



© 2021 Department of Japanese Studies
Vol.1, No.1, January 2022
Inaugural Issue, pp. 249-259
ISSN:2789-3014
<http://doi.org/10.55156/jjsem.dec2113>

The Role of Myanmar in India's Look East Policy

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Abstract – India has pursued the "Look East" policy to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with East and Southeast Asian nations, address its security concerns, and bolster its standing as a regional power. Myanmar is the only land bridge between India and the Southeast Asia countries, and that is why Myanmar's geopolitical location is of crucial importance for India. Balancing China's economic and security interests in Myanmar, India pursued "constructive engagement" to reconcile with Myanmar. Based on these claims, this paper focuses on how the geostrategic position of Myanmar has become a vital role of India's Look East Policy? This article argues that the "Look East Policy" plays a significant role in influencing India's foreign policy behaviour with Myanmar and stresses that Myanmar plays a vital role in strengthening India's geopolitical position in Southeast Asia. It first discusses India's Look East Policy and the position and vitality of Myanmar in the broader framework of India's Look East Policy. It then analyses the factors that have resulted in successfully approaches of Look East policy rely not only on geopolitical position but also on Linkage projects between India and Myanmar, especially Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. The qualitative research method will analyse primary and secondary data in the open literature.

Keywords India · India's Look East Policy · Constructive engagement ·

1. Introduction

India's 'Look East' policy originated in the early 1990s when the context of the international system was changed. After economic difficulty in India caused by the economic crisis in 1991, India recalibrated its foreign relations to promote economic development and aimed to extend trade relations towards Southeast Asia under its "Look East Policy" (Ergeteau, 2003, p.102). The 'Look East Policy' is a paradigm shift in India's world perspective. It is 'not merely an external

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economic policy, but also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy.' The main objective of this policy is to forge closer and deeper economic integration, physical connectivity and strategic partnership with its eastern neighbours. India's Look East Policy has found its wings to build bilateral and multilateral alliances with most ASEAN member states in the commerce, culture, and defence sectors (Kang, 2010, p.4). For India, Myanmar is seen as a "land bridge" to Southeast Asian markets and important for its "Look East Policy". Therefore, economic interest becomes a crucial factor in the present Myanmar-India relationship. After the Cold War, India pursued "constructive engagement" to reconcile Myanmar. This new policy led to the signing of the border trade agreement in February 1995, and their relations improved to a higher level and became deeper (Ergeteau 2003, p.123). In 2014, the shift of India's new "Act East Policy" from the former approach of "Look East" during the change of government in Myanmar made a more proactive position and became an opportunity to implement relations between the two countries completely.

2. Literature review

Among leading regional powers in the Indo-Pacific region, India adopted the Look East Policy to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asia, bolstering its standing as a regional power and counterweighting the strategic influence of China. Chatterjee, in his book, *The Look East Policy and India's Northeastern States* (Chatterjee 2014:1), wrote that the economic regeneration of India's relatively backward Northeastern states sharing linguistic roots, culture, tribal, and physical connectivity between the Northeast of India and some Southeast Asian states via Myanmar makes it possible to realise this vision. However, Boswell (Boswell 2016:16) argued that India implemented a more aggressive engagement strategy with Myanmar responding to Myanmar's domestic political reforms and concerns about rising Chinese influence. The literature mentioned above pointed out that both Myanmar and India desire to strengthen their friendship. These facts partly assist in the preparation to analyse in this paper. This research emphasises Myanmar's geostrategic position in India's Look East by examining the patterns of engagements between Myanmar and India and analysing the community management between the two countries.

3. Methods

This is qualitative research analysing the primary sources of surveys conducted by scholars or media or organisations and official government statements, and the secondary source of scholarly articles. The geopolitics approach is used in doing research.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 India's Foreign Policy

India's foreign policy developed gradually as a "dual" pattern, involving a regional role and global. There were different principles between the two roles as a realistic policy was conducted with its neighbours, in contrast with the moralistic international policy. The dimension of the regional sector was based on the idea that everything would be done to be a hegemon in the region. NAM created it (Non-Aligned movement) to align India's foreign policy towards newly decolonised states, aiming to set up peaceful areas by attacking common dangers of racialism and imperialism together.

4.2 India's Myanmar Policy

4.2.1 India's constructive engagement

The Myanmar-India relationship is based on historical, cultural, and religious ties. Myanmar is an important neighbour for India due to its geostrategic location, linking Southeast Asia, East Asia and South Asia regions. Myanmar-India relations have been long-standing for two millennia. Both countries were British's colonies. So, the leaders from both sides mutually understand each other and have a close connection in struggling for Independence (Mishra, 2014:112). However, India's relations with Myanmar worsened after General Ne Win's takeover in 1962 due to the government's policy of the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' that led to a massive wave of nationalisation. In 1988, relations saw a further downturn because India supported the pro-democracy activities in Myanmar (Saikia 2009:878). The globalisation of the world's economies greatly intensified international competition and has given rise to a new wave of regionalism. In this changing condition, trade and economic dimensions become a tool of India's foreign policy. Policy reforms were immediately undertaken, and the ASEAN region was singled out as an important area with which India sought a formal tie. Since the early 1990s, China has advanced its Asia Pacific region. Growing Chinese influence in some regional countries and its increasing presence in the Indian Ocean have alarmed the other regional powers (Boswell 2016:15). The scholar Ashraf highlights that the progress of India's engagement towards Myanmar has the three main reasons behind; China overwhelming influence in Myanmar, India's northeastern region's stability, and its 'Look East Policy' (Ashraf 2014:3). Therefore, economic reforms associated with globalisation's integrative forces and anxiety about China's rising power in the Asia Pacific region were basic parameters of India's foreign policy. In India's new foreign policy strategy, its geopolitical interaction with Myanmar does not let India be aggressive toward

Myanmar for many years. If the engagement with Myanmar cannot be achieved, it may be difficult for India in achieving its "Look East" policy to be successful.

4.2.2 India's Look East Policy / Act East Policy

India's 'Act East Policy', initiated in the early 1990s as 'Look East' policy by the Government of India, is now an important component of India's foreign policy. Since the launching of this policy, India's relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become a key feature of India's foreign policy. In May 2014, about six months after taking office, the newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that the previous 'Look East Policy' would be transformed into 'Act East' Policy. Attending the 12th ASEAN-India Summit in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, on 12 November 2014, the Prime Minister along with ASEAN leaders reviewed the current status of the India-ASEAN Strategic Partnership and placed ASEAN at the "core" of India's 'Act East Policy' calling for the strengthening of relations in all sectors (Touhngang 2019:9).

Since the Look East Policy initiation, four objectives have been chased under this policy in many years: (a) regional economic integration, (b) reform and liberalisation, (c) sustained economic growth and (d) development of the Northeastern region. The emphasis placed on each of these objectives has been different at different points of time during the past years. More recently, the emphasis has been on developing the Northeastern region through economic integration with East and Southeast Asia. The Northeastern states lag in economic development, and this gap has widened since independence. The sense of neglect has resulted in various forms of unrest in the region. This region can be a gateway to the East, linking the Northeastern region with Southeast Asia through pipelines, roads, and railways. It is expected to initiate economic development and help the eight Northeastern states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura) to develop infrastructure, communication, trade, investment, logistics, agribusiness and other commercial activities (Hoakip 2011:251). The Northeastern states support the 'Look East' policy, knowing fully about its benefits.

The economic cooperation between India's Northeast region and Southeast Asia is one of the main intentions of the Look East Policy. Accordingly, India has undertaken numerous bilateral and multilateral projects for boosting connectivity between its northeast provinces and Southeast Asia. The critical ongoing and potential infrastructures projects in this regard are the Moreh-Kalewa Road, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Trans-Asian Highway, India-Myanmar rail linkages, the Kaladan Project, the Stilwell road, the Myanmar-India-Bangladesh gas or oil pipeline, the Tamanthi Hydroelectricity project and

the optical fibre network between Northeast India and Southeast Asia which has been operational since 2009_{fn2} (Chatterjee 2014:2-3). Infrastructure projects, such as the Trans-Asia Highway between Northeastern India and Bangkok passing through Myanmar, are the key to opening new trading routes between India and the Southeast Asian neighbours. All those will lead to further bilateral cooperation and trade, open the Southeast Asian markets to Delhi, and get India more involved in the Asian trade world (Sinha 2009:1-4). Therefore, Myanmar's role is pivotal for developing India's Northeast region. India's investments in Myanmar's infrastructure are more fruitful for Northeast provinces as they can connect physically with the more prosperous markets of Southeast Asia.

4.2.3 China factor

Myanmar's increasing economic and military relations with China are a cause of concern to India. Since the 1980s, China has been intensely involved with Myanmar. In 1988 after the pro-democracy demonstrations were brutally suppressed, most of the world, including India, chose to disengage with Myanmar. It has been believed that India's pro-democracy stance had driven Myanmar to China's den (Singh 2012:34). India was concerned about China's economic cooperation with Myanmar in trade and infrastructure development sectors as a threat to its maritime and economic interest in the Indian ocean. Given Myanmar's long coastline on the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal and its proximity to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's relationship with Myanmar acquires great importance in the context of the security of these islands as well as India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. If China secures a pre-eminent position of influence in Myanmar, Myanmar could be used as the springboard for China's ambitions in South and Southeast Asia_{fn3}. (Singh 2012:84). As it is evident from the above, amongst all the Southeast Asian neighbours, Myanmar is more important for India's geostrategic rationale, and that is why Myanmar's domestic and foreign policies have the highest potential to impact India's strategic interests directly.

Given Myanmar's geographical location, India's strategic interests in the relationship with Myanmar include the protection of India's territorial integrity in the remote Northeastern part of India. India's six Northeastern states are sandwiched between Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, and Myanmar. Myanmar shares a 1643 km border with four of these six Northeastern states of India, and these four states are the farthest away from India's heartland. On the other hand, China has an 1125 km border with Arunachal Pradesh, which is claimed as China's territory (Gupta 2013:81). If Myanmar is under the strategic control of China, the protection of India's Northeastern states would be impossible for India. Moreover, the economic growth and development

of these four remote Northeastern states of India mainly depend on full-scale economic cooperation with Myanmar.

5. Myanmar in India's geostrategic rationale

Out of all ASEAN member states, Myanmar is the only country that has connecting land border with India. India and Myanmar share a 1,643 km (1021 miles) long unfenced border. Myanmar has a long coastline that shares parts of the Bay of Bengal, notably the Coco Islands and the Andaman Sea. It has the most extensive border with India after China, approximately 4,000 km long. Another critical point is that India has long historical, cultural and religious ties with Myanmar. Buddhism and Hinduism, two major religions of Myanmar, came to Myanmar from India. The majority of the population in Myanmar follows Buddhism, which is a strong link between these two countries. More importantly, Myanmar, strategically located at the tri-junction of South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia, is India's gateway to the Southeast Asian region. In addition, India's willingness to engage Southeast Asia has been a vital component of India's strategic thinking since the 1990s (Mishra 2014:108). So Myanmar plays a vital role in making stronger the geopolitical position of India in Southeast Asia.

Physically, four of India's eight remote Northeastern provinces: Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh sit, between China and Myanmar and are pretty removed from direct contact with New Delhi. Arunachal Pradesh province is the most vulnerable among them, and China is disputing India's claim to much of that remote state's territory. China has an 1125 km border with Arunachal Pradesh, which is claimed as China's territory 9 (Gupta 2013:81). On the other hand, If Myanmar is under the strategic control of China, the protection of India's Northeastern states would be impossible for India. Moreover, the economic growth and development of these four remote Northeastern states of India mainly depend on full-scale economic cooperation with Myanmar. Since India's northeast is also known for geographical inaccessibility, insurgencies, and underdevelopment, improved cross-border relations with Myanmar could also improve New Delhi's access to and governance within these troubled states. India, like China, also desires more efficient overland routes through Myanmar to supply its northeastern security arms forces⁴. (Boswell 2016: 54). It could improve bilateral security cooperation between India and Myanmar and benefit both nations' internal security programs. Moreover, Myanmar is a potentially significant neighbour for India's energy security as it can be a rich source of natural gas.

Currently, India ranks as the 11th largest energy producer of the world, accounting for about 2.4 % of total annual energy manufacturing of the world and the world's six most significant energy consumers (consumption of about 3.3 % of total

annual energy of the world). India is "a net energy importer, " despite massive annual energy production," because of the large gap between oil consumption and production (Routray 2011:312). Myanmar is potentially a prosperous source of natural gas. Geographically, it is the closest source for India. Therefore, in order to be convenient transporting gas from foreign resources quickly and directly to India, it has been proposed to build three gas pipelines: "the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline in the north, the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline in the west, and the Myanmar-Bangladesh-India pipeline in the east" (Rieffel, 2010, p.117). The gas and oil reserves of Myanmar are of vital interest for future energy requirements of India as Myanmar has eighty-eight trillion cubic feet (TCF) of total gas reserves and oil reserves of around six hundred million barrels of oil reserves (Routray 2011:313). Despite objections from the West, investments have been made in Myanmar's energy sector by the Indian companies like Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) and the overseas arm of India's Oil and Natural Gas Commission – ONGC Videsh Ltd. (Rieffel 2010:117). Therefore, Myanmar is potentially vital for India's energy security.

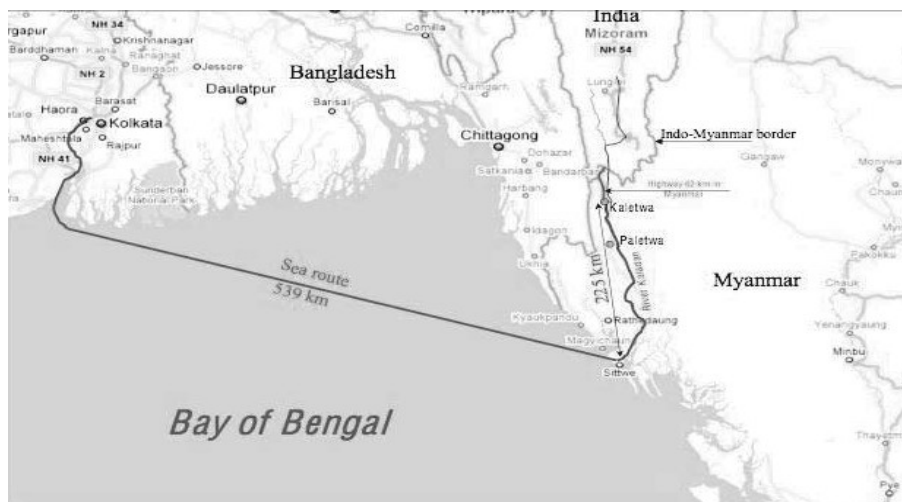
Given Myanmar's long coastline on the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal and its proximity to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India's relationship with Myanmar acquires great importance in the context of the security of these islands as well as India's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal (Gupta 2013:82). In 2001, India created the Andaman and Nicobar Command to safeguard India's strategic interest in Southeast Asia and the Strait of Malacca and introduced the rapid deployment of military assets in the region. There were several reasons for this creation, including India's greater interest in the Indian Ocean region, the build-up of the Indian Navy, and India's 'Look East' policy of the 1990s that focused on strengthening relations with Southeast Asia (Gupta 2013: 81). India's Andaman and the Nicobar Islands are closer to Myanmar than mainland India. Therefore, improved maritime cooperation with Myanmar would enhance India's sea power projection and help India to check China's regional ambitions.

6. Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTT)

Under the Look East Policy, linkage projects between India and Myanmar are several. Some of the important ones are; BLO- Border Liaison Office, KMMTT-Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport, Sittwe port development to improve land/river communication links, Tamu-Kalewa-kalemyo road, Rih-Tiddim (80.17km), Rih-Falm (151.5 km) roads, Tamanthi and Shwezaye hydropower projects, development of Myanmar' off show Shwe oil and natural gas fields. Interestingly, the KMMTT is just one of many infrastructure projects in which India is currently completed involved (Basu 2014:89). Because the Indian

government conceived the KMMTT project to develop a trade route between its mainland and the Northeast as a critical element of the Look East Policy.

The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTT) was officially signed in April 2008. This \$120 million project, funded by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, began in 2008 and is scheduled to be completed in 2014. It involves private and state-owned Indian companies, such as the Inland Waterways Authority of India and Essar Oil Ltd. Specifically, 'Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit-transport KMMTT Facility' (called Kaladan Project) is to be established through the kaladana river in the Rakhine state of Western Myanmar and the state of Mizoram in India. This project aims to unlock Mizoram by providing southwards a river-cum-road corridor from the Indian border to the Indian Ocean and port facilities in Sittwe. It, therefore, proposes to bypass Bangladesh, with which New Delhi had developed tense relations in the past, very much depending on who is governing Dhaka (Egreteau 2011: 57). After completion, this project will connect the Eastern India seaport of Kolkata with Sittwe port in Myanmar by sea. Then, it will link Sittwe, Myanmar and Mizoram, India, via river and road transport. The complication of this project will reduce the distance from Kolkata (in India) to Sittwe (in Myanmar) by approximately 1328 km (Basu 2014:78).



Source: <http://archive-2.mizzima.com/research/8787-indian-look-east-policy-and-the-kaladan-project-of-western-burma.html>

Given the above argument, the KMMTT projects, when completed, will generate the following possible positive points, impact-wise:

- The implementation of the project will open up many opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds in this region.
- The development of transportation facilities from Sittwe Post, Myanmar, up to Silchar
- Mizoram is to become the gateway to southeast Asia countries after the construction of the kaladana Multimodal Transit Transport Project in neighbouring Myanmar
- The building of a pipeline will bring natural gas from Myanmar via the north-east to the whole of India
- The Northeastern landlocked states will gain easy access to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar

The region will officially be interested through channels, bringing transparency (Basu 2014:79).

Therefore, KMMTT will become an icon for the 'Look East Policy', aiming to reach out to the ASEAN nations. However, the KMMTT initiative remains focused on the Myanmar region. On the other hand, political instability in the Rakhine state limits KMMTT projects. For India, Kaladan multimodal waterway is strategic in its rights, offering a maritime link and outlet to the land-locked North-East. The seaport is Sittwe, which is also the capital of Rakhine state. The Rakhine State is still disconnected politically, culturally, and economically from Myanmar's heartland (Egreteau 2011:17). The construction timetable for this waterway has been held up by armed conflict with the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed organisation fighting the central government, labelled it a terrorist organisation.

The Kaladan Project also has the potential to bring several negative impacts to local communities, such as land confiscation and forced eviction; disruption of and/or complete loss of livelihoods; the increased presence of Burma Army troops; the use of forced labour during project construction; restrictions on freedom of movement and access to river transportation; illegal taxation and extortion; violations of indigenous peoples' rights due to lack of public participation in development decisions through a process of Free, Prior and Informed Consent; and water pollution and environmental degradation (Conference Report, 2015:8). Arakan river network (ARN) argued that the framework of the Agreement of the KMMTT project makes no mention of environmental impact surveys or standards for the development (Basu 2014:67).

Moreover, the youth from the region may have several problems like AIDS. In India, Manipur shares over 11 % among HIV/AIDS cases of about 3.5 million (Routray 2011:316). The tribal farmers and the insurgents are also being encouraged to plant poppies by the drug lords of Myanmar. Therefore, it needs to destroy these plantations and provide agricultural alternatives to the farmers. If not, the border of Myanmar-India will soon be complete with poppy fields and even more supplied for the insurgent groups. Therefore, political instability in Rakhine state, no mention of environmental impact surveys for the development, and the social problem between Myanmar and India border seriously limited for KMMTT project.

7. Conclusion

Geographically, Myanmar is a gateway to Southeast Asia and can be a central hub for exchanging goods, services and technology. To be successful in its "Look East" policy, north-east region stability is a vital determinant. Consequently, cooperation with Myanmar became a decisive factor for India because four of eight northeastern regions, "Manipur, Mizoram, Pradesh, Arunachal and Nagaland", shares border with Myanmar. Therefore, the KMMTT project is vital for India.

India's engagement with Myanmar is a testimony that Myanmar is an integral part of its Look East Policy, and without reaching out to Myanmar, India would not be able to engage ASEAN proactively. Myanmar is indeed India's gateway to Southeast Asia. The KMMTT project is also essential for India's 'Look East Policy' as it further increases the economic relations of Myanmar and India and provides the opportunities to connect six sister's states of India's Northeast. Thus, a win-win situation is provided for both by this project. However, the Look East policy is not yet on firm footing with Myanmar in the northeast.

On the other hand, the KMMTT initiative remains focused on Myanmar. Political instability in Rakhine state, KMMTT project makes no mention of environmental impact surveys for the development and the social problem between Myanmar and India border minimal participation of the economy into the region and global networks. It would be realised through government to government efforts and through community management; both countries need to work together and land together.

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