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India and Burma/Myanmar Relations : From Idealism to Realism

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Introduction

Burma¹ happened to be the largest and one of the richest provinces of British India. After three Anglo-Burmese Wars in the nineteenth century (1824-26, 1852-53 and 1885-86), the British integrated the whole Burmese territory to their Empire in India and ruled the Burma province directly from Calcutta (and New Delhi after 1911). Thus Burma was given the new role of the strategic frontier of British India, and became a buffer territory between India and the French Indochina and the decadent Chinese Empire further North. After the Independence of the country in 1948, Burma split with India and to chose to revert to its traditional neutral and equidistant position between India, China and South-East Asia. With

¹ The new junta that took power through a coup on September 18, 1988 changed in May 1989 the name of the country and many geographical and historical names. From then on, 'Burma' has been known as 'Myanmar', Rangoon as 'Yangon', the 'Irrawaddy' River as the 'Ayeyarwardy' River, etc... In this paper, these new terms will be used when specifically referring to the country's current military government. Otherwise, 'Burma' or 'Burma/Myanmar' will be used when referring to the country in general.

the first Burmese Prime Minister, U Nu, along with other Asian leaders, especially J. Nehru who was very close to him, Burma became one of the leading countries of the Non Aligned Movement in the fifties. But the advent of a military rule in Burma in 1962, with General Ne Win's Coup, changed this diplomatic trend as the country opted for a self-isolation that lasted for almost three decades. The Burmese regime cut the links with all its neighbours, including India, which in turn contented itself with those cordial and neglected relations with another military dictatorship. Thus, the eastern border of India has long been the less dealt with by Indian strategists. Obsessed by the security on its Western front against Pakistan (furthermore when Bangladesh became independent in 1971), India has long ignored its Burmese neighbour.

However, Burma shares with four Indian Northeastern States (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram) a 1 643 km-long border, and with a coastline of 1 930 km wide open on the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal facing the Indian Territories of the Andaman Islands, Myanmar offers a strategic challenge to India's Eastern frontier. Ignoring such an important neighbour was a rather unusual political option chosen by the Indian political and diplomatic establishment, but this policy was nevertheless guided by the Nehruvian ideals of the Indian diplomacy. Fearing no credible threat from the East, New Delhi was apparently satisfied with these "non-relations" with the Burmese Military, even if Indira and then Rajiv Gandhi paid each a single official visit to Rangoon (in 1967 and 1987 respectively).

The dramatic uprising that took place in Burma in 1988 and the arrival of a new junta in Rangoon through another coup d'Etat in September 1988 made the Indian Government refocused its Burmese Policy. With the new geopolitics of the region by the late eighties and the early nineties, India had to rethink its policy and to dropped its neglected attitude towards its eastern bordering countries.

In this presentation, we will first go through the first diplomatic attitude India defined in the late eighties-early nineties towards the new State of Myanmar, a basically "idealist stance", to analyse after the U-turn, sometimes called 'a volte-face' of the Indian diplomacy towards the Burmese Junta in 1993.

Then we will consider the stakes involved in the region, stakes that could justify and explain this U-Turn and the conduct of a "realist policy" by the successive Indian governments. Finally we will asset some perspectives on this new Burmese policy with a focus on its limits.

India's first attitude towards the SLORC (1988-1992) : between diplomatic isolation and support for Democracy

When Burma began to be shaken by a strong popular movement in 1988 after 26 years of military rule, India clearly adopted a sympathetic stance towards the pro-democracy uprising. After the demission of General Ne Win on July 23rd, 1988, demonstrations of students, monks and democracy activists followed one another till the general strike of August the 8th. Thousands of Burmese marched through the streets of Rangoon and of other major cities, cheering Aung San Suu Kyi (who just came back to Burma) and her followers. After some hesitation, the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army), decided to retake the control of the situation by firing at the crowd gathered in the heart of Rangoon. On that day, several hundreds of demonstrators were slaughtered as thousands were thrown into jails. India strongly denounced the bloody repression. During these black days following the 8-8-88 massacre, the Indian Embassy was even turned into a makeshift hospital and several Burmese students climbed over the Embassy's walls to take shelter. PMS Malik, the then Indian Ambassador, strongly stood against the new junta that seized power on September 18th, 1988. By that time many Burmese activists sought a military intervention of India. A year before, Rajiv Gandhi had sent troops to Sri Lanka, officially to protect the Tamil population of the island and his mother too had sent Indian troops to East Pakistan in 1971. So why not sending the Indian Army to Burma, which happens to be next door to India ? Apparently, the Burmese Military feared this hypothesis but there was no plan of this kind considered by the Indian Government. New Delhi, as soon as the SLORC took power, only froze its relations with Yangon and violently opposed the new regime by giving a full and opened support to the pro-democracy movements.

Besides the official diplomatic positions condemning the junta and demanding a return to democracy and humanist values, India did its best to support the Burmese democratic activists, students and 'rebels' who fled Burma in 1988-89. New Delhi made no effort to conceal its sympathy for the Burmese exiles – quite the reverse. Refugees camps were set up in the North-East, near the Indo-Burma border to welcome these refugees as India had already defined in South Block its open-door policy for Burmese students and activists. A large campaign condemning the Burmese Military activities was also launched. As a state-controlled institution, the All India Radio broadcast many programmes (especially in Burmese) denouncing the military. In turn, the Burmese Generals accused India of collusion

with the democratic movements in Yangon (through its Embassy), as well as with ethnic insurgencies all over Myanmar, especially along the Indo-Burmese border. India reportedly provided some financial and technical assistance to the Kachins (*Kachin Independence Organisation*) in the North-West of Myanmar and the Karens, near Thailand (*Karen National Union*, through its consulate in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand). India wanted thus to prove its commitment to the restoration of democracy in Burma by conducting this humanist and idealist policy guided by Gandhian and Nehruvian principles.

Two years later, after the elections won by the *National League for Democracy* (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi and U Nu, and by ethnic minorities' parties in May 1990, the Burmese Military Government once again opted for the violent alternative by refusing to implement the results and arresting most of the Members of Parliament newly elected. India continued its policy of isolation and opposition to the Myanmar regime and a particular event illustrated this Indian position in 1990. A former student of International Relations at the University of Rangoon, Soe Myint, hijacked with a friend a Thai Airways plane to Calcutta in November 1990. The hijack was non-violent and took place with the tacit agreement of the captain and passengers. Soe Myint's objective was merely that of creating public awareness, notably in Thailand and India, and denouncing the atrocities committed by the junta in power in Myanmar. Arrested by the Indian authorities at Calcutta Airport, he was however released three months later, in February 1991. Taking advantage of the case, the Indian Authorities freed the young men while reiterating their official position of criticism towards the Burmese Military regime. Furthermore, several personalities in India have supported this attitude of rejection of the military dictatorship in Myanmar and offered support to Burmese exiles. For instance, George Fernandes, who is now the Defence Minister, gave shelter to Burmese activists and the *All Burma Students League* operates now from his residence in New Delhi.

The first stance India opted for vis-à-vis the new Burmese Junta was a definitely idealist one, a policy of opposition and denunciation of the Burmese Military. However, in the early nineties, as the regional order began to be reshaped after the end of the Cold War and the Indochina Wars, the geopolitics of the region changed and Burma's geopolitical position seemed to have been rediscovered. This led to an overhaul of the Indian Burmese Policy.

The realist U-turn of 1993 : in search of a strategic partnership with Myanmar

Since the International Community opted for an almost complete isolation of the country, the Burmese Generals were desperately looking for an ally, at least an economic partner. China, having cracked down herself in June 1989 on another student uprising, seized the opportunity and established a very close relationship with its southern neighbour. Taking advantage of the diplomatic and economic vacuum left in Myanmar, China built up a “Burmese strategy”, which had been publicly defined in the mid-eighties, and to a great extent, the Chinese gain a foothold in the country. At the same time, India was opening a new diplomatic era with the launch of a new “*Look East Policy*”, aimed at getting closer to the booming South East Asia. Thus, India began to wonder if ignoring Burma, such a strategic neighbour, was the best diplomatic option to choose. Fearing a potential Chinese threat at its Eastern door, New Delhi began to review its Burmese Policy. The official visit paid by J.N. Dixit, the Indian Foreign Secretary, in March 1993 in Yangon, marked a turning point in the Indo-Burmese Relations as India decided from then on to cautiously engage the Burmese military regime and dropped its isolating policy. The Indian Government 'officially' agreed not to interfere in the internal affairs of Myanmar, and vice versa, and thus, India officially considered now the Burmese democratic movements and the Aung San Suu Kyi Issue as a Myanmar's internal affair.

The year after, in January 1994, was signed in New Delhi the first *Border Trade Agreement* between India and Myanmar. Implemented in April 1995, with the opening of a cross border point between Moreh (Manipur, India) and Tamu (Sagaing Division, Myanmar), this agreement enhanced (and made official) the bilateral border trade between the two countries. The Indo-Burmese cooperation got another boost at the military level in 1995 when both Armies decided to conduct a joint military operation (called *Golden Bird*) against some insurgents groups in the North-East of India (*United Liberation Front of Asom, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM & K), People's Liberation Army of Manipur, Manipur People's Liberation Front, Kuki National Army*). But these apparently cordial relations suffered from hesitancy on both sides. The Yangon regime did not seem to trust the Indian government in its engagement policy attempt and when India granted to Aung San Suu Kyi the *Nehru Prize for International Understanding* in 1995, as a proof of her democratic commitment, the Burmese Military answered back by stopping the *Golden Bird* Operation in

the North-East, expressing thus a strong disappointment against New Delhi's choice. Basically, in the mid-nineties, the "Burmese Policy" of India was still faltering, between an open support to the Burmese democratic opposition and cordial relations with the military regime of Yangon.

The advent of the Vajpayee government changes, at least initially, the Indian attitude vis-à-vis the Burmese Military. In 1998-99, the Indian foreign policy was basically focused on the Nuclear Issue and the rivalry with Pakistan. Furthermore, Georges Fernandes was appointed Defence Minister of the NDA's Government and he has been known as one of the fiercest leaders of the anti-China campaign when he stated in May 1998 that China was the 'enemy number one' of India. He also stoutly denounced the Chinese influence over the Burmese Junta and accused Beijing of using Yangon's military regime as a spear against India on its eastern flank. His violent rhetoric on the Chinese "*Myanmar Pawn*" followed his life commitment for human rights, democracy and civil liberties in Asia, especially for Burma and Tibet.

Thus, in the first steps of the Vajpayee Government, the engagement policy of India towards Myanmar slowed down but as soon as Jaswant Singh, the new Indian Foreign Affairs Minister, took up his post, he reshaped India's Burmese Policy by anchoring the Realist approach in South Block. The "Eastern Strategy" of Jaswant Singh purposed India to gain a foothold in Asia through Myanmar, taking advantage of the geopolitical position of the country. As a consequence, a working relationship with the Burmese regime, regardless the nature of this regime, was the first condition necessary for achieving this strategic goal. The strategic interest of Myanmar for India appeared to command over the definition of its external policy. As a consequence, New Delhi began to drop its commitment to the restoration of democracy in Burma and chose to openly 'engage' the Burmese Junta so as to establish a closer partnership with it. Two official visits of Jaswant Singh himself, in Tamu (in February 2001, to formally inaugurate the 160 km-long *India-Myanmar Friendship Road* built on Burmese territory between Tamu and Kalemmyo in the Chin State) and Yangon (in April 2002 to deal with Burmese and Thai officials on the Trans Asia-Highway project) further enhanced these Indo-Burmese formal economic relations.

While commercial links were substantially growing, military contacts between Indian and Burmese Armies' high-rank officials started. Military-to-military dialogue facilitated the political rapprochement of the two neighbours. In January 2000, the Indian Chief of Army, Gen. V.P. Malik, met his counterpart, Gen. Maung Aye, in Yangon and in Shillong and in turn, the number 2 man of the *State Peace and Development Council* (the new name the

SLORC took in 1997), paid two official visits to India (in January and November 2000). In January 2001, the Indian Navy Chief of Staff, Admiral Sushil Kumar, paid an official visit to Yangon and in November 2001, his Burmese counterpart, the Navy Commander-in-Chief Vice-Adm. Kyi Min, paid a week long visit to India (Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata).

It appears thus that India consciously decided to conduct such a policy. Many observers and Indian policy makers assert that India could not but follow this policy trend in its own interest. What could justify and explain this new strategy ? Three main reason might legitimate this new approach according to the stakes involved : first, the instability in the North-East, then the willingness to open up India to South-East Asia and finally, the so-called “China Threat”.

The stakes involved : the strategic interest of Myanmar for India

Instability in the Indian North-East : the Burmese Connection

For decades the North-East of India has been going through political instability and ethnic insurgencies. The region located at the foothills of the Himalayas, along the Brahmaputra River Basin between Burma and the Indian Ocean, is a mosaic of peoples and cultures. Many tribes and ethnic groups live in these landlocked territories, ignoring the delineation of official state borders. On both sides of the 1 643 km Indo-Burmese border, ethnic kinships are legion. Since the Independence of India and Burma in 1947-48, many of these ethnic minorities have been struggling against their respective central government so as to gain more autonomy (and for some even independence) or at least a specific political and cultural recognition. Most of them organized themselves in various violent separatist outfits and have often found across borders sympathy, shelter and finance.

On the Indian side, the Naga rebellion has been one of the most violent insurgencies in the region for the last fifty years. Claiming the creation of a Greater Nagaland (*Nagalim*), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), formed in 1980 but inheriting from three decades of struggle, constituted one of the most dangerous insurgent outfit in India, along with the Assamese (*United Liberation Front of Asom* since 1979) and Mizo (*Mizo National Front*, having disarmed since the creation of the Indian State of Mizoram in 1987) movements. Since the NSCN split into two rival factions – NSCN (Khaplang) and NSCN (Isaac-Muivah) in 1988, the region has been witnessing in the nineties a rise of violence, through ethnic and criminal clashes, and drugs and weapons trafficking. Burma has long

served in the 1960s and 1970s as a corridor linking the Indian North-East's insurgent groups and China (especially through the *Communist Party of Burma*), one of the then main patron of the Indian terrorist outfits. Burma has long offered a harbour to many of them, seeking shelter beyond the Indo-Burmese border. As kinships are common across borders, relations between Northeastern insurgents and rebels from Burma were quite logical. These ties between Indian insurgents and Burmese ethnic armed groups have been often reported, particularly with the *Kachin Independence Army* (mainly Christian, Northern Myanmar) and the *Chin National Front* (as the Chin are close to the Mizo ethnicity, further South). Moreover, Khaplang, a notorious Naga leader, is of Burmese origin and has established bases in Myanmar.

Thus, this imbroglio of ethnic secessionism, religious and political insurgencies, large-scaled smuggling and above all transnational links and cross border supports, have long undermined the relations between New Delhi and Rangoon (Yangon). Burma had often turned a blind eye on the home bases the two NSCNs, the ULFA and Kuki outfits had set up on Burmese territory and the Indian government has been forever denouncing the indirect (or direct) support the Burmese junta gave to them. Aware of this bargaining chip that the Burmese Generals had in their hands, New Delhi began to review its policy towards Myanmar so as to stabilize the region by making Yangon stop aiding the Indian insurgents. The two governments organized new joint military operation to crack down on some insurgents outfits in 2000-2001. Since a couple of years, the Burmese regime has been keeping on reassuring India that it would not help those outfits nor harbour any of them. Furthermore, courting the junta would also enable India to open up the North-East and in the long term crack down on all the smugglings of the region, particularly small and light arms proliferation, since Myanmar had become a well known trafficking corridor.

Reaching Out South-East Asia : the Myanmar Bridge

The second reason that can explain the readiness of India to establish close ties with Myanmar in the willingness of reaching out South-East Asia, especially the ASEAN countries. In 1991, the Narasimha Rao Government launched of a new "*Look East Policy*", aimed at getting closer to the booming economies of South-East Asia. The political aspect of this rapprochement with Asia purposed to associate India with the peripheral countries of China and Japan to draw up a new strategic framework in Asia. As South-East Asia begins with Myanmar, the Indian diplomacy had to include this country in its eastern diplomacy and could no longer isolate it as in the past. With the turnaround of India's attitude towards the

Burmese Generals in the mid-nineties, and with the entry of Myanmar into the ASEAN club in 1997, the integration of Yangon in India's *Look East Policy* was quite logical. According to Indian officials, Myanmar could be the first step India needs to enter South-East Asia, have access to attractive markets and get a strategic foothold there. In the spirit of this *Look East Policy*, several institutional projects were set up in the region, with Myanmar being the geographical node of them : the BIMST-EC (**B**angladesh **I**ndia **M**yanmar **S**ri Lanka and **T**hailand **E**conomic Cooperation), the **M**ekong **G**anga Cooperation (MGC) and the Kunming Initiative. India chose to engage Myanmar and get closer to it through these regional organisations.

The BIST-EC was launched in June 1997, with Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. As only Bangladesh and India had common borders, the idea of inviting Myanmar into the club was approved in December 1997, six months after Yangon also joined on its part the ASEAN club. The BIST-EC became then the BIMST-EC, which was, thanks to Myanmar and Thailand, very much less indo-centric as the SAARC could be seen. The main objective being the connection between the Indian Subcontinent and Indochina, the Organization functions mainly deal with infrastructures projects, like the Trans-Asia Highway, linking North-East India to Bangkok via Mandalay, Myanmar. India realised that its eastern neighbour could be a valuable bridge to Indochina enabling the opening up of its landlocked Northeastern States. The BIMST-EC is actually India's favourite forum and Delhi is very keen on developing these regional projects.

A second regional organisation, of which India and Myanmar are both part of it, is the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which was launched in July 2000 by the Foreign Ministers of the six Asian countries concerned : Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos for the riparian states of the Mekong River, and India for the Ganges River. Bringing together six countries which feel they have a common civilizational background, the organization puts ahead the cultural and development fields to enhance their multilateral cooperation. The MGC was also seen as a counterbalance project to China's commitment in the region (Mekong Basin Project, Kunming Initiative...).

While closely watching at India's diplomatic thrust into South-East Asia, China too sought to enter the institutional dynamics of the region and to benefit from those cooperations. Thus, the Chinese South-West province of Yunnan, fully backed by Beijing, launched a regional forum, gathering four neighbouring countries : China, Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. A first conference which took place in Kunming, capital of Yunnan, in August 1999, gave birth to the *Kunming Initiative* or (BCIM). For the Chinese, this four sided

organisation aimed at opening up China to the South, through Myanmar, to India, Bangladesh and the Indian Ocean, thanks to the revival of the historic 'Burma Roads' that in the past connected India to China. A part from the economic projects of reviving these Burma Roads, India seems reluctant to go further with the Kunming Initiative, preferring to deal bilaterally with China, rather through a regional organisation. On the contrary, Beijing and Kunming are very keen on enhancing these projects, as the Myanmar-China connection is already well established.

Thus, along with the admission of India as a Full Dialogue partner in the ASEAN in 1996, the entry of Myanmar in the ASEAN the year after and the launch of the India-ASEAN Summit in 2002, both India and Myanmar had many regional fora to discuss together. By being part of the institutional network of the region, India and Myanmar are enabled to come closer diplomatically. Nevertheless, their bilateral relations since India showed its willingness to engage the Burmese Junta, are far from being as flourishing as they are touted to be. India did not benefit that much from its political rapprochement with Myanmar. In 2001-2002, the bilateral trade between Myanmar and India reached US\$ 323.43 million (but largely against India as Myanmar exports almost eight times more than India does : US\$ 37.57 million worth of Indian exports to Myanmar against US\$ 285.86 million imports). Moreover, the *Border Trade Agreement* of 1994 allowed only 22 items to be legally traded across the Indo-Burmese border, and shipping links between India and South-East Asia remain largely cheaper and more convenient than land trade by road via Myanmar. Reviving the ancient Burma Roads to transform them into economic corridors linking India and China is the dream of many diplomats and businessmen in the region.

The idea of these historic Burma Roads cuts actually across two different projects based on two different communication routes, which would complement each other both geographically and economically. In fact, the first Burma Road follows the old Southern Silk Road that connected China with the Indian Ocean, from Sichuan and Yunnan to Rangoon, passing through the cities of Ruili and Muse, then Lashio or Bhamo to Mandalay. The second road dates back to British colonization when the British tried to reach China from their colony of Bengal and, later, Assam. The 'Ledo Road' was supposed to connect the city of Ledo in Assam to Yunnan, where British merchants hoped to hold back the commercial advance of the French who had already settled down in Yunnan. This *Ledo Road* was reactivated during the Second World War, by General Joe Stillwell who undertook to rebuild the road, in order to reach the allied front against the Japanese in northern Burma and after 1945, to help Chinese nationalists fighting against Mao's Army in southern China. Thereafter, it was China

that revived the notion of the "Burma Road" by initiating the restoration and up-grading of the Chinese part of it. Now the road from Kunming to Baoshan is a huge modern highway and the connection to the Myanmar border is also improving. But the Burmese and Indian parts of this road are still in very poor condition. So the idea of reviving these roads might be just an old dream and Myanmar is thus not yet the valuable gateway India believes it should be.

The China Threat

The third reason, and maybe the most sensitive one, that could justify the realist Burmese policy of India is the so-called "*China Threat*". China has for a long time given a wide and open support to various Indian insurgents groups, notably those which claimed to follow the Maoist ideology in the 1960s and 1970s. After the Sino-Indian War of 1962, India feared the Chinese militarization of Tibet and Beijing's claim over a large part of Arunachal Pradesh in the Eastern sector. But Burma has not been seen as credible ally China could use against India's interest in the North-East. Ne Win's regime had very cold and less than cordial relations with Beijing and as Burma was self-isolated, cutting links with the outside world (even with the Non Aligned Movement in 1979), India did not perceive any Chinese Threat through Burma before the early nineties.

The advance of the Chinese influence in the Indo-Burmese region occurred indeed more recently. The uprising of 1988 in Burma and the advent of a new junta in Rangoon changed the geopolitical situation of the country. Once again isolated, Myanmar rapidly gained the favour of its northern neighbour, China, which took advantage of the vacuum left in there and established from 1988 a close partnership with the new Burmese Generals. After having signed a large trade agreement in August 1988, the Sino-Burmese cooperation kept on growing. Beijing, through two huge arms deals (in 1989 and 1994), supplied the Burmese Army with weapons in abundance. The *Tatmadaw* (Burmese Army) was thus offered a great opportunity to see its strength increased and its equipment modernized at low cost. It took only a few years for China to get a strong foothold in Myanmar. The Chinese strategy on its southern flank was clear since the then Chinese Vice-Minister of Communications wrote an article (*Opening the South-West : an Expert Opinion*) in the *Beijing Review* in September 1985. According to him, the main objective of the central government in that region was to open up the Yunnan and Sichuan provinces to Burma, thanks to a trade corridor through the Irrawaddy River and road/rail links (which would be up-graded or simply built by the Chinese) towards the Burmese ports on the Indian Ocean. For the southern provinces of

China, Myanmar offered a valuable economic outlet as the new Burmese junta opened and liberalized the country's economy in the early nineties. The Burmese market was seen as a major opportunity for cheap Chinese products. As a consequence, Northern Burma has been largely dominated by Chinese investors and traders ever since. China's second intention was to ensure a secure and permanent access to the sea (the Bay of Bengal), especially in case of a blockade in the South China Sea or off the Malacca Straits, and to acquire another military ally neighbouring India, a la Pakistan. Having two close military allies flanking India could not but contented China. The inclusion of Myanmar into China's Grand Strategy was then obvious, and the Chinese leaders took advantage of the chance offered in Burma in 1988-89 while they too were ostracized by the International Community after the repression of Tian Anmen's students uprising in 1989.

Although Beijing has tried to give the impression that the People's Liberation Army and Navy had few interests in the region, China has now deep strategic links with Myanmar. This Chinese influence on the Burmese Junta is seen as a potential threat by India, especially as far as the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is concerned. China is reportedly suspected of having significantly up-graded several ports and naval bases of Myanmar. The strengthening of the Burmese naval infrastructures and the installation of monitoring facilities by the Chinese on the Burmese territory has long worried India. The construction of several electronic surveillance facilities and listening post along the Burmese coasts (Hainggyi on the Irrawaddy delta, Zadetkyi and Sakanthit near Mergui in the Tenasserim State) or on Islands (Greater Coco Islands with its 50m-high antenna) are seen as obviously directed against India by many observers, even though Myanmar (and China) strongly denied it. Georges Fernandes in his first days as Minister of Defence in 1998 strongly denounced this alleged Chinese presence in Myanmar. Nevertheless, pointing out the "*China Threat*" and the "*Burmese Pawn*", India tried to cope with it. Realising the likely use of the Burmese facilities by China, India chose to deal carefully with Myanmar instead of opposing head-on the Burmese military and tried to court the Burmese junta so as to avoid it turning into a Chinese military pawn against Indian interests. Burma/Myanmar in itself is not at all perceived as a threat by India, even if the *Tatmadaw* has increased considerably its strength and if the large-scale weaponry present in the country could not be of any risk. Befriending the Burmese Generals with a '*constructive engagement policy*' would in fact, according to Indian strategists, enable India to deal with the Chinese potential threat on its eastern flank.

Perspectives on the new Burmese Policy of India

India is now clearly conducting a realist policy towards Myanmar. The definition of this strategy implied the abandon of the first idealist diplomacy guided by Gandhian and Nehruvian principles. India obviously dropped its democratic ideals and stopped appealing for the restoration of democracy in Burma, at least publicly. The latest developments in Myanmar have confirmed this stance. When Aung San Suu Kyi was released for the second time in May 2002, the Indian government released a discreet statement cheering her liberation but at the same time showing its trust in the democratic transition efforts of the Myanmar government.

At the end of last year, the Indian Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal, paid an official visit to Yangon and Mandalay where he officially inaugurated the re-opening of the Indian Consulate. India thus wanted to extend its diplomatic influence at the heart of Myanmar where China has already a substantial toehold (China has too a Consulate in Mandalay). Myanmar has on its side opened a Consulate in Kolkata in September 2002. In January 2003, the Burmese Foreign Affairs Minister, U Win Aung (who already came to India, following Gen. Maung Aye in November 2000) paid a first independent trip to New Delhi, Hyderabad and Calcutta. His 6-day visit was again marked by the willingness of closer ties and of non-interference with internal affairs. This policy trend was again confirmed when India did not react negatively to the clashes that occurred between pro-democratic groups and military regime followers on May 30, 2003 and led to the “protective custody” of Aung San Suu Kyi (her third arrest by the Military since she came back to Burma in 1988). New Delhi waited for the U-turn of the ASEAN which decided to condemn the Burmese Military by asking for the release of Suu Kyi and thus dropping the ‘non-intervention policy’ the organisation had always been conducting previously toward its members. India then cautiously denounced the arrest of the NLD leader but kept a discreet attitude so as not to upset the Burmese Junta.

After a month, the Indian government accepted the clarification that U Win Aung, the Burmese Foreign Affairs Minister gave to all Myanmar’s neighbouring countries, when he and his Deputy Minister went on a diplomatic offensive in July 2003 to Japan, China, ASEAN countries, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (in New Delhi, July 8-10, 2003). As the pressure from Western countries was intensifying, both diplomatically and economically, Yangon sought to get the support of Asian governments in these latest political developments. India cautiously took the hand and the explanation the Burmese Junta gave.

The military exchanges between India and Myanmar got another boost too these past months. The Indian Naval Chief (Adm. M. Singh) paid an official visit to Yangon while the Myanmar Air Force Chief (MG Myat Hein) came to New Delhi early September 2003. While India is looking for a naval cooperation with Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal so as to benefit from Burmese port facilities along the Burmese Coast, the Burmese Army is seeking for training skills, especially the Air Force. Since last year, India is also reportedly sending arm shipments to Myanmar (maybe mortar and artillery pieces). Those military exchanges are very likely to go on, even in case a majority change in the Indian Parliament. When Gen. Maung Aye, the number 2 man of the SPDC, came to India in 2000, he met the opposition leader, Sonia Gandhi. Thus, there is every chance that this policy of engagement keeps on.

Even Georges Fernandes has mellowed his position and admits India could not but engage the Burmese regime. The support he has been giving to Burmese exiled is still obvious and the Burmese refugees issue remains sensitive and a source of concern for India. For instance, more than one thousand Burmese refugees were listed in New Delhi in 2002. Out of them, few hundreds are political activists operating from here and organizing demonstrations regularly, as well as petitions and lobbying activities to denounce the shift of India's policy. Soe Myint, the young 'hijacker' of 1990, saw his case dropped by the West Bengal Justice Court in July 2003 after 13 years of hesitancy. Now considered as one of the leader of the exiled Burmese community in Delhi, he continues his struggle against the Military regime and tries to keep the Indian people aware of the situation prevailing in Burma. Nevertheless, it seems that the sympathy showed by India has faded away. The Burmese refugees in the Indian North-Eastern States are more and more badly received by local populations. In Mizoram, a rape affair in July 2003 sparked off a violent backlash against Chin and Burmese exiled populations of which many fled back to Myanmar, despite the risk they run.

The Indian policy makers appear to conduct deliberately this new policy given the strategic stakes involved. But this policy is not a clear-cut one. India seems to be always hesitant, almost shameful to have to establish a close relationship with another military regime. As soon as a Burma issue is raised, India seems to be reluctant to deal with it, knowing that on one hand India's fundamentals are based on democracy and on the other hand that it could hardly ignore neither isolate its neighbour, even if it is another military regime. The Indian diplomats and politicians may know that they might be playing with fire but think they can win on both sides : courting the junta to get a strategic foothold in Myanmar and counterweight China's influence which is still growing, to get a valuable bridge to Asia and to open a new economic corridor, while on the other side still showing a (fading)

sympathy towards Burmese activists and a discreet commitment to the restoration of democracy in Burma thanks to some marginal groups (lobbying groups, few intellectuals, some MPs or some political parties, like the Samata Party of Georges Fernandes). Many observers think it is the best option India should develop and that New Delhi has no other political choice.

But a violent backlash could occur and India might lose on both sides. Both losing its credibility as a democratic country committed to the restoration of a democratic Burma but also losing economic and strategic opportunities in Myanmar by not conducting a clear-cut policy towards the Burmese Generals nor frankly engaging them. Also, India, feeling ashamed, has chosen to define a solitary policy, not in unison with the ASEAN or the Western countries. A policy of its own, most of the time hesitant and not reactive enough towards the Burmese regime. But it is clear now that this realist approach has all the chance to win over the idealist one, even if the latter is definitely more suited to a so-called democratic India...