

Myanmar in India's Intertwined Idealism – Realism Foreign Policy: A 'Modified Structuralism' Perspective

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Abstract

In discussing India's Myanmar foreign policy, we need to understand India's psyche concerning the Asian region as a whole. Since its independence in 1947, India had been using the Gandhian-Nehruvian philosophy of non-violence and peace in its relations with Myanmar and other Asian countries. India's engagement with Myanmar was based on its idealistic self-conception as a major and civilised power from geographical and cultural perspectives, promoting peace, non-alignment, and democracy. India tried to promote democracy in Myanmar by becoming a staunch supporter of pro-democratic movements in Myanmar, financially and logistically after 1988. However, India's democratic stance in Myanmar is seemed to have shifted, as since 1993 onwards India established a close relationship with the military government of Myanmar because of India's own economic and geo-strategic interests. Theoretically, this foreign policy phenomenon in India-Myanmar relations is looked upon from a "modified structuralism" perspective. This theory argues that foreign policy decision makers of a state or government operate in a 'world of sovereign states seeking to maximize their interest and power' but under some conditions choose to transcend 'individualistic calculations of interest.' This article is trying to look into how "modified structuralism" is used to explain India's foreign policy behaviour towards Myanmar.

Keywords: Foreign policy, India, Myanmar, Modified structuralism, Idealism-realism

1. Introduction

A state or regime is assumed to act based on its own national interests. At the minimum level, a state or regime will attempt to maintain its existence as a state or regime, and at the maximum level to try and achieve a universal domination. Briefly, modified structuralism as a theory has a perspective that the world is full of sovereign states trying to maximize their power and national interests. In this kind of world, the basic function of a state is to coordinate its behavior in its effort to achieve the desired goals in certain issues. This theory also views the states or regimes emerge and have significant impacts under certain restrictive conditions (Krasner, 1982). From the perspective of modified structuralism also, decision makers operate in “a world of sovereign states seeking to maximize their interests and power but under certain conditions choose to transcend individualistic calculations of interests” (Bajpai, 1998). In India’s foreign policy context as a sovereign state, India is concerned with the independence of its foreign policy orientation as well as protecting its territories. Concerning the independence in foreign policy orientation, Indian foreign policy makers have been resorting to many methods such as involving concessions to external rival interests. This method includes among others negotiations, summit meetings among state leaders and officials, promoting economic and cultural links, regional cooperation and military cooperation. India’s modified structuralism in its relation with Myanmar can be best understood in terms of material factors and ideational factors (Bajpai, 1998).

India’s early foreign policy towards Myanmar after the independence of both countries, was influenced by national interests that India wanted to achieve at that time. This can be seen through, for example, India’s early efforts in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Through NAM, India had attempted to project its domestic interests into its foreign policy, where India tried to bring back its identity after for so long under the British colonization. India struggled to re-erect its identity as a nation which is superior and civilized. India’s foreign policy after its independence was influenced by this sentiment, where India portrayed itself as an ancient nation with morally superior civilization (Solomon, 2012). Apart from being an ancient nation with morally superior civilization, Indian policymakers are also of the opinion that India is a great power due to its large territory, vast resources and population, strategic location between the east and the west, as well as India’s historical richness. Muthiah Alagappa (1998) argues that Indian history plays an important part in shaping some aspects of its foreign and security policies, as well as India’s national self-conception as a great power.

Through this conception and inspiration, Indian leaders and policymakers after the nation’s independence, were of the opinion that they were a sort of ‘successors’ to the Indian empires in its vast history and civilization. This historical inspiration, rooted from early Indian empires, such as Asoka could also become a significant factor in India’s foreign relations with Asian countries, where India planned to lead a leading role in a revived Asia (Pardesi, 2010). Jawaharlal Nehru had attempted to translate India’s identity as a morally superior nation by championing the rights of the weak and developing countries through NAM. By co-founding NAM and becoming its primary mover, India tried to show to the world that

India is a country that is different from other countries. Through NAM, India tried to protect weak states and their sovereignty in the world of *realpolitik* where at that time many countries of the world are easily trapped in the Cold War conflict between the United States of America (US) and the Soviet Union (USSR) (Solomon, 2012). India also at the same time practiced idealism in its foreign policy, especially in the early part of its independence. This was due to the fact that India had just been freed from colonial yoke and as a nation, still weak. As argued by Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2009), being idealist is one method which is always used by weak nations in their efforts to place themselves in the international system. At this time, India as a nation-state was still weak, engulfed with impoverishment and had limited ability and resources to project itself as a powerful nation. Therefore, by practicing idealism in its foreign policy and by supporting moral norms in international politics, India was able to save itself from plunging into conflicts. Within this concept, the major objective of a moral-based international system is to protect the principle of sovereignty, a principle designed to protect weak nation-states from the threats of big powers (Mehta, 2009). Sinderpal Singh (2005) has made an argument that between the period of 1947 to 1955, India had designed its foreign policy to cater to both India's idealism and realism interests. India's foreign policy around this time was not designed to cater only for the Gandhian-Nehruvian idealism, as suggested by some scholars. The tendencies of idealism and realism found in India's foreign policy over that period of time were actually intertwined (Singh, 2011).

India has projected some elements of *idealpolitik* or *moralpolitik* in its Myanmar policy, as part of India's 'realist' effort to be recognized as a superior and morally civilized nation, in India's foreign policy toward Myanmar between 1947 to 1990. India's Myanmar foreign policy since its independence until today is divided into two strands, namely idealism and realism. It can also be said that India's Myanmar foreign policy is influenced by the combination of these strands. Modified structuralism found in India's Myanmar foreign policy is when India projected its own national interests but at the same time behaves in accordance with universal terms and values, in its relations with Myanmar. In this Indo-Burmese relations, India has struggled and championed democratic ideals in the early part of the relationship between the two countries, but later on shifted to become more realistic by prioritizing India's own national interests, by focusing on economic, security, and geostrategic imperatives in its relation with Myanmar.

2. India's Myanmar Ideational Factors

In modified structuralism perspective, a state or regime "must embody some principles and norms, as well as rules in decision-making process." In the international world full of sovereign states, this is needed in the states' interaction. Principles and norms are the "integral part" of interaction among world's states. The notion of "reciprocation" or the belief that if State A helps State B at some opportunity cost to state A, the reciprocation will take place when a situation is changed in future, hence a state should "avoid to maximize its own interests in the short term for the sake of expected long-run gains" (Keohane, 1982). In India's Myanmar foreign policy behavior, this situation is more or less depicted. India's behavior towards Myanmar in the early part of the history of bilateral relations of both countries suggests that India did not reflect specific calculations of self-interest.

To discuss on India's Myanmar foreign policy, we have to first understand India's psyche concerning the Asian region as a whole. Through its architect of foreign policy - Jawaharlal Nehru, Indian first Prime Minister, India started its quest for regional leadership through an ideational strand of humanitarian value, which was to free Asia from the yoke of colonialism. Jawaharlal Nehru believed that India was an important and a core country in the Asian region that can provide an aspiring leadership (Singh, 2011). Ideally also, Nehru believed that India's successful fight against the British colonialism through the philosophy of non-violence and peace, had given India a sort of special responsibility to 'free' Asia from imperialism. Nehru had made clear of this idea in his speech in 1948 (Singh, 2011), echoed the same in March 1949 through his speech in Constituent Assembly (Legislative), and reiterated again in Lok Sabha's speech in February 1958 (Nehru, 1971).

As for India's Myanmar relations, Myanmar was already in India's interest ever since the former's independence in January 1948. Although Myanmar was facing some internal political problems a few years after its independence, India was willing to extend its assistance, without directly embroiled in Myanmar's domestic difficulties, as reflected in Nehru's speech addressed to the Indian Parliament in March 17, 1950 (Nehru, 1971). Jawaharlal Nehru regarded the relationship between India and Myanmar as very friendly. To him, Myanmar was a country of friendly neighbor, as well as a country of 'dear to us' and 'near to us' (Nehru, 1971). The pleasant relationship between India and Myanmar prior to the Burmese's Ne Win military coup in 1962, was even acknowledged by the then Burmese Prime Minister U Nu (Liang, 1990). The cordial Indo-Burmese relations at the early stage of the bilateral ties of the two countries are mainly due to three attributes, namely the political and economic cooperation, similarity in foreign policy outlook, and the intimate personal relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu (Liang, 1990). In order to keep Myanmar a democratic country, India helped Myanmar in crushing the Communist party rebellions in 1949 by supplying arms to Myanmar. India also helped Myanmar to obtain funds from the Commonwealth. With India's military support, Myanmar managed to suppress the Communist insurgencies, thus prolonging democracy in Myanmar before it was truncated by the military coup in 1962. With India's assistance also, Myanmar managed to get Commonwealth's financial aid worth six million pounds, in which India gave one sixth of it (Liang, 1990). This action of India in helping Myanmar to stand up against any non-democratic elements is evident that India aspired to free Asia from imperialism and tyranny, as hoped by Jawaharlal Nehru, in his quest to play a major role in India's Asian neighborhood. India also helped Myanmar at that time in formulating Myanmar's foreign policy. As both countries were in the midst of the Cold War era and emerging China as a new frontier threat, India and Myanmar cooperated to stand still in their foreign policy of neutrality and non-alignment (Liang, 1990).

However, democracy is a 'non-driver' of India's foreign policy in the Asian region and India's lack of enthusiasm in using democracy in its foreign policy has been criticized. Western countries such as the United States would like to see and expect India to play a more active role in promoting democracy in Myanmar (Sahni, 2009). As Myanmar is now gradually moving toward democracy under the civilian presidency of Thein Sein, India could

revert back to the idea of democratic-idealist-humanist approach it once applied upon Myanmar after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in Myanmar. India is suggested to play a more engaging role in Myanmar, because if India sidelined this matter, it would bring ‘Western influence into its own backyard’ (Ayob, 2013). Although in general India takes a stand of not interfering in the domestic politics of its neighbors, but with regard to Myanmar, India was willing to take coercive and blatant moves in its support for democracy. After the Myanmar’s people’s demonstration in 1988, the Indian government under the premiership of Rajiv Ghandi was among the early Myanmar’s neighbors to condemn the harsh Myanmar military junta against its pro-democracy supporters. India also became a staunch supporter of Myanmar’s pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. For Aung San Suu Kyi and her party’s followers, the Indian government was one of their movement’s most active and ardent supporter (Ayob, 2013; Cartwright, 2009). Since then, India had opted for a democratic-idealist-humanist-moralist approach in its relation with Myanmar. Among the actions taken by India in extending support to the Myanmar’s pro-democracy activities were:

1. Welcomed Myanmar’s anti-SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) supporters and took side with them, where India opened its Northeastern borders and setting up refugee camps at Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam to accommodate Burmese students and anti-SLORC pro-democracy supporters (Egreteau, 2003; Sidhu, 2009).
2. Indian embassy in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) even helped these pro-democracy supporters majority of them were Burmese students, by keeping in touch with oppositions such as All Burma Federation of Students’ Union (ABFSU), and gave financial assistance to them to fled to India (Routray, 2011).
3. The Indian Foreign Ministry at that time had even taken another step in this matter by issuing an instruction that no genuine Burmese refugees and dissidents who wanted to seek refuge in India be deported back to Myanmar (Routray, 2011).
4. India gave permission in July 1992 to Myanmar’s military government opposition, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) to open its office in New Delhi (Haacke, 2006).
5. India also sponsored a United Nations resolution in 1992 together with the US and a few Western Countries to condemn Myanmar military government for the inhumane treatment of the pro-democracy activists and violation of human rights in Myanmar (Routray, 2011).

It is evident that at first, India adopted a democratic-idealist-humanist-moralist approach in its relationship with Myanmar. This approach was centripetal in India-Myanmar relations. India refused to be involved in any dealings with Myanmar military junta. Although India could not do much to restore democracy in Myanmar, but India became the “government in exile” for Myanmar’s students, dissidents and other pro-democracy supporters to launch campaigns against the Myanmar’s SLORC government through print and electronic media (Routray, 2011).

3. India's Myanmar Material Factors

Broadly in 1993, India seemed to suffer from a democratic-idealist-humanist-moralist fatigue. It seemed that India was unable to maintain its idealism of championing democracy for Myanmar. India's efforts in bringing back democracy to Myanmar and in isolating Myanmar's military government from an international mainstream seemed to be futile. Military generals in Myanmar's government were not willing to compromise with India's efforts in bringing back democracy to Myanmar. Several factors have made India to reconsider its Myanmar's foreign policy, and eventually changed it from championing idealist-humanist-moralist-democratic stance to a more realist-pragmatist policy, which is based on India's own national interests. Several instances were evident to this India's Myanmar new foreign policy stance:

1. India's toning down critics to Myanmar's military junta and began government-to-government cooperation.
2. Since March 1993, India's high government officers visited Myanmar, and vice versa to discuss several issues in the two countries' bilateral relations. India's trade and military delegations were also sent to Myanmar in the following years (Sidhu, 2009).
3. India increased its economic assistance, investment, as well as infrastructure projects in Myanmar since 1993. The official high level visits between the governments of the two countries became frequent.

National interests, no doubt became the primary mover in India's turnaround policy towards Myanmar. The principle of democratic-idealist-humanist-moralist in which India was persistent in implementing for several years since 1988, was no longer central in India's Myanmar foreign policy after mid of 1990s. It was "*realpolitik* that guided New Delhi's changing attitudes towards Myanmar" (Mohan, 2007). As mentioned by Jan Cartwright (2009), India "finds itself at odds when geopolitical interests cross path with the support for democracy." India, like any other countries of the world, would of course choose realism over idealism, simply because the former is tightly knotted with its own survival as a nation-state. In this light, India does not care of the world's criticism upon its decision to further court Myanmar's military junta in its new approach of *realpolitik* in its Myanmar's policy.

At least, there are four factors that have been identified as the propellers in India's reassessment of its foreign policy towards Myanmar. First is the China factor. China rescued Myanmar economically and militarily in the late 1980s when India and the whole world isolated the country due to its inhumane treatment of the pro-democracy protestors which took place in 1988. Throughout these years, the Sino-Burmese relationship has steadily developed and progressed in which India currently still could not match China's influence on Myanmar. India viewed China's military presence in Myanmar as a security threat to its territory and strategic national interests. India believed that this situation is alarming, and it could no longer stay out of its eastern neighbor - Myanmar.

Second, is India's economic and geostrategic interests. The importance of this factor to India

is undeniable. Myanmar provides an economic market for Indian goods. India was Myanmar's fourth trading partner in 2006, right after Thailand, China, and Singapore. India's export to Myanmar ranges from pharmaceutical products, steel, as well as electrical products. Apart from these, India is interested in fostering good relationship with Myanmar because of direct economic opportunities. Myanmar is a source of oil and gas for India (Price, 2013; Cartwright, 2009). India also invested heavily in the sector of infrastructure in Myanmar. It is with the objectives to improve connectivity in the Indian northeastern region for inter-Indian trade, to establish communications channels to Southeast Asia through Myanmar, as well as to ease out hydro-electric project in Myanmar for India's long term benefit (Price, 2013).

Third, is the issue of India's security problem in the Northeastern regions. India is in need of Myanmar's military cooperation to suppress this ongoing security threat. The Indian northeast provinces are bordering with Myanmar in which the provinces have given India a security threat for decades. The region is the "home" for a few secessionist groups, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), and United Nationalist Liberation Front (UNLF). To defeat the secessionist groups that dwell in the forests in these provinces, India believes that without Myanmar's help it is impossible to crush these separatist forces, which move and roam freely between India-Myanmar borders.

Fourth, is India's ambition in Southeast Asia. India aims to foster a closer relationship with Southeast Asian countries through its 'Look East Policy.' In relation to this, India sees Myanmar as a "land bridge" (Mohan, 2010) connecting Southeast Asia. Myanmar is also a member of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN). India's main objective is to get closer to Southeast Asia is none other than to gain benefits from Southeast Asia's booming economies. India is interested to join ASEAN since 1987. Through joining ASEAN, India believes that its membership in the organization would help to develop trade relation between India and Southeast Asian countries. In 1992, India was given the status of dialog partner by ASEAN (Jaffrelot, 2003; Egrettau, 2011). By actively engaging Myanmar, India hopes that it would be able to successfully gain access to Southeast Asia's markets.

4. Conclusion

Based on the evidence above, India's foreign policy towards Myanmar since its independence in 1947 is intertwined with the idealism of humanist-moralist-democracy aspirations in which India had implemented it for decades, with the new strand of realist politics fuelled by economic, security, and strategic interests. At first, India wanted to project itself as the champion for democracy in the Asian region, particularly in Myanmar. At the early stage after Myanmar's independence, India helped the country to keep its feet on the democratic ground before Myanmar's military coup in 1962. Again, starting from 1988 to 1993 India assisted Myanmar's pro democracy dissidents without gaining much benefits, in light of the modified structuralism's notion of "making a short-run sacrifice" in order to benefit later, in case the situation changed (Keohane, 1982). And in fact the situation did change when in 1993 India started to court Myanmar aggressively through India's "Look East Policy" for the economic and geostrategic interests that India hopes to reap from its close relations with Myanmar.

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Glossary

ABFSU: All Burma Federation of Students' Union.

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asia Nations.

Lok Sabha: Lower House in Indian Parliament.

NAM: Non-Aligned Movement.

NCGUB: National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma.

NSCN: National Socialist Council of Nagaland.

SLORC: State Law and Order Restoration Council.

ULFA: United Liberation Front of Asom.

UNLF: United Nationalist Liberation Front.

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