

# **New Delhi looks to its own interests in its Burma policy**

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**India at best has a contradictory attitude towards the pariah government in Burma, sometimes blowing hot, sometimes blowing cold, to the dismay of the international community eyeing the political turmoil in the junta-led country. India. However, has rational, overriding strategic and economic reasons for its actions, however.**

It was the 1988 uprising, in which the Burmese came close to bringing down the military regime, that brought India significantly into Burmese politics. The failed uprising forced hundreds of refugees across the international border into India. From 1988 to 1992, India's policy vacillated between support for the democracy movement and diplomatic isolation.

P.V. Narasimha Rao, India's prime minister from 1991 to 1996), basically changed the country's foreign policy toward Burma through his so-called Look East policy. However, a more dramatic policy shift happened during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's administration, which ran from 2004 to 2007.

There were two major factors responsible: to provide a counterweight to China's growing strategic influence and to deal with India's own intractable insurgency problems in the northeastern part of the country which abuts Burma. Economic interest also contributed. Of the two, countering China's regional influence remains India's primary concern. Having experienced a bitter war with China in 1962, India feels insecure and threatened when China's influence is broadened.

Certainly, China is by far the bigger trade partner. China-Burma bilateral trade hit US\$2.057 billion in 2007, up 40.9 percent compared with 2006. China's exports to Burma took US\$1.686 billion, up 39.6 percent, while imports from Burma stood at US\$371 million, up 46.9 percent, giving China a trade surplus of US\$1.315 billion.

Similarly, India's exports to Burma in 2007-2008 amounted to about US\$185 million, while its imports were valued at around US\$810 million. In addition to the Tamu-Kalay-Kalewa highway upgrade, India has made investments in projects such as energy and gas exploration. Most recent India's assistance was the US\$200 million project in IT program.

All these moves and counter-moves are the direct result of scrambling for power by the two Asian powers. India, at least for now, sees engaging with the military regime an effective means to narrowing the influence of China.

Another important factor for India's foreign policy shift was due to the rise of insurgency problems in the restive Northeast India. About 20,000 insurgents from different groups of Northeast India have bases in Burma, mostly in the Northwestern part Sagaing Division.

Talks for coordination between India and Burma security forces in counter-insurgency operations have taken on new momentum in recent years. During his visit to New Delhi in 2004, Senior General Than Shwe assured the Indian government that he would not allow his country to be used by anti-

India elements.

Sometimes, bilateral talks and agreements have not really been put into practice. Although the Burmese military, in a number of occasions, has asked the Indian government to silence its Burmese dissidents, New Delhi so far seems to pay a wishy-washy response. Similarly, the Burmese generals' headquarters in Naypyidaw appear to be not fully engaged in dismantling the bases of Indian insurgents operating from Burma.

India apparently is not totally ignoring her support for the Burmese democratic movement. One evidence is the presence of more than 50,000 Burmese refugees (no official figure available) taking refuge in India, including some leading dissidents.

India rather acts in tandem with her national interest and security in the face of China's influence in the region. By engaging with the military regime, India feels better served. To many, this looks as if India has adopted a double-standard policy toward Burma.

In the event of Burma becoming a democratic country, India is expected to be one of the first to throw her support. Till then, India will continue to compete with China, while the Western world is likely to continue with traditional sanctions.

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**P.S.**

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