



Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

Army Chief Visits Myanmar

Towards the end of last month Indian Army Chief Gen Bipin Rawat visited Myanmar for four days to strengthen the ongoing bilateral defence and security cooperation. The visit came at a time when Myanmar's political and military leaders had just about finished with the second edition of 21st Century Panglong Conference that was designed to achieve peace and reconciliation with multiple insurgent groups.

Not only India supports such a peace process in Myanmar but it also has very vital stakes in ensuring peace and stability along the Indo-Myanmar borders. The 1643 kilometers long border has witnessed gun running, narcotics trafficking, smuggling in contraband and crossings by insurgent groups for achieving their nefarious objectives against the State. While, in principle, both Indian and Myanmar armed forces have been cooperating and at times even carrying out coordinated patrols yet there have been some major incidents on the Indian side which resulted in loss of soldiers' lives. For instance, since National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang), or NSCN (K) abrogated the ceasefire in April 2015 there have been a number of attacks on Indian security forces by the NSCN (K) and its which have resulted in killing of about 40 security personnel so far. With the death of SS Khaplang, leader of the NSCN (K), based in Sagaing Division of Myanmar, there would be increased opportunities for both Indian and Myanmar armed forces to neutralize not only this insurgent group but also prevent it from offering shelter to NE insurgent groups like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur, Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) and some others.

Gen Bipin Rawat besides giving talk at Myanmar National Defence College met the Tatmadaw's (Myanmar Defence Forces) leadership for acquainting them with India's concerns. He conferred with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services and discussed security and stability in border areas and cooperation between two countries for development. Gen Hlaing apprised the visiting Indian Army Chief of the ongoing political reform processes and Tatmadaw's objectives in building a standard army with a capacity to defend the state. Indian Army Chief on his part highlighted the country's 'Neighbourhood First' policy where emphasis are on engaging the neighbouring countries. India's Look East and now 'Act East Policy' also mandate stronger relationships with India's eastern neighbours like Myanmar. He also expressed support for the ongoing internal peace process of Myanmar and said that India would promote cooperation in ensuring peace and stability and development tasks in border region between the two countries.

Political Context

Nevertheless, India with the able offices of the Indian ambassador to Myanmar has made pro-active efforts to speed up its infrastructure development projects in Myanmar. It should be noted that while India has extended grants and credits to the tune of 1.75 billion US dollars the implementation of projects has rather been slow. It is



for no reason that Myanmar's strategic community accuses India of not implementing the announced developmental projects in time thus giving rise to India being termed as 'No Action, Talk Only' country. It is also quite evident that Myanmar Army has a considerable political role in the present power sharing arrangements ordained by the 2008 Constitution. While that may not be the only reason to engage the Myanmar military yet that adds to a number of reasons as to why India should have a strong military to military relationship with Myanmar.

However, the military to military relationship has to occur in a political context and while the political relations have been warm and friendly yet there is widely held belief that India has not paid enough attention to developing and strengthening some of the other aspects of the evolving relationship. Though India's Foreign Secretary visited Myanmar in May this year yet engagement with Myanmar has not been as intense as with some of our other neighbours like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Defence Cooperation on Ascending Trajectory

On the other hand Indo-Myanmar defence cooperation has been on the ascending trajectory in the recent years. The frequency high level military leaders visits to each other's country has increased the quasi civil-military government took over power in 2011. Special efforts have been made by the current Indian government to both engage Myanmar's political and military leadership since May 2014. For instance, Myanmar Army chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, had visited India in July 2015. The visit had come about a month or so after Indian troops had carried out strikes against two camps NSCN (K) insurgent group along the Indo-Myanmar border. Gen Hlaing at that time had assured New Delhi that Naypyidaw will not allow use of its territory for activities inimical to India. Both sides agreed on importance of sound border management as an intrinsic part of maintaining border security and their determination to work together to resolve issue of unsettled boundary pillars in all sectors. A joint visit at a senior official level was later arranged to the India-Myanmar border in Nagaland sector to understand situation in this sector.

Regular mechanisms for holding Army, Navy and Air Force Staff Talks have also been established as a step towards enhancing the cooperative relationship. Last November the Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba visited Myanmar with the aim of consolidating and enhancing the bilateral maritime relations between India and Myanmar. As both countries share long maritime boundary in the strategically significant Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, maritime cooperation has become an equally important aspect of the military to military relations. During the first meeting of Joint Consultative Commission established between both countries in July 2015, India's External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj had committed to support the modernization of Myanmar Armed Forces as also in creating a national army, cooperation in the field of IT, in dealing with emerging security challenges, and military to military cooperation including in terms of training. She also expressed India's commitment to cooperate with Myanmar in building a professional and capable Myanmar Navy to safeguard and ensure its maritime security.

Navies of the two countries have conducted coordinated patrols along the maritime boundary since 2013. Taking it forward, the Fourth Edition of the India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol (IMCOR) was successfully undertaken from February 13 to 16, 2016 along the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) in the



Andaman Sea. During the Closing Ceremony of 4th IMCOR, the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for IMCOR was also signed between Indian Navy and Myanmar Navy. This is only the third country with which India has signed a formal agreement for maritime coordinated patrols and reflects growing naval interaction between India and Myanmar. The signing of the SOP is a significant achievement and will facilitate smooth conduct of coordinated patrols between two friendly neighbours that share a long maritime boundary in the strategically significant Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal.

Myanmar Navy has also been taking part in India's joint naval exercises which are held biennially. Last year it also took part in India's International Fleet Review. Further, during a Myanmar Navy delegation's visit to India in March this year the Indian Navy has agreed to set up meteorological facilities and impart training to the Myanmar Navy personnel. The delegation had earlier visited Indian Naval Meteorological and Analysis Centre as well as the School of Naval Oceanology and Meteorology.

Provision of Defence Equipment and Systems

Over the years India has also given some defence equipment and weapon systems like 105 mm guns, T-55 tanks, 75 mm Howitzers and two BN-2 Defender Islander maritime surveillance aircraft and deck-based air-defense guns to the Myanmar Navy. In recent years three Sonars have also been given. India has also undertaken maintenance of Russian equipment held by them. There have also been indications that India may export off shore patrol vehicles like India has done in the case of Vietnam, Mauritius and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, India's defence export policy has apparently undergone a change early this year when some of the Indian Defence Public Sector Undertakings announced their intentions of defence exports. Reports indicate Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL) is ready to export some of the anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) like Konkur and Milan besides surface to air missiles (Akash missile systems) etc. There are possibilities of India exporting 15 weapon systems including Astra beyond-visual range air to air missiles, Prahar surface to surface missiles, light combat aircraft (LCA), Brahmos supersonic cruise missile, sonars, Arjun Mk-2 battle tanks, airborne early warning systems, battlefield radars and a variety of unmanned systems. In June 2016, the then Defence Minister had stated that 10 percent of missile production capacity could be earmarked for exports subject to certain conditions. One estimate suggests that India could export defence equipment worth about 2 billion USD per year to start with.

The above development becomes important and relevant because Myanmar has been on the lookout for importing not only Fighter Aircrafts and some other weapon systems but also submarines. While India may not be in a position to meet all the requirements it should provide competition to the other defence exporting countries in the region in meeting Myanmar armed forces' requirements.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, India needs to strengthen its strategic relationship with Myanmar which India considers as a gateway as also a launch pad for its 'Act East Policy'. In congruence with its political relationship India needs to further boost its evolving military to military equation with Myanmar. India needs to further build up capacity of Myanmar armed forces so that not only they can deal with internal challenges but also enable them to provide a secure environment along the land and maritime borders. It should be noted that the most of the inventory of



Myanmar military is from China and this heavy dependence needs to be offset by India. Besides increasing the vacancies for Myanmar armed forces personnel at the Indian military training establishments New Delhi should not be shy of providing big ticket items to support the modernization efforts of Tatmadaw at friendly prices, for strategic reasons.



About VIF

Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.

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Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

www.vifindia.org

 @vifindia

