



CENJOWS

BOOSTING INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY THROUGH MILITARY DIPLOMACY WITH MYANMAR

By

Lt Gen Shakti Gurung, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

In November 2014 during the ASEAN Summit at Nay Pyi Daw, Myanmar's new capital, PM Modi announced India's Act East Policy (AEP) for the first time. Going back into time, the AEP is an upgradation of India's Look East Policy (LEP) announced by the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao in 1992. The end of the Cold War and breakup of the Soviet Union warranted a fresh look at India's priorities.

By "acting" east rather than only "looking" at it, India has conveyed its intent of a more deliberate integration with South East Asia and even beyond to the rich markets of the Greater Mekong Sub region (GMS). The significance of the announcement made by PM Modi was that Myanmar being at the doorstep of India's North Eastern Region (NER) was to be the harbinger of the AEP. It was meant to act as the land bridge connecting the subcontinent with South East Asia through the economic corridors of the GMS. "SAGAR" and the "Neighbourhood First" policies followed soon thereafter to further reinforce this intent.

In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's party the National League for Democracy (NLD), is set for its second term after a sweeping mandate in the November 2020 General Elections. Suu Kyi's first term was riddled with three major

problems – the Rohingya issue, the ethnic armed groups (EAGs) not aligned to the National Ceasefire Agreement of May 2015, and the COVID pandemic. These in a way were a true test of her political acumen. All three have rolled over into her next term as well.

Suu Kyi's problems do not end there. Dual power centers continue to exist in Myanmar. While Suu Kyi's NLD is one, the other is the powerful Tatmadaw or the Myanmar military. 25 percent seats in both houses of the Union Assembly and one third seats in the regional legislatures are reserved for uniformed personnel who get appointed by the C-in-C Defence Services, the Senior General himself. Besides this one of the two Vice Presidents, the Defence Minister, Interior Minister, and the Border Affairs Minister are from the military.

Furthermore, for any decision to get passed in parliament the ruling party needs the support of 75 percent members. The Tatmadaw also has its own political party, the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) comprising of military in civil clothes. This makes it near impossible for Suu Kyi to get a nod for any of her decisions which do not suit the military. The importance of the Tatmadaw and the significance of military diplomacy as an adjunct to positive political relations thus cannot be more emphasised. As an essential element of national power in Myanmar, good relations with the military must prevail for India's AEP to succeed and move beyond to the GMS and Indo Pacific.

China, the other stake holder in Myanmar, is already pushing ahead the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) as part of its Belt and Road Initiative terminating it at the strategic deep sea port of Kyaukphyu in Rakhine state. With the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) coming up to its west and CMEC in the east, it would be an uncomfortable position India would find itself in. To balance this India needs to engage Myanmar more intensely in a permanent relationship, military diplomacy being one option.

Till democratic reforms began in 2011, Myanmar was fully dependent on China for its defence needs. This cooperation between the two is now at an all time low. A void has been created due to three sore issues the

Tatmadaw holds against the Chinese. There is an unspoken concern that China is supplying inferior defence equipment which has lowered the proud Tatmadaw's defence profile in the region. History has it that erstwhile Burmese kings have fought wars with and defeated the Chinese besides fighting battles even up to Assam in India.

The other resentment the Tatmadaw holds against the Chinese, is its tacit support to the seven EAGs who have not signed Myanmar's National Ceasefire Agreement. Equipping these groups with arms more sophisticated than what is being given to the military gives China the leverage to "dictate" terms to the Myanmar government which is not taken well by the Tatmadaw. Moreover this adds to the mounting casualty rate in the military following clashes with the same rebel groups. Recent recoveries of caches in Shan and Karen states bearing Chinese markings destined for the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Arakan Army further confirms this support. The attack on the Defence Services Academy at Pyin Oo Lwin in Shan state on 15 August 2019 by the EAGs was the final nail in the coffin.

The third and final reason is of Suu Kyi's growing closeness to China that leaves not just the local population but the military uneasy.

Following transition to democracy and lifting of international sanctions, the Tatmadaw has gone in for rapid modernisation and diversification of its defence services and needs. The visit by India's Army Chief, General MM Naravane has gone down well with Myanmar and is bound to reap rich dividends. Visiting the neighbour just prior to the general elections defined the relationship in a new and positive manner. Gifting of the Russian 3000 ton attack submarine INS Sindhuvir to the Myanmar Navy has added a different dimension to defence relations between the two neighbours. It has given Myanmar a boost in its image especially since Bangladesh has already received two Ming class submarines from China, and Thailand was also set to get its share till COVID allegations against China resulted in the deal getting scrapped.

In India, the Tatmadaw sees a dependable and reliable partner and has indicated a positive inclination towards it. This needs to be built upon. Myanmar's participation in joint operations with India like the "Sunrise"

series in Sagaing Division and Rakhine State opposite Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram is enough proof of its willingness to engage more intensely with India. The recent handing over of 22 “wanted” insurgents to India also justifies this.

Besides cooperation on land, there is ample scope to build relations on the high seas as well. Myanmar navy must get inducted and included gradually in regional exercises to make it an equally responsible nation and partner in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Myanmar is a participating member in the Indian Navy’s annual Exercise MILAN and has also begun participation in Ex SIMTEX, a trilateral exercise with Singapore and Thailand being the other two participants. In September 2019 the Myanmar Navy took part in the inaugural US-ASEAN Exercise (AUMX) in the South China Sea.

The recently announced “Island Diplomacy” by India can be put to good use as Myanmar has numerous island territories within its economic zone. Creating a network with India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands would enhance domination of the area.

Scrapping of China’s inclusion from the Kra Canal project by Thailand has opened up the possibility for India to invest in it. This will enable access to Myanmar’s second strategic port, Dawei on the Andaman Sea and would add to India’s naval muscle especially after access has been guaranteed at Changi (Singapore) and Sabang (Indonesia) as well. This would also assist in checking China in the IOR after its ports at Djibouti, Gwadar, Maldives (Feydhoo Finolhu Island) and Sri Lanka (Hambantota) are built into a naval shipping network with Myanmar (Kyaukphyu).

Myanmar’s inclusion in any future strategy of QUAD to counter China in the IOR can be a reality and must not be overlooked. The centrality of ASEAN and in particular Myanmar for QUAD must not be lost sight of. Being a “port country” and as an essential part of the “Pivot to Asia,” Myanmar could become the game-changer in times to come.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.