

India and Burma: Such Good Friends

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Driven by the growing need for energy, both India and China are throwing money and development projects at Burma's junta.

Burma may be a pariah in the eyes of most of the world but India appears determined to enhance its strategic relationship with the country to avoid conceding ground to China. New Delhi is planning a spate of development projects, including a gas pipeline from the Burmese coast to India, and is now proposing to develop a Burmese seaport on the Bay of Bengal to give India's landlocked northeast region access to commercial sea routes.

In the meantime, the generals who rule Burma under their State Peace and Development Council junta, have found a lucrative game: playing India off against China and winning projects from both.

"The fact that both of the two regional powers, India and China, want exactly the same thing from Burma puts them in a position very vulnerable to be exploited by Burma's streetwise generals," said Tayza Thuria, a Burmese activist exiled in the United Kingdom. "China, without having its own seaports for access to the Indian Ocean, would dearly love to get Indian Ocean access via Burma's rivers and seaports. India also wants the right to use the same rivers and seaports in Burma for similar reasons, to provide sea-access to its landlocked states."

At the same time, China's plans to dam the Salween River, Southeast Asia's second largest, are coming under fire from environmental groups in the region, who say that Beijing is again showing little concern for downstream countries that fear its adverse effects. Chinese construction crews began the first efforts to dam the river this week. Eventually 13 dams are envisioned for the river, which is one of Burma's most important water resources. The series of dams are expected to raise government hackles in Rangoon.

Analysts also expect China to get into the pipeline business with Burma in a big way. A pipeline through the country and into Yunnan could save nearly two thousand miles of sea travel to China's South China Sea ports from oil sources in the Middle East.

The junta, meanwhile has approved New Delhi's proposal to work on the US\$212.4 million Kaladan project, which includes development of the Sittway port in Burma as well as waterways and road transport to connect the harbor with the northeastern state of Mizoram, adjacent to Burma's Chin province.

India's northeastern region is surrounded by five foreign nations ? Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and Bangladesh. Comprised of eight states with a cumulative population of around 50 million, it is connected to mainland India through what has been described as a chicken's neck. Only 2 percent of the region's territory is attached to the mainland.

"New Delhi wants to connect the northeast with commercial sea routes," Indian Commerce Minister Jairam Ramesh told reporters during a recent visit to the region. "Moreover, with the development of the Sittway port and the Kaladan River as navigable, the region is expected to have another viable access to ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries."

Proposed by India 's foreign ministry in 2003, the project includes development of the Kaladan as a waterway to connect Kaletwa in Burma, then a road to Aizawl, the capital of poverty-stricken Mizoram. Completion would connect the area directly to Sittway, the capital of the western Burmese province of Rakhine, also known as Arakan, which is less than 400 km away from Aizawl.

The project has already been given the go signal by the Indian Planning Commission and is awaiting formal cabinet approval, Ramesh said, adding that completion would also allow the movement of cargo ships from Sittway to other Indian ports.

The Kaladan, the biggest waterway in the region, flows from Mizoram to Sittway through Chin province. There is also a road connecting Sittway to China's Yunnan province through Mandalay, Burma's second largest city.

New Delhi has decided to spend US\$103 million initially on developing the seaport. Although the Burmese junta consented to the proposal, it has refused to invest in the project, providing only free land use.

To facilitate the investment, the Burmese junta reopened the Sittway seaport jetty on February 18. The 240-foot jetty, constructed by the British in 1844, was damaged during a cyclone in 2004.

The project is anticipated to be completed within four years and will include road construction from Kaletwa in Chin province to the Mizoram border. The road is designed to connect to India's National Highway 54 inside Mizoram and will be built by the government-owned Rail India Technical Economic Services.

Another major project is a US\$1 billion natural gas pipeline India is eagerly touting. External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee visited Burma in January seeking approval, but the junta has said it will delay approval of the project until it is certain its gas reserves will support it. A decision is expected in May.

"We are trying to build a pipeline through which we can get gas directly from the gas fields to our refineries," Mukherjee said. "Burma has responded by saying that they are exploring the gas fields and the actual quantity available will be known only after exploration is complete."

Regardless, both projects raise the ire of activists who fear a repeat of the forced labor allegations that plagued the Yadana pipeline project, a joint venture in southern Burma between Total of France and Unocal of the US. That project ended up in a California court when Burmese exiles successfully got a suit over human rights issues heard against UNOCAL before it was finally settled.

Reports have already surfaced in the Burmese exile press of the involvement of Burmese military units in planning meetings with officials and engineers in Mizoram for the development of the waterway.

"I would like to ask whether the present situation is really suitable for investing money and efforts in the country?" said exile journalist Ko Nyo, who works for US-funded Radio Free Asia's Burmese service . He argues that "initiating any kind of project in today's Burma, implies forced labor and also forced displacement of indigenous people from their habitation."

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