

A Geostrategic Explanation of India-Myanmar Bilateral Relations since the 1990s

Written by Balachander Palanisamy

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I argue that the relationship between India and Myanmar is dominated by geostrategic interests rather than identity, domestic politics or ideas. This argument is developed by examining India's interests with Myanmar through realism and constructivism lenses. In doing so, an outline of the level of analysis framework and discussion of the realist view in the geostrategic and economic landscape of Myanmar is made. I later acknowledge that a realist lens is not completely sufficient in explaining India's engagement with Myanmar, and complementary explanations using identity and domestic politics are offered. Finally, I focus on whether the ideas of leaders can influence the relationship. I conclude that realism remains the dominant explanation in India's relationship with Myanmar.

The Levels of Analysis Explained

I use the level of analysis framework (Singer, 1961) to provide more holistic explanations. First, at the systemic level, realism[i] explains the structural logic behind India's overtures in Myanmar. The international system constrains the choices that states have in international politics. The end of the Cold War (CW) caused a dis-equilibrium in the international system assumed to be anarchic[ii] which led to a unipolar power to emerge (Waltz, 2000). The presence of a unipolar power would mean rising powers will attempt to balance against a hegemon (benign or aggressive) by either internally and/or externally balancing to rival the capabilities of the hegemon. A corollary of the system upend, was the 'rise of China', seeking to be a regional hegemon and eventual peer competitor of USA. As such the new distribution of power suggests that India would have structural imperatives to pursue new partnerships with states to improve its capabilities relative to China in ordering the international system. As Ganguly & Pardesi, 2009 argue, India adopted a more 'self-help' stance and aggressive foreign policy in line with the systemic change that took place after the CW. They determined that India's foreign policy shifted from 'Nehruvian idealism' to realism. The 'Look East' policy (LEP) employed after the post-CW review, is an attempt to counter the growing influence of China in the region by balancing regionally (Batabyal, 2006). India increased its capabilities by externally balancing China via securing strategic partnerships. India had to manage the China threat to its national security, geo-strategic and economic competition by courting Myanmar. Neorealism suggests that cooperative relationship between India and Myanmar is a consequence of the structure of the international system in the region. It offers parsimonious and descriptive explanations to certain outcomes. A fuller explanation of state behaviour is required to explain state choices, for which constructivist theories might be of use. As such I defer to the state and individual levels as likely explanations.

Second, at the state level, domestic politics, identity and culture of India and Myanmar is considered. Although culture seeks to explain the normative connection beyond the instrumental gains, it does not bear relevance in the relationship. I note that these factors do not offer strong explanations to the relationship.

Third, at the individual level, I examine whether Narasimha Rao's policy was affected by Modi's ideas. This is to determine whether new ideas hold sway in India's relationship with Myanmar or whether old ideas of Narasimha Rao are continued.[iii]

Situating these levels by using the framework provides a better understanding for why 'constructive engagement'

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with Myanmar emerged and continued. The framework complements the correlation that the systemic level produces with the causation of sub-systemic variables (Singer 1961, 90). But this causation has been minimal when the two lower levels are considered. I retain the view that realism is the dominant explanation despite being parsimonious.

Structural Level

Geostrategic Interests-Land

Myanmar is an important land bridge between South and Southeast Asia (Chenyang 2010). It serves as a buffer between India and China. Chenyang (2010, 116) describes the strategic importance of Myanmar to India. Myanmar has coastal access to the Bay of Bengal and extension to the Indian Ocean. Its western and northern borders connect Bangladesh, China and the restive Northeastern states of India. Its Southeast coast is also close to India's Nicobar archipelago. From its geographic position, it is a state likely to be jockeyed for influence by India and China. India fears that a rising China will contain it by strengthening relationships in the region. Influence in Myanmar will allow China to penetrate India's Northeastern region and control the Bay of Bengal, thereby leaving India exposed to attack from the east.

The growing military relationship between Myanmar and China marked the end of its non-alignment orientation. China gained first-mover advantage into Burma under Deng Xiaoping's 'good neighbourliness policy', a change from Mao's interventionist policy of supporting the local communist insurgents (Bouquerat 2011). When the communist insurgency in 1989 collapsed, China and Burma were able to establish cross-border trade, officially (Litner 2015, 173). China recognised Myanmar's strategic position as providing trade routes to the landlocked provinces of Yunnan and the ability to access the Indian Ocean (Litner 2015, 173). India turned to adopt an approach of making decisions based on rational calculations of costs and benefits and increasing its power relative to China based on a realist orientation. It abandoned the previous approach of supporting democratic forces and engaged the military regime. Relationship with the present quasi-civilian government continues as India is indifferent to the Rohingya crisis and human rights violations.

Geostrategic Interests- Waterways

The strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal that Myanmar has a coastal border with should be emphasised. Renaud Egreteau (2003, 53) notes this importance: there are vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) which can prove to be of strategic use for foreign states and much trade flows through the route south of the Bay of Bengal passing through the Malacca Strait. China's strategic interests came to light in the 1990s when India received reports on supposed military build-ups in Myanmar. China was building intelligence monitoring stations on the southwest of the Myanmar coast which is close to the Indian territories of Andaman and Nicobar (Malik M. 1994, 140-141). In recent years, China ramped up its information gathering in the Bay of Bengal with military ships frequenting the area (Bhat 2019). It was considered a serious violation of Indian sphere of influence as China now poses a threat to the north and the east of India. The China threat in India-Myanmar relationship was subsequently drummed up, fearing the 'Tibetisation of Myanmar' mainly because it provides China with an invasion route (Malik M. 1994).

Geostrategic Interests- Counterinsurgency

The Northeast region of India has been rife with political insurrections. To understand the tension in geopolitical terms, I referred to Vallabhai Patel who consistently noted that the Northeast is a sensitive region with China, composing of 'Mongoloid' people whose loyalty to India is questionable. He drew the link between an internal security struggle and external geopolitics contention. After the annexation of Tibet, Patel felt that India would be vulnerable from the east (Abraham 2014, 129). The threat from Chinese imperialism came from the weakness of India's hold over the Northeast that seemingly lacked a strong state authority (Abraham 2014). India had to secure the Northeast frontier to prevent Chinese influences in the region from festering. Ties with Myanmar is important in this aspect when the Northeast is considered as a geostrategic space engaged in armed resistance and violence. Myanmar is key to maintaining India's territorial integrity by aiding in suppressing insurgents in the region. Since the shift in policy, India has conducted cross-border surgical strikes in Myanmar.[iv] India also seeks to 'connect' the Northeast with

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neighbouring countries through land and sea to uplift the region economically by providing long-term stability and peace which would discourage insurgencies.

Economic Interests

Gaining considerable economic influence in Myanmar would give India latent power to convert into military might which counters China's modernisation efforts. Myanmar is vital to this specifically because it is endowed with natural resources.[v] It is in India's interests to tap these natural resources available in proximity by providing technology and infrastructure for exploration and production (Kanwal 2010, 136). This is especially, when China is forming economic ties with Myanmar through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) where projects such as the Muse-Mandalay Railway project and Kyaukphyu Deep sea port are in the pipeline (Lwin 2019). The Kyaukphyu port, will be a starting point for an oil-gas pipeline and railroad link to Yunnan state in China (Bhaumik 2017). Bilateral trade between India and Myanmar has grown over the years but remains below China's trade relations (Kanwal 2010, 138). India exports to Myanmar over US\$1 billion and imports from Myanmar are at over US\$500 million (World Bank 2018). However, China's exports to Myanmar is more than US\$10 billion (World Bank 2018). Partly, the reason for poor export and import showings is that Myanmar's global exports consist of mainly food, fuel and non-food agricultural products (World Bank 2018). Myanmar has a high demand for manufactured goods which are met by China that has a competitive advantage over India. In terms of oil and gas, India has been given the right to build, operate, and use the offshore hub for Myanmar gas. It had previously lost out on obtaining Myanmar's offshore gas resources in Rakhine state to China. The Kaladan multi-modal project is designed to provide a sea-river-land link to India's remote Northeast through Sittwe port which is to be operational in 2020 (Bhaumik 2017). However, the project has faced many delays, like several others, due to the lack of coordination among different implementing agencies, poor monitoring and financial constraints (The Diplomat 2016). Furthermore, protests and security risks also act as roadblocks to the projects' construction. India's bilateral trade with Myanmar has grown gradually but 'connectivity' lags behind China with its massive investments and first-mover advantage in the country.[vi]

State Level

Domestic Politics

Domestic politics[vii] played a less influential role in relations with Myanmar as a prominent moral element to foreign policy was absent. Morality was side-lined in India's conduct with Myanmar. The question of democracy drew less appeal among foreign policy elites, though fragments among parliamentarians opposed the policy.[viii] Pranab Mukherjee in 1996 had confirmed the Indian position of not interfering in the internal affair of Myanmar between the opposition movements and the military junta (Egreteau 2003, 133). This unwavering stance on the engagement policy with Myanmar has been followed by every successive government since Rao (Singh 2011, 71). The present administration unlike its predecessors holds significant majority to continue the policies towards Myanmar unopposed. Although there were political parties favouring the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, there was no substantial opposition in engaging the junta unlike the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal that was hampered by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), (Singh 2011).

Ethics gave way to self-interested considerations in India's foreign policy given the security implications from Pakistan and China (Tharoor 2007). India remains opposed to Western sanctions on the country despite pressures from the West for democratic credentials (Pant 2016). India's national interest towards Myanmar evidently arises out of self-interest expressed in terms of maximising security relative to China. This is evident of a turnaround in ethical foreign policy because of China's assertions in Myanmar.

Identity

Constructivists seek to open the 'black box' of International Relations. They argue that the state is mutually constituted with the international system. Actors are constrained by the structure while also having the capacity to influence it. Conventional constructivists such as Alexander Wendt (1995) focused on what influences a state's objectives. He suggested that a state's identity is derived from culture. Which has the capacity to influence foreign

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policy making. States' interests are not just about power and wealth, they can also be about culture. The cultural links that states share shapes either an amity or enmity relationship. Neo-realism assumes that states perceive the same self-interests and behave according to structural constraints. However, domestic values can influence how states define their interests. I examine whether culture can influence foreign policy decisions made by India towards Myanmar. This section concludes that culture's influence in foreign policy with Myanmar is not decisive enough. It is more appropriate for culture to be viewed as a tool of foreign policy instead.

Huntington (1993) argued that a state's religious heritage determines its enemies and allies in the post-CW era. Culture which falls under the larger conception of civilisation determines cooperation or conflict between states. Here, religion dominates and influences a state's identity and culture. This thesis has been critiqued extensively but it lends valuable insight especially, considering the causal mechanism in the argument – countries of the same religion may have a significant level of ideological affinity (Warner & Walker 2011). States with the same religion or religious heritage see that they have a common cultural bond, which fosters a common identity that mitigates the 'us versus them' dynamic of the international system (Warner & Walker 2011). If religion is regarded to be integral to a state's identity, it is likely to influence foreign policy formulations (Warner & Walker 2011).

One way to understand the 'closeness' between India and Myanmar is the religious connection but how far this affects foreign policy decisions is yet to be seen. I attempt to establish a connection using Huntington's thesis. Muslims and Buddhists share an ancient enmity in Myanmar (Egreteau 2003). Anti-Muslim hostility has increased in the country with the persecution of the Rohingyas. The rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s was attracted to Myanmar's reaction to the Muslims as they had a common enemy – Islam (Egreteau 2003). The nationalists then attempted to repossess Buddhism by including it into the Hindu ideology and mythology to establish a 'Hindu-Buddhist' alliance to fight the Islamist radicals. Efforts were undertaken to acknowledge shared religio-cultural features with Myanmar. For example, they cast Siddharta Gautama as a Hindu God (Vishnu's avatar) and advertised India as having the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites and Hinduism and Buddhism were referred as 'branches of the same tree' (Matthews 2001). The assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism was then religiously justified. Egreteau (2003), notes Huntington's hypothesis shows that a rapprochement between India and Myanmar would be advantageous for each to fight the Muslim movements in the region.

However, is culture reflected in foreign policy decisions? Isabelle Saint-Mezard (2006, 259) argued that when cultural ties have been used for commercial purposes, they improved economic cooperation. However, such religious diplomacy has not been enough to 'nurture a feeling of proximity' towards Southeast Asian nations where the cultural antecedents with India has been diluted by modernity (Saint-Mezard 2006, 259-266). This would explain that Narendra Modi's attempt to revive old cultural ties is a soft power approach than an input in foreign policy decision-making. The foreign policies have been given a mere cultural shine to show more 'closeness' with Myanmar.

Individual Level

Ideas

Leaders can affect foreign policy decision-making through their ideas.[ix] Ideas are beliefs held by individuals about 'social reality that identify possibilities for action, reflect moral principles, and specify causal relationships' (Goldstein & Keohane 1993). Furthermore, 'ideas act as road maps to guide behaviour under conditions of uncertainty by providing causal patterns or by providing compelling ethical and moral motivations for action' (Goldstein & Keohane 1993). The most relevant for this discussion is causal beliefs.[x]

I argue that the LEP arose during the post-CW, an uncertain time for India when the dynamics of the international system changed. This shift was undertaken as a direct effort to meet the objective of enhancing India's national security given the conditions at the time. Keohane (1993) argues that successful ideas are embedded in institutions and are changed when better and more politically palatable ideas replace its predecessor. The LEP adopted by Rao was entrenched over the years and continues with minor changes. Renamed the 'Act East' policy (AEP) by Modi, it does not differ much from the old policy. There is a lack of substantive change except in expanding the policy geographically to include Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. As Bajpee (2017) argues, there is no linear

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progression in India's engagement in the region regarding the 'four phases' of the LEP, rather, it is a cyclical process of peaks and troughs. The elements of strategic and security considerations and geographic scope during the policy's inception remain in the later phases and in the AEP.

Politicians can create policies by introducing new ideas or questioning old ones, but they must refer to the pre-existing and institutionalised ideas (Miller & Estrada 2017). Modi would have to create a balance between Hindutva beliefs and institutionalised ideas to pursue a pragmatic policy (Miller & Estrada 2017). A product of such balance seeks to supplement or replicate previous policies. Radical changes in policies are not expected to be internally produced without an exogenous factor.[xi] It is possible to argue that the AEP is a compromise between Modi's Hindutva beliefs and the institutionalised LEP. The AEP possesses the key elements of the LEP as noted by Manjeet Pardesi (2019).[xii] It reflects more continuity than change in Modi's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. This analysis can be extrapolated to India's relations with Myanmar. Looking at the exports/imports data, a peak and trough trend that agrees with Bajpee (2017) is observed in (World Bank 2018). There is no thorough evidence to show that Modi's ideas have led to a significant change in the relationship between India and Myanmar rather there has been a continuation of the policy from Rao's time. But what has been unique to Modi's foreign policy is his use of 'soft power' to gather support for initiatives by alluding it to civilizational cultural links. However, soft power is a tool of foreign policy and culture is a resource of soft power, it is not as I argued here a cause for foreign policy construction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argued that realism though a parsimonious theory for state behaviour, effectively remains dominant as I have shown the lower level explanations lack strong evidence to prove realism otherwise. I examined that domestic politics, identity and ideas are not strong explanations in India's relationship with Myanmar. However, they are still important to provide a holistic understanding of the complex relationship.

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Notes

[i] I use Kenneth Waltz's concept of structural realism, mainly balance of power to explain restrictions on India's behaviour with Myanmar and explain the attendant pursuit of self-interests and power.

[ii] Anarchy in realist terms means there is no overarching sovereign or authority to arbitrate disputes between the states which forces states to rely on themselves. This leads to a logic of 'self-help'

[iii] In 1992, Narasimha Rao pursued a two-track policy (political and military level engagements) in view that the military regime in Myanmar will persist. The shift happened amidst the end of CW and a recognition that the old policy of promoting democracy in Myanmar had stoked much mistrust and suspicion between the two by eroding their historical and cultural relationship which meant it had to be removed (Bhatia, 2016, p. 102).

[iv] Both states have conducted cross-border counter-insurgency operations. India has conducted its third surgical strike operation in 2019, dubbed 'Operation Sunrise'. See (Indian Defence Review, 2019) for more details on the surgical strike.

[v] It is said to have the tenth largest gas reserves in the world. See (Azo Mining, 2012) for more details on natural resources.

[vi] Connectivity refers to the physical, institutional and people-to-people linkages to achieve economic, political-security and socio-cultural integration.

[vii] Domestic politics part of state level analysis is used to show that it has minimal influence over foreign policy decisions with Myanmar especially on the question of establishing a democratic regime. Self-interests is still invaluable in India's foreign policy towards Myanmar.

[viii] The Indian Parliamentarians' Forum for Democracy in Burma supports the cause of democracy in Myanmar and lobbied for New Delhi to adopt an ethical policy. The late parliamentarian George Fernandes was also a vocal critic of Myanmar's junta but even he adopted a moderate approach on the democratic issue in Myanmar when the NDA government was pressurised by the main party in the coalition, BJP, to maintain good relations with Myanmar for security of India's Northeast region. See (Singh, 2011, pp. 70-72)

[ix] There are three typologies offered: world views; principled beliefs and causal beliefs (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993).

[x] Logical steps taken under uncertain conditions to achieve an objective with a set of means.

[xi] An exogenous factor such as the end of the Cold War spurred changes Indian foreign policy outlook by Narasimha Rao and decision-makers.

[xii] There are four elements in the policy that reflect continuity: a similar approach as America to Asia; building military capabilities in relations to China while enhancing political and economic engagement in the region; a strategic approach towards Japan; an emphasis of Southeast Asia and ASEAN. See (Pardesi, 2019) for more.

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