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India's Outdated Myanmar Policy: Time for a Change

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India's disturbing silence during the current turmoil in Myanmar can only be understood in the context of New Delhi's long and turbulent relationship with the military rulers of Yangon. Having paid the price for being a lone supporter of the democratic aspirations in Myanmar for decades, India is hesitant to depart from its current policy of constructive engagement. However, New Delhi could begin to make incremental adjustments as it faces growing internal and external pressures to promote political change in Myanmar.

SINCE THE generals took charge of Burma 45 years ago, India has been its persistent critic of the military rule until the mid 1990s. The strong historic bonds between the Indian freedom movement and the Burmese national movement saw New Delhi condemn the military takeover of Burma in 1962 and a steady deterioration of bilateral relations. In the late 1980s, when the pro-democracy movement reached its zenith in Burma, India provided both moral and material support to the dissidents.

Why India changed its earlier hostility

In the meanwhile, Burma's junta has renamed the country as Myanmar. Three factors compelled India to rethink its political hostility towards the generals during the last decade. First was the China factor. As India and the world sought to isolate Myanmar in the late 1980s, Yangon drew ever closer to Beijing. Amidst the shifting balance of power in its immediate eastern neighbourhood in favour of China, India believed it could no longer stay out of Myanmar.

Second was the question of India's internal security in the restive North Eastern provinces. Cooperation with the Myanmarese military has been critical for India's efforts to counter many entrenched insurgencies in the Northeast. Third, as it sought to promote the "Look East" policy from the mid 1990s, India saw Myanmar as a natural land bridge to Southeast Asia. Together the three imperatives shaped a steadily expanding engagement with the Myanmarese Generals and downgrade India's support to the pro-democracy movement.

Although the shift in India's policy towards Myanmar is often justified in the name of "non-intervention" in the internal affairs of other nations, it was not principle but *realpolitik* that guided New Delhi's changing attitudes towards Yangon since the mid 1990s.

India's neighbourhood policy has always been torn between the temptation to promote positive internal change and the relentless pressure to deal with who ever was in power. It was the specific circumstance, rather than a consistent *moralpolitik* that determined India's approach to the internal

affairs of its neighbours.

After all India had conducted one of the world's first humanitarian interventions in East Pakistan in 1971 to end the genocide there and created Bangladesh. It had unilaterally sent a peacekeeping force into Sri Lanka in the late 1987 to promote a reconciliation between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil separatists. And last year, India's forceful diplomatic intervention persuaded the Nepalese monarchy to cede power to the people and generate a roadmap for the integration of Maoist insurgents into the political mainstream.

India's current calculus on Myanmar

What matters, then, is the nature of India's calculus on its immediate and future interests and the ability to make a difference to the internal balance of forces in Myanmar. The core assumption that has guided India's policy is that internal change in Myanmar is not on the cards. The brief but dramatic protest by the Buddhist monks has challenged this premise, but has not yet overturned it.

If the internal conditions in Myanmar, which have already become unbearable for a majority of the populace, continue to provoke protests in the near future, India will have to reassess the longer term political costs of identifying itself so overtly with the generals. More fundamentally, if New Delhi begins to take into account over-the-horizon security threats arising from a failed state in Yangon, it would have every reason to work for change in that Southeast Asian country rather than go down with an unsustainable status quo.

Equally important will be the realisation in New Delhi that its competition with Beijing for influence in Myanmar might have run its course. Any review of this rivalry over the last decade and a half would suggest that China has gained far more than India in Myanmar. Given its limited resources and democratic constraints, India is unlikely to outrun China there.

New Delhi's passive policy has ceded the high ground to Beijing, which has positioned itself as the agent of influence as well as the principal interlocutor between the international community and Myanmar. By simply tailing China in Myanmar, India now finds itself in dissonance not just with the United States but also Japan and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which have taken uncharacteristically strong positions against the Myanmar General.

An International Coalition on Myanmar?

On its own India, does not have the leverage to engineer internal change in Myanmar. But it has enough stakes and equities there to contribute to the building of an international coalition. If such a coalition, involving the U.S., Japan, ASEAN, and India, is founded on the recognition that neither the attempt to isolate Myanmar nor those seeking separate engagement have delivered satisfactory results, a more credible approach might yet emerge from the current crisis. A subtle approach that focuses on carrots and sticks to induce change might have a better shot at inducing incremental change in Myanmar.

From the perspective of *realpolitik*, too, such an international coalition might offer India a more credible option to balance China's influence in Myanmar. If Beijing joins such a coalition, it will necessarily have to accept new constraints on its policy towards Myanmar. If it does not, India could become part of a stronger countervailing force in its eastern neighbourhood.

Conclusion: Recalibrating India's policy

Given its deeply democratic character, changes in Indian foreign policy usually arise from domestic political pressures. There is deep empathy across the Indian political spectrum for the Myanmar

opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who grew up in New Delhi when her mother was her country's ambassador there. From the communists, who oppose military rule in Myanmar, to the Hindu nationalists, who are revolted by the repression against the Buddhist monks, there is a strong domestic sentiment in India in favour of political change in Myanmar.

If a solid international coalition and a credible strategy to alter the domestic dynamics of Myanmar emerge, India is bound to redo its sums on its enduring national interests to recalibrate its outdated policy on Myanmar.

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