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# The India-Myanmar Relationship: New Directions after a Change of Governments?

Pierre Gottschlich

## Abstract

Despite a promising start after independence, bilateral relations between India and Myanmar have had a long history of mutual neglect and obliviousness. This paper revisits the developments since the end of colonial rule and points out crucial historical landmarks. Further, the most important policy issues between the two nations are discussed. The focal point of the analysis is the question of whether one can expect new directions in the bilateral relationship since the election of new governments in India in 2014 and in Myanmar in 2015. While there have been signs of a new foreign policy approach towards its eastern neighbour on the part of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it remains to be seen if the government of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy will substantially alter Myanmar's course on an international level.

**Keywords:** India, Myanmar, Burma, foreign policy, bilateral relations

## 1. Introduction

Recent political developments in Myanmar<sup>1</sup> have led to hopes for groundbreaking democratisation and liberalisation processes in the country (Bünthe 2014; Kipgen 2016). In particular, the landslide victory of the former oppositional National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi in general elections in 2015, with the subsequent formation of an NLD government in early 2016, is seen as a turning point in the history of Myanmar. With a potentially major political and economic transformation, there might also be room for a reconsideration of Myanmar's foreign policy, particularly with regard to its giant neighbours, China and India (Gordon 2014: 193–194). Likewise, international actors may reassess their strategy towards a changing Myanmar (Singh 2012: 26). In such a period of transition,

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new and unexpected opportunities might open up to either readjust or even drastically alter foreign policy doctrines and traditions. In some cases, a complete fresh start of bilateral relations might occur, ideally to the benefit of both parties involved.

This article deals with the bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar as an example of a possible new beginning in international diplomacy. It argues that a reassessment by India and a shift in the relations between New Delhi and Naypyidaw is not only conceivable but, from an Indian perspective, absolutely necessary. For India, the current situation might present a unique opportunity to rectify some foreign policy failures of the past and overhaul an attitude of obliviousness and neglect towards Myanmar that has marred the relationship for decades. After a short historical overview, this paper assesses the state of India–Myanmar relations in six different policy areas. It will look at India’s role in Myanmar’s process of democratisation and at its interest in stability in Myanmar. Following that, security in India’s Northeast region and the issue of illegal migration from Myanmar will be considered. The next three topics the paper looks at are closely interconnected: trade and infrastructure, access to energy resources and development cooperation are interdependent issues that can hardly be addressed in isolation from each other. As a final policy area, the role of China and its influence on India–Myanmar relations is scrutinised. The next section deals with the changes of government in India and Myanmar and asks which new developments have already occurred or can be expected in the future. Naturally, this chapter focuses primarily on the two most prominent figures in the bilateral relationship, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and State Counsellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs Aung San Suu Kyi. Additionally, three specific questions will be looked at more closely: Can Myanmar be a balancing factor in the India–Myanmar–China triangle? Is there a future for India–Myanmar–Bangladesh trilateralism? And what are the prospects for Myanmar to become a full SAARC member? The conclusion summarises the findings and offers a glimpse at the road ahead.

Apart from a review of scholarly studies, policy papers and journal and newspaper articles, this paper is based on a number of interviews with Indian diplomats, including three former ambassadors to Myanmar, and with some of the leading experts on India–Myanmar relations from Indian think tanks, research institutions and universities.<sup>2</sup> Here, a glaring limitation of this study becomes obvious. The history, current state of and prospects for the bilateral relationship between New Delhi and Naypyidaw are analysed from an Indian

1 I am going to use the official name “Myanmar” throughout the study. The English term “Burma” will only be referred to in a historical context, for events before the renaming in 1988, or in direct quotations, following academically accepted patterns (e.g. Renshaw 2013: 30). For the purposes of this article, there is no political connotation in the use of either “Myanmar” or “Burma”.

2 Interviews were conducted in October 2014 and in June/July 2016. Some of the interviewees were questioned on both occasions.

point of view. This somewhat biased perspective of course invites criticism but is also an invitation to complementary research shedding more light on the Myanmar side of the relationship.

## 2. Historical overview

Today's Myanmar was formerly part of the British Empire in South and South-east Asia. After its political separation from British India in April 1937, Burma was administrated as an independent unit and became a strategic buffer safeguarding the Indian heartland in World War II (Egreteau 2003: 19–26; Singh 2012: 27–28). After the war ended, Burma lost this role. Its importance to the British Empire was further diminished when India and Pakistan were granted independence in August 1947. Burma itself became independent on 4 January 1948, but in contrast to India, Pakistan and Ceylon did not join the Commonwealth. In the period immediately following independence, bilateral relations between India and Burma were strong. The shared cultural and religious heritage was intensely emphasised by leaders of both nations. The deep bonds between the countries were reflected in Jawaharlal Nehru's famous words on the occasion of Burma's independence:

As in the past, so in the future, the people of India will stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Burma, and whether we have to share good fortune or ill fortune, we shall share it together. This is a great and solemn day not only for Burma, but for India, and for the whole of Asia. (Jawaharlal Nehru in Routray 2011: 301)

In 1951, India and Burma signed a Treaty of Friendship, which, according to Nehru, was to last “for ever thereafter” (Lall 2006: 431). After 1954, New Delhi's relations with Burma, as well as India's rapprochement with China, were guided by the “Panch Sheel” (the five virtues) of peaceful coexistence: respect for the other nation's territorial integrity; respect for the other nation's sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference in domestic affairs; and equality and efforts for mutual benefit (Mitra 2011: 187). Throughout the 1950s, bilateral relations between India and Burma remained stable, partly because of common interests within the Non-Aligned Movement and further bolstered by a strong personal relationship between Nehru and Burma's Prime Minister Nu (Myint-U 2012: 268). The Buddhist connection also played a role in nurturing mutual bonds, for instance in February 1950 when Nu visited Calcutta to accompany the transfer of a Buddhist relic to Burma. Furthermore, New Delhi supplied the Nu government with arms and ammunition in the early 1950s. In the form of development cooperation, India granted Burma a loan of 46 million USD in 1958. The military coup in Burma in 1962, however, changed the nature of the two nations' political and eco-

conomic relations. While there was not necessarily an open rift between them in the following decades, a lasting mutual indifference developed, furthered by Burma's self-imposed isolation (Egreteau 2003: 33–36). The stern repression of the Burmese democracy movement in 1988 led to a further deterioration of relations, resulting in a short diplomatic ice age between New Delhi and the newly named Myanmar (Dörffel 2003: 379–380; Singh 2012: 31–32).

The 1990s brought a substantial new orientation in India's foreign policy (Mitra 2011: 183–196). Following the severe economic crisis of 1991, which almost resulted in the total bankruptcy of India, the government of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao (1991–1996) recalibrated India's foreign relations in order to foster economic development. New Delhi's so-called "Look East Policy" focused on Asian markets and an extension of Indian trade relations towards Southeast Asia. Under this new framework, a fresh start in India–Myanmar relations was possible (Egreteau 2003: 102). For New Delhi, economic and strategic interests now trumped democratisation and human rights considerations that had previously been widely viewed as crucial to any rapprochement (Haacke 2006: 34). The new policy of "constructive engagement" (Egreteau 2003: 132) led to the Common Border Trade Agreement of 1994 and a gradual improvement of the bilateral relationship. In 1995, India and Myanmar even conducted a joint military operation against ethnic guerilla groups along the Mizoram border (Myint-U 2012: 71). When Indian Prime Minister I. K. Gujral (1997–1998) promulgated the "Good Neighbour Policy", Myanmar's prospects were further enhanced. Now, India was abandoning the principle of strict reciprocity in its foreign relations within its immediate neighbourhood. Instead, New Delhi announced that it was willing to invest considerably more while at the same time assuring its respect for the "Panch Sheel", particularly with regard to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighbouring countries. Regional economic cooperation became a cornerstone of India's foreign policy. For Myanmar, this development resulted in its integration into the organisation BIMST-EC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand - Economic Cooperation)<sup>3</sup>, which aimed to establish more effective collaboration in the Bay of Bengal region (Wagner 2005: 281).

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004) and the government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) brought a "real shift in India–Myanmar relations" and a much more pragmatic approach to, for instance, military-to-military contacts and economic ties (Lall 2006: 432). In 2000, both nations became founding members of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) group. Two years later, India and Myanmar reopened diplomatic representations and consular offices. Under the subsequent government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), bilateral economic relations between In-

3 After the integration of Bhutan and Nepal in 2004, the organisation was officially renamed Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

dia and Myanmar cautiously improved further without, however, resulting in a significant political rapprochement. A rare foreign visit of General Than Shwe to New Delhi in July 2010 led to the signing of many economic agreements, yet fell short of truly bringing relations to a new level (Myint-U 2012: 221, 270–271). When Myanmar's new president, Thein Sein, hosted Prime Minister Singh for a state visit in Naypyidaw in May 2012, it marked the first visit of an Indian prime minister to Myanmar in 25 years and was widely regarded “a historic milestone” (Singh 2012: 26). While once again many memorandums and agreements were signed, it seems that the visit was just a hint of the greater shifts to come.

Given the change of government in India in 2014, there is an opportunity for a much more fundamental transformation or even a completely fresh start in relations between New Delhi and Naypyidaw. Particularly the proclamation of India's new “Act East Policy” signals a major shift from its former “Look East” approach, towards a more proactive stance. According to critical voices in India, such a reorientation is much needed since India's rather passive and self-sufficient foreign policy towards Myanmar has been marred by ineffectiveness, especially in the economic realm. Former Indian ambassador to Myanmar Gopalapuram Parthasarathy writes, “We would be less than honest if we did not admit that in project and investment cooperation, our record has been tardy” (Parthasarathy 2014). Oftentimes, however, it is not the basic intention but the protracted and incomplete realisation of arduously agreed-upon plans and projects that is widely criticised, as the following excerpt from an interview with Khriezo Yhome, Myanmar expert and research fellow at the Observer Research Foundation Delhi, shows:

It wouldn't be wrong to say that India has the best of plans, policies and mechanisms in place to promote and protect its interests in Myanmar. [...] The problem is in implementing these plans and projects. New Delhi need not reinvent new policies; if the existing policies and plans are implemented effectively half of the battle is won. [...] There is no doubt that the Burmese want close ties with India [...]. If we, however, ask if the Burmese are happy with India's role in Myanmar, there is a sense of frustration at the pace at which India has been moving. [...] The lack of proper and effective implementation of policies and projects has been a major source of damage to India's image. (Yhome, interviewed by author 4 October 2014)

Hence, there is not only much room for improvement but severe need for action if India does not want to squander the opportunities for better and mutually beneficial relations between India and Myanmar that might be opening up.

### 3. Issues and policy areas of the India–Myanmar relationship

When asked about the single most important issue for India with regard to Myanmar, the diplomats, experts, researchers and policy advisors interviewed for this study variously named several different topics as the top priority. Security in India's Northeast and bilateral trade relations were named most often. Related to trade and economic issues, the question of connectivity – meaning the improvement of the exchange mechanism between the two nations and a better connection from India to Southeast Asia through Myanmar as a transit country – was also seen as crucial to India. Other subjects mentioned include energy, illegal migration and democracy. Interestingly, one topic which usually receives much attention in the Western world was not mentioned at all: the supposed great power competition between India and China in a “new Great Game” of influence in Asia, in which Myanmar is usually seen as crucial to both sides, was not named as a top priority for India. Apparently, there is a much different assessment of the “China factor” within the foreign policy community in India than some Western observers assume.

Probably the most remarkable point about the answers to the question “What would you regard as the single most important issue for India?”, however, is the diversity of the issues named. There does not seem to be much consensus among the relevant policy institutes and think tanks with regard to the order of India's interests in its bilateral relations towards Myanmar. Of course, this reflects the generally incoherent and in some cases erratic foreign policy India has conducted towards its eastern neighbour in the past. After 70 years, there is still no tangible foreign policy statement, let alone a grand strategy regarding Myanmar from the Indian side. Considering the generally feeble nature of the Indian foreign policy service (Chatterjee Miller 2013), this is part of an overarching problem and hardly surprising. It may, nevertheless, cast serious doubts on one of the basic assumptions of international relations analyses – namely, that actors are aware of their own interests and are able to convert these interests into a list of ranked preferences. As long as a concerted official Indian foreign policy strategy is missing, it is an important task for researchers and advisors to organise the different policy areas and point out interdependencies among them.

#### 3.1. Democratisation and stability

The promotion of democracy abroad has never been one of the main pillars of India's foreign policy and plays a rather marginal role. Instead, the principle of non-interference has dominated foreign policy debates and choices in India since the 1950s (Wagner 2009: 9–11). The advancement of democratic ideals



is usually weighed against national interests and only occasionally supersedes economy or security concerns. With bilateral relations already at a low point and not much leverage to lose, India did openly side with the Burmese democracy movement in 1988, welcoming political refugees and exiles from the country (EgretEAU 2003: 121–124; Haacke 2006: 34). Apart from granting asylum and supporting exile radio broadcasts, however, tangible activities on the part of India to foster democratic developments in Myanmar have remained scarce. In the early 1990s, India's assessment of the situation changed. With Myanmar's military rulers firmly established and issues such as the question of energy security or the violent rebellions in India's Northeast becoming more pressing, New Delhi began its policy of "constructive engagement" and largely refrained from explicit calls for a transition towards democracy (Wagner 2009: 17–19; EgretEAU 2011: 468–470). This "triumph of pragmatism" (Routray 2011) in India's foreign policy brought a modest improvement in bilateral relations, but disappointed the Burmese democracy movement and many observers. Alana,<sup>4</sup> an activist from the Burma Centre Delhi, notes:

Although India allowed Burmese refugees to take shelter in India especially during [the] 1988 nationwide uprising,<sup>5</sup> India didn't do much or influence much in the process of democratisation in Burma. It's not a matter of being underestimated or overemphasised, but having worked for democracy and human rights in Burma along with Burmese democratic forces in India [over] the past many years, I don't really see India influencing that country for democracy. (Alana, interviewed by author 7 October 2014)

This sentiment of disappointment was also reflected when, during her visit to India in 2012, then-opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi voiced sadness about the lack of support for democratic change in Myanmar and openly criticised New Delhi for straying from the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (Miglani 2012; *The Hindu* 2012). Despite its underwhelming efforts so far and going well beyond a mere return to Nehruvian idealism, India has practical incentives for greater engagement on behalf of a sustained democratisation in Myanmar. While in the past the question of stability has often been linked to supporting or at least tolerating military rule in Myanmar, this reasoning has partially been reversed. Now, only a thorough democratisation is seen as a safeguard for lasting stability. Democracy would also offer an opportunity for Indian foreign policy to engage with several different actors in Myanmar rather than continuing to depend on the mood swings of one single decision maker:

Stability and strengthening reform processes in Myanmar [...] have a direct bearing [on] India's strategic interests in the region. Instability provides room for other major powers to play a role in its periphery and as Myanmar's reform progresses, it not only addresses [the concern over external influences] but also opens up more domestic ac-

4 For reasons of privacy, only Alana's first name is used.

5 Many student activists and political leaders fled Burma and took shelter in India.



tors in a democratic setup, thereby presenting multiple domestic actors [that] India can engage with, thus keeping a check on the possibility of a single-actor dominance whose domestic and foreign policy orientations could adversely affect India's interests there – the junta in the past is a case in point. (Yhome, interviewed by author 4 October 2014)

Of course, whether the nascent democratisation in Myanmar will have short-term positive effects on Indian foreign policy remains to be seen. There are reasons to be sceptical about the ability of the NLD government to remove some of the obstacles to better bilateral relations and brighter prospects for future cooperation, particularly regarding security concerns in the Northeast (Lee 2014: 311). In any case, having a reliable and predictable partner in Naypyidaw has to be considered as one of India's essential interests.

### 3.2. Security in India's Northeast and illegal migration

India and Myanmar share a land border 1,643 kilometres long, of which only 10 kilometres are in the process of being fenced (Lee 2014: 299–300). Unsurprisingly, this porous border has been exploited by guerrilla organisations on both sides. The Northeast region of India's "seven sisters" (the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura) have represented "a policy headache for New Delhi" and have been ravaged by violence for decades (Myint-U 2012: 235–236, 272–293). Outside of Assam, three states directly bordering on Myanmar have been hit hardest by guerrilla warfare: Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. Particularly during the 1980s and the 1990s, armed groups from India such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) used the inaccessible and hardly controllable border region as a safe haven. With the open and covert support of the Burmese military junta, they set up bases and supply structures on Burmese territory (Hazarika 2014). Likewise, the Indian government has been accused of lending financial and technical assistance to rebel organisations from Myanmar such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and the Karen National Union (KNU) since 1988 (Ganesan 2010: 11). The gradual improvement of bilateral relations between India and Myanmar has led to progress on both sides of the border and has resulted in more coordinated efforts to contain insurgencies (Pardesi 2012: 122–123).

An additional problem has been and continues to be the increasing undocumented migration from Myanmar. Again and again, thousands of Muslim Rohingya have fled the spreading ethnic violence in Myanmar and come to India illegally (Mishra 2014). According to Aparupa Bhattacharjee of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi, the Indian government underestimated the issue for a long time and did not tackle the problem seriously (Bhat-

tacherjee, interviewed by author 30 October 2014). But even if pursued more rigorously from the Indian side, there will be no solution without close cooperation between the border security forces of India and Myanmar. Here, New Delhi faces the problem that the government in Naypyidaw has conflicting priorities and engages rather reluctantly in the relevant border areas. Rahul K. Bhonsle, Director of Security Risks Asia, who served for a decade as an army officer in India's Northeast region, points out:

For the Myanmar government, priority of borders is dictated by the security challenges that are faced by it on multiple fronts. Thus it is more concerned about the borders inhabited by Kachin, Karen and Wa and the Rakhine State with Bangladesh, while [the] Indian border is seen as more of a concern for Delhi. (Bhonsle, interviewed by author 4 October 2014)

Still under the government of Manmohan Singh, India and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Border Cooperation on 8 May 2014. This agreement is set to provide a framework for an extended collaboration on security issues, for information and intelligence exchange, and for jointly coordinated border patrols. The goal of the memorandum is the further weakening of transnationally operating guerrilla groups and the more effective prevention of other illegal activities such as contraband trade or human trafficking (Hazarika 2014).

### 3.3. Trade and infrastructure

Bilateral trade between Indian and Myanmar accounted for well over 2 billion USD in the fiscal year 2016–2017,<sup>6</sup> a noteworthy increase compared to former years. In 2001–2002, the trade volume was just a little over 300 million USD, and in 2007–2008 the number was still below 1 billion USD (Ganesan 2010: 12). Despite the progress, however, trade with Myanmar still accounts for only 0.33 per cent of India's overall trade (see Table 1). The gains in absolute money volume have not led to a significant increase of the relative share of bilateral trade relations compared to other partner countries. Trade with Myanmar largely remains an afterthought for much of the Indian economy.

There is much room for a further extension in bilateral trade on both sides. India ranks only fifth in the list of Myanmar's most important trading partners, trailing Myanmar's other economically important neighbour countries China and Thailand by substantial margins (see Table 2). As stated by former government official C. S. Kuppuswamy of the South Asia Analysis Group, it was an important immediate target for New Delhi to raise the volume of bilateral trade to 3 billion USD by the end of the fiscal year 2015–2016 (Kuppuswamy, interviewed by author 6 October 2014).

6 The Indian fiscal year runs from 1 April to 31 March.

Table 1: India's bilateral trade with Myanmar

Fiscal year	India's exports to Myanmar		India's imports from Myanmar		Total bilateral trade	
	Amount in million USD	Overall share in %	Amount in million USD	Overall share in %	Amount in million USD	Overall share in %
2008–2009	221.64	0.12	928.97	0.31	1,150.60	0.24
2009–2010	207.97	0.12	1,289.80	0.45	1,497.77	0.32
2010–2011	320.62	0.13	1,017.67	0.28	1,338.29	0.22
2011–2012	545.38	0.18	1,381.15	0.28	1,926.52	0.24
2012–2013	544.66	0.18	1,412.69	0.29	1,957.35	0.25
2013–2014	787.01	0.25	1,395.67	0.31	2,182.68	0.29
2014–2015	773.24	0.25	1,231.54	0.27	2,004.78	0.26
2015–2016	1,070.65	0.41	984.27	0.26	2,054.92	0.32
2016–2017	1,107.89	0.40	1,067.25	0.28	2,175.14	0.33

Source: Government of India 2018a (Department of Commerce)

This goal has not been achieved, as bilateral trade stagnated at roughly 2 billion USD both in 2014–2015 and in 2015–2016 after reaching a high point at almost 2.2 billion USD in the fiscal year of 2013–2014 (and coming close to this mark again in 2016–2017). Overall, “bilateral trade still remains below potential” (Kuppuswamy, interviewed by author 1 July 2016).

Table 2: Myanmar's top trading partners 2016

	Total trade in million EUR	Share in %	Imports in million EUR	Share in %	Exports in million EUR	Share in %
China	4,323	22.3	2,434	25.9	1,890	18.9
Thailand	3,240	16.7	856	9.1	2,384	23.9
Singapore	2,245	11.6	2,007	21.4	238	2.4
Hong Kong	1,913	9.9	26	0.2	1,897	19.0

	Total trade in million EUR	Share in %	Imports in million EUR	Share in %	Exports in million EUR	Share in %
India	1,465	7.6	626	6.7	839	8.4
Japan	1,241	6.4	774	8.2	468	4.7
World	19,371	100.0	9,393	100.0	9,978	100.0

Source: European Commission 2017

Not only does India want to increase bilateral trade with Myanmar, it also strives to enhance the exchange of goods with other countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). For a long time, Southeast Asia played a rather marginal role in India's foreign trade even after the ASEAN–India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) came into effect in 2010. According to statistics from the Indian Department of Commerce, there were only three countries from the ASEAN region among India's 25 most important trading partners in 2013–2014: Indonesia ranked 8th, Singapore came in 10th and Malaysia was 21st. Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar were, at that point, well outside the group of India's top trading partners. Three years later, the picture has changed. For the fiscal year of 2016–2017, both Vietnam and Thailand have entered the list of India's most important trading partners at positions 19 and 24, respectively, in addition to Indonesia (8), Singapore (10), and Malaysia (11). Myanmar, however, is still not found on that list.

In order to further extend Indian trade with Southeast Asia, interregional connectivity needs to be improved. After taking power, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi immediately declared the issue of connectivity a priority of its foreign policy (Jacob 2014). Of course, Myanmar as a hub and transit country plays a crucial role in this endeavour. The improvement of transportation facilities in Myanmar has been a major focus of Indian bilateral development cooperation for years. Since 2008, the Indian government has spent 20 million USD on the construction of a trilateral highway linking the Indian state of Manipur with Thailand through Myanmar. The road is co-financed by Thailand and the Asian Development Bank (Yhome 2015: 1230). After continuous delays, it is scheduled to be opened in 2020 (Ramya 2018). Such projects, if completed in time, can also be seen as small steps within the larger framework of establishing a new "Southern Silk Road". An important part of these considerations is the initiative to create a Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) corridor (Aneja 2014). All these processes form preconditions for the intended establishment of the world's largest free trade area, ASEAN+6. The negotiations about the creation of a Regional Comprehensive Economic

Partnership (RCEP) consisting of the ASEAN member states plus six partner countries (India, China, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand) started in November 2012 and could hugely benefit from an enhancement of transportation facilities and trade routes between India and Southeast Asia (Hoepfner 2013). For India, the short-term costs of the infrastructure investments in Myanmar and elsewhere are likely to be outweighed by the long-term benefits from the RCEP (Pande 2018: 3).

Another ambitious infrastructure project in Myanmar combines economic aspects with security politics for India. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project is designed to create a direct trade connection from Kolkata to Mizoram over the Bay of Bengal into the port of Sittwe and through the states of Rakhine and Chin in Myanmar. Here, the water transportation routes on the Kaladan River will be improved while many roads will be modernised or newly constructed. The long-term goal for New Delhi is a significantly improved linkage of its Northeast region to the Indian heartland (Hackmann 2014: 14–15). Since 2007, India has invested 50 million USD in this project. Enhanced trade could bring not only a spark to the economy but also a noticeable improvement of the living conditions in Mizoram and the other states in the Northeast that have suffered from violent rebellions for decades. It is hoped that the intended socio-economic development will weaken secessionist movements and reduce the activities of guerrilla groups, thereby easing security problems. Also, the establishment of an alternative connection between the Indian centre and the Northeast would at least partially compensate for the strategic disadvantage of the narrow Siliguri Corridor (Mullen et al. 2014: 17–18). In the long run, building closer connections between India's Northeast and Myanmar could be beneficial to both sides, mutually reinforcing socio-economic development, particularly considering that the Northeast region is completely insignificant in the overall India–Myanmar trade volume (Panda 2017: 43–44):

Northeast India and Burma combined make up a market of over 100 million people, poor now, but not necessarily forever. It has not helped Northeast India to have an internationally isolated, economically mismanaged, military dictatorship next door. But neither has it helped Burma to be adjacent to one of the most conflict-ridden and neglected parts of India. [...] In a way, Northeast India and Burma have long reinforced one another's problems. As borders begin to open, the question is whether they can now support each other's progress instead. (Myint-U 2012: 307)

### 3.4. Energy

Myanmar's vast oil and gas resources are intriguing to many countries. Competition for exploration and exploitation rights began long ago. In fact, it was Myanmar's potential role as a supplier of natural gas that was crucial for im-

proving bilateral relations with ever energy-hungry India in the 1990s and early 2000s through a new “pipeline diplomacy” (Lall 2006: 425–430, 2009: 34–35). New Delhi, however, has damaged its prospects for years because of protracted decision-making and uncoordinated policies. Government-owned companies from India were not well prepared to succeed in the competitive environment of international bidding in Myanmar (Narayan 2009: 25). Additionally, New Delhi manoeuvred itself into a difficult situation regarding a tripartite gas pipeline project from Myanmar to India through Bangladesh in 2005. When India–Bangladesh relations worsened and the prospects for the pipeline became uncertain, India did not have a strategy for an alternative transportation route (Islam 2009: 140–142). Former Indian ambassador to Myanmar Gopalapuram Parthasarathy recounts the consequences of this disappointing endeavour and another telling example of Indian failure:

After having secured exploration rights for gas in the Bay of Bengal, we conducted our project-planning and diplomacy so clumsily that we did not have a strategy ready for taking the gas to India through a pipeline across Myanmar and our Northeast, or for transporting it as LNG. China deftly stepped in and took away all this gas by expeditiously building a pipeline to Yunnan Province. In the mid-1990s, Myanmar offered us hydroelectric projects with a potential of over 1,000 MW across rivers near our borders. We took years to scrutinise these projects [...]. After nearly two decades, we backed off. (Parthasarathy 2014)

India’s more or less self-inflicted defeats have given China a much better position in the Myanmar gas market (Lall 2014: 213). What is more, virtually all current and future hydropower joint ventures in Myanmar are being conducted with the help of Chinese firms (Eleven 2014). India’s reputation in the energy sector and beyond has been severely damaged (Jha 2013: 233). There is a widespread feeling in Myanmar that the “Indian government promises much but delivers little” (Bhonsle, interviewed by author 4 October 2014). Many auspicious projects have never been implemented: “Things didn’t materialise much except [...] [on paper]” (Alana, interviewed by author 7 October 2014). There is an urgent need for a different approach from the Indian side. The new government in New Delhi seems to have realised the problem and has started to tackle it with fresh rhetoric. Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, as well as Prime Minister Modi, have announced the transformation of the more than twenty-year-old “Look East Policy” into an “Act East Policy”, thereby raising hopes that India is going to speed up its decision-making and conduct future projects with much stronger commitment (Jacob 2014; PTI 2014a).

### 3.5. Development cooperation

Despite the fact that an overall foreign policy strategy regarding the bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar is still lacking, the country has been a major recipient of Indian foreign aid, mainly through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and similar schemes. Additionally, Myanmar is one of just three countries for which New Delhi has laid out a comprehensively planned aid and development assistance programme (Bhonsle, interviewed by author 4 October 2014). The other two nations with such a special status are Bhutan and Afghanistan. The prominent standing of these three countries is also reflected in the volume of Indian loans and grants over the last decade (see Tables 3 and 4). From 2000 to 2014, Bhutan alone received almost half (48.85 per cent) of India's total loans and grants to all partner countries, while Afghanistan accounted for 8.38 per cent. With a share of 3.49 per cent, Myanmar came in sixth overall, behind Nepal (5.86 per cent), Sri Lanka (5.35 per cent) and Bangladesh (3.83 per cent) (Mullen et al. 2014: 3).

There is still much room for an expansion of financial development assistance from India to Myanmar, especially considering the fact that India's annual contributions fall well short of the amount that the United Kingdom, the European Union and leading donor country Japan give per year.

Table 3: Major recipients of Indian loans and grants (in million INR)

	2001–2004	2004–2007	2007–2010	2010–2013
Bhutan	7,265	12,130	28,021	72,450
Afghanistan	NA	NA	8,959	11,675
Nepal	1,203	3,422	3,611	6,290
Sri Lanka	2,033	2,389	2,001	5,627
Maldives	118	224	5,271	3,488
Bangladesh	904	1,003	737	3,079
Myanmar	823	1,922	1,008	2,664
All African countries	873	1,878	2,708	4,487
All other countries	9,869	18,797	9,335	11,228

Source: Mullen 2013: 14



Table 4: Indian foreign aid to Myanmar (in million INR)

Fiscal year	Budget	Revised	Actual
2011–2012	1,900.0	1,118.2	674.0
2012–2013	3,022.1	1,350.0	1,218.7
2013–2014	4,500.0	2,550.0	1,648.6
2014–2015	3,300.0	1,300.0	1,043.4
2015–2016	2,700.0	1,540.0	1,170.7
2016–2017	4,000.0	1,200.0	1,236.2
2017–2018	2,250.0	2,250.0	NA
2018–2019	2,800.0	NA	NA

Source: Government of India 2017 and 2018b (Ministry of Finance)

The United Kingdom doubled its bilateral aid to Myanmar to 95 million USD in 2014. Since 2015, the European Union has quadrupled its annual development assistance to Myanmar to 123 million USD. In 2013, Japan announced it would deliver an aid and investment package to Myanmar to the tune of 394 million USD (Patteran 2014). Compared to these numbers, India's financial commitments appear meagre and underwhelming. In the current “feeding frenzy” (Patteran 2014), New Delhi runs the risk of being left behind and once again frittering away future opportunities. Additionally, willing donors such as Japan or Germany provide alternatives for the Myanmar government to counter the Chinese presence in the country without having to rely on India. Thus, they may give New Delhi tough competition in Myanmar (Ramya 2018).

Most of India's loans and grants in bilateral development cooperation are being used for infrastructure projects. Another focus is the modernisation of Myanmar's agricultural sector, which is being advanced by hundreds of millions in INR and further supported by knowledge transfer. Apart from that, India funds numerous education and training facilities in Myanmar. The establishment of the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology (MIIT) was financed by New Delhi with the sum of 326.8 million INR. Almost 50 million INR went into the founding and subsequent expansion of the India–Myanmar Centre for Enhancement of Information Technology Skills (IMCEITS) in Yangon, which so far has produced approximately 1,500 IT specialists. India and Myanmar also cooperate in the area of effective and efficient governance. Through the ITEC programme, India is training 525 government officials from Myanmar. Additionally, public servants are being educated in all forms of digi-

tal services and e-governance (Mullen et al. 2014: 17–18). In the entire field of IT-related training, India has been remarkably successful and even enjoys a distinct advantage over China in Myanmar (Ramya 2018).

### 3.6. China

Naturally, China plays an important role in all of New Delhi's foreign policy considerations. Hence, the relations between India and Myanmar cannot escape the shadow of the giant neighbour to the North. With the Beijing-financed construction of a new harbour in Kyaukpyu, Myanmar has become part of the so-called "String of Pearls" of Chinese deep-water ports around the Indian Ocean. This alleged encirclement with harbour facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar is viewed with much scrutiny and suspicion in India. It is feared that these ports might someday be used not only economically but also for military purposes (Vasan 2012: 415–416). Also, the huge Chinese influence in everyday life in many parts of Northern and Northeast Myanmar is cause for concern among some Indian observers (Myint-U 2012: 30–31, 266–268). In particular, the growing interdependence of the economies of China and Myanmar in the border region and the close trade relations between Myanmar and Yunnan Province serve as a painful reminder of India's own shortcomings in this respect (Lall 2014: 211; Parthasarathy 2014).

In general, India and China compete for influence in Myanmar in every policy area. Among parts of the Indian foreign policy establishment, there is "a shared sense of the two countries as rivals", particularly regarding the "crossroads" nation Myanmar (Myint-U 2012: 238). This also includes the vital question of energy security. For a time, "China and India both regarded competition in the energy sector as a purely zero-sum game" (Li 2009: 154). Some observers, however, question whether New Delhi really has to follow the rules of such an "anachronistic" game. As, for instance, Objia Borah Hazarika, a political scientist from Dibrugarh University in Assam, points out:

In the twenty-first century, treating a country like a pawn in a country's strategic calculation is anachronistic. India can, at most, make itself seem like a more feasible partner in security, economic and cultural issues to Myanmar, and let the latter take its pick between China and India. (Hazarika, interviewed by author 25 October 2014)

There is a chorus of very critical voices regarding the apparent obsession of Indian foreign policy with China in general, which has allegedly been evident for decades, particularly as it relates to Myanmar. A truly independent Indian foreign policy should not simply react to Chinese decisions and initiatives, especially considering the different strategic positions and resource capabilities of New Delhi and Beijing. According to proponents of this view, the coexistence of India and China in Myanmar is definitely possible as long as New

Delhi is able to avoid direct competition and a power struggle with Beijing that it almost certainly cannot win (Wagner / Cafiero 2014: 2). India has to realise that China's lead is probably too large to be overcome in a short period of time. Right now, "India is not there to compete with China" (Kuppuswamy, interviewed by author 6 October 2014). However, the constellation might change more rapidly than anticipated, since China's influence in Myanmar seems to be declining. Increasingly, Naypyidaw appears to regard its dependency on China as a strategic problem and as a loss of sovereignty it is no longer willing to concede (Lee 2014: 294–295). Strengthening national sovereignty thus requires a diversification of Myanmar's foreign policy. The visit of General Than Shwe to New Delhi in 2010 has been interpreted as an early demonstration that Myanmar "would seek to balance China with India" (Myint-U 2012: 221). New Delhi could profit from this situation if it overcomes its own fixation on China. The Modi government has taken steps in this direction, as Wasbir Hussain, executive director of the Centre for Development and Peace Studies in Guwahati and a former member of India's National Security Advisory Board, notes:

India's policy towards Myanmar [so far] has basically been nothing but a response to what China was doing there. India has now realised that it has to look beyond China and is, therefore, fine-tuning a proactive policy towards Myanmar. (Hussain, interviewed by author 21 October 2014)

Part of this new strategy is an emphasis on the cultural and religious heritage that India and Myanmar share. There is a "natural" familiarity China cannot offer, particularly regarding a common Buddhist tradition (Myint-U 2012: 31). Therefore, it is not surprising that Minister Swaraj, during her visit to Myanmar in August 2014, pointed to Buddhism as an important link between the countries that may foster people-to-people contacts and serve as a foundation for generally improved relations. Accordingly, Swaraj suggested the establishment of direct flights between Yangon and the Buddhist pilgrimage site Bodhgaya in India (Roy 2014).

### 3.7. Summary: India's view of Myanmar

India-Myanmar bilateral relations seem to be at a crossroads. The political changes in Myanmar, coupled with an apparent desire to diversify its foreign policy, might open up new opportunities for New Delhi to pursue its interests and avoid the risks and pitfalls that have plagued its policy towards Myanmar for many years. Before assessing recent developments under the current governments, this article will briefly summarise India's general view of Myanmar with respect to different policy issues.

As far as democratisation in Myanmar is concerned, India's main interest remains having a stable and reliable partner across its eastern border. While continued or increased support for democratisation could bring long-term stability and secure friendship with future governments, there is also the risk of a backlash under a renewed military regime, possibly resulting in a new diplomatic ice age.

The interconnected issues of security in India's Northeast and illegal migration bear significant interests for New Delhi. Above all, India needs sustained peace in the Northeast, which seems impossible if there is a haven for guerrilla groups in Myanmar. Thus, effective border control is mandatory, also to prevent contraband trade and illegal migration. A functional border control regime could weaken secessionist movements in the Northeast if there is a committed partner in Myanmar.

In the policy areas of trade and infrastructure, India is looking for an expansion of bilateral trade and a reduction of its trade deficit. Further interests include increasing trade with Southeast Asia via Myanmar and improving the connection and economic development of the Northeast. New Delhi sees an opportunity for economic recovery in the area, not least through new trading partners in Southeast Asia. This has the potential to weaken secessionist movements in the Northeast as well. There is, however, a substantial risk of economic stagnation. India's trade deficit could remain the same or even increase. Also, the infrastructure projects financed by New Delhi could be used by other actors without benefiting India.

In the energy sector, India has a strong interest in diversifying its energy imports. Better bilateral relations with Myanmar include the prospect of a reliable energy supply at reasonable prices. However, there is a risk of new dependencies for India. On the other hand, a complete loss of access to Myanmar's energy resources is also thinkable.

New Delhi has shown a willingness to use development cooperation to foster its own interests. In doing so, India attempts to create win-win situations. If successful, development cooperation could enhance trade infrastructure and thereby benefit India. Additionally, it might produce a grateful Myanmar government. Conversely, falling too far behind other donors could damage India's standing. Another risk is that India may not benefit from its investments.

Finally, China is a factor that cannot be ignored. India's paramount concern is to keep from losing Myanmar to China. However, there can be no zero-sum game mentality and no competition with China. It must be New Delhi's interest to facilitate cooperation with China in Myanmar and to increase its influence in Myanmar without negative implications for the India–China relationship. Yet, there is a risk that a possible zero-sum logic in Chinese foreign policy may eventually lead to a complete expulsion of India from Myanmar.

## 4. New directions after a change of governments?

### 4.1. Narendra Modi: “Act East”?

After being elected in a landslide victory in 2014, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a pragmatic and undogmatic foreign policy doctrine based on “enlightened national interest” (Haidar 2014). Modi’s doctrine has put its focus clearly on India’s immediate neighbourhood, including Myanmar. However, the Modi government did not have the best of starts with regard to its Eastern neighbour. India’s political influence in Myanmar can be improved only if New Delhi shows substantial public appreciation of the importance of the bilateral relationship. In this respect, some observers were heavily critical of the fact that Myanmar’s then-President Thein Sein was not invited to the swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi on 26 May 2014, especially in light of the fact that the heads of state of all other neighbouring countries were invited (Sailo 2014: 3). Myanmar, critics argue, obviously was and maybe still is not seen as a real neighbour of India:

Although Myanmar shares a long, sensitive border with India, many in New Delhi don’t seem to regard it as a neighbour, a fact reflected in the failure to invite President Thein Sein to Modi’s swearing-in event. Distant Mauritius was invited to the event but not Myanmar. (Chellaney 2014)

It should have been particularly alarming to everyone aspiring to better relations between New Delhi and Naypyidaw that the non-invitation was not widely seen as a mistake or an affront but was, in fact, generally interpreted as fitting, given the nature of India–Myanmar relations:

In all likelihood, the lack of an invite for Myanmar’s President Thein Sein was not a mistake or a deliberate omission, but simply something that was on nobody’s mind. Politicians and the media in both countries did not seem to expect that Myanmar would even be invited, as evidenced by the fact that the media in neither country made an issue out of Myanmar’s non-invite. (Pillalamarri 2014)

Under these circumstances, Modi’s visit to Myanmar in November 2014 was a welcome step in a new direction. Although Modi’s primary reason for coming to Myanmar was to attend the ASEAN meeting and the East Asia Summit (EAS), there were also bilateral talks with then-President Thein Sein. Arguably even more important were the signs of respect shown through one of Modi’s preferred channels of communication, Twitter. On 6 November 2014, Modi tweeted: “I will have bilateral meetings with leaders of Myanmar, a valued friend. Having stronger relations with Myanmar is a priority area for us.” Particularly the description of Myanmar as “a valued friend” carries a significance not to be underestimated. India signalled rhetorically that it was serious about a new definition of its relations towards its smaller neighbours that

have been neglected in the past, particularly Myanmar, but also Bhutan and Nepal.

However, this promising start has not led to substantial improvement in the bilateral relationship. One interviewee even noted: “In the Modi phase, India seems to have downgraded her relations with Myanmar” (Hazarika, interviewed by author 15 July 2016). Initially, high-level visits from the Indian side remained rather scarce. After Modi’s 2014 stay, it took almost three years before he travelled to Myanmar again in September 2017. Given the political changes in Naypyidaw in 2015, a high-level visit from India came rather late, especially considering that China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi wasted no time and came to Myanmar as the very first overseas dignitary in early April 2016, shortly after the new NLD government took over (Maini 2016). In a very unfortunate circumstance for India, Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj had to postpone a planned visit that same month, for reasons of health. Swaraj’s Myanmar visit finally took place in August 2016. However, the fact that there had been no immediate efforts to make up for the lost opportunity in April further reinforced the view voiced rather mildly by retired senior government official Bashkar Roy, who said in an interview that “the engagement from India’s side has been less than optimum” (Roy, interviewed by author 25 June 2016). Former Indian ambassador to Myanmar Preet Malik stated:

[T]he present Indian leadership has not shown the kind of involvement with Myanmar on the direct bilateral level that the facts on the ground merit. Prime Minister Modi has visited all of India’s neighbouring countries but has only made a visit to Myanmar to meet his regional multilateral commitments. This contrasts unfavourably with the panache that he has shown in the area of foreign policy. (Malik, interviewed by author 19 July 2016)

On the other hand, some observers note that it may have actually been wise not to push the bilateral relationship too strongly from India’s side and to give Aung San Suu Kyi some room to manoeuvre, particularly with regard to Myanmar’s delicate relations with China. From this point of view, rushing in and putting too much pressure on Suu Kyi to show a strong commitment towards India would have been counterproductive. It might as well be argued, however, that India’s “failure to deal with [Suu Kyi] [...] after a reasonable time had lapsed does not bode well for the evolving of a closer relationship with Myanmar” (Malik, interviewed by author 19 July 2016).

On the other hand, there has also been little effort for immediate high-level visits from Myanmar to India. Although Prime Minister Modi invited Aung San Suu Kyi to India immediately after the election victory of her NLD in November 2015, it took almost one year before the visit actually took place in October 2016. What is more, Suu Kyi made her first major state visit in her position as State Counsellor of Myanmar and Minister of Foreign Affairs to China well before coming to India. While there was some mild disappoint-

ment in India, there is certainly an understanding of the delicate balancing act *Suu Kyi* has to perform to keep both New Delhi and Beijing happy (Bhatia 2016a; Firstpost 2016). On a positive note, Myanmar's then-new President Htin Kyaw made India his choice for his very first bilateral state visit in August 2016 (PTI 2016). The last high-ranking diplomat to come to India before that had been then-Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin, who came to New Delhi in July 2015 in order to take part in the first meeting of the India–Myanmar Joint Consultative Commission (JCC). The establishment of the JCC has been one pillar of Modi's "Act East Policy" with regard to Myanmar. It is designed to provide a forum to discuss a wide range of bilateral issues and also to function as a form of regulatory body. Periodic JCC meetings should help overcome the implementation problems that have plagued India's foreign policy towards Myanmar for decades. This pertains particularly to two of the most important connectivity projects that have run behind schedule for years. The first is a trilateral highway linking India, Myanmar and Thailand, now to be opened in 2020. The second is the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Facility – connecting Kolkata and the Indian heartland, via the Bay of Bengal and the Kaladan River in Myanmar, to the northeastern state of Mizoram – which is finally making progress after years of delay and is planned to be completed by 2019 (Feng 2017; Borah 2018). Better connectivity is of course vital for enhancing bilateral trade, where there is much room for further expansion on both sides.

Recent years have seen mixed signals regarding Indian development assistance towards Myanmar. Myanmar has long been an important target country for Indian loans and grants, though nowhere near the extent of the major recipient, Bhutan. However, Indian foreign aid allocations to Myanmar decreased substantially in both 2014–2015 and 2015–2016. While the national budget for 2016–2017 initially increased the amount distributed to 4,000 million INR, the revised estimates were much lower, at only 1,200 million INR. The budget for 2017–2018 once again reduced the allocations, to 2,250 million INR, thereby making Myanmar only number five on the list of major foreign aid beneficiaries in that financial year – trailing not only Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan but also the Maldives. On a positive note, the revised estimates for Myanmar were the same as the initial numbers, which was not the case for Bhutan and the Maldives. The 2018–2019 budget slightly raised the foreign aid target for Myanmar to 2,800 million INR (see Table 5). However, India could certainly do more.



Table 5: Budget allocations of Indian foreign aid (in million INR)

Recipient	2014 –2015	2015 –2016	2016 –2017	2017 –2018	2018 –2019
Bhutan	60,074	61,602	54,900	37,141	26,500
Nepal	4,500	4,200	3,000	3,750	6,500
Afghanistan	6,760	6,760	5,200	3,500	3,250
Myanmar	3,300	2,700	4,000	2,250	2,800
Bangladesh	3,500	2,500	1,500	1,250	1,750
Sri Lanka	5,000	5,000	2,300	1,250	1,500
Maldives	1,830	1,830	400	2,450	1,250

Source: Government of India 2017 and 2018b (Ministry of Finance)

One policy area where India has acted swiftly concerns the fight against guerrilla organisations in the Northeast. In June 2015, Indian security forces unilaterally entered Myanmar territory to fight against the NSCN (Khaplang) insurgency group, which is active on both sides of the border. Although not officially confirmed, it is believed that this cross-border raid triggered developments in bilateral security relations. There has been a series of consultations among high-level security officials, which has led to improved coordination between India and Myanmar (Bhonsle, interviewed by author 25 June 2016). However, one area where there has been no progress is in the conclusion of an India–Myanmar extradition treaty. Analyst Obja Borah Hazarika of Dibrugarh University in Assam is not very optimistic:

If Myanmar–India relations are prioritised by both countries, the extradition treaty will soon see light of day; however, given the present pace of their interaction, it does not seem to be in the cards. (Hazarika, interviewed by author 15 July 2016)

Overall, the record of India’s foreign policy towards Myanmar under Modi is mixed. While there have been areas of progress such as development cooperation and security coordination, there have been disappointments regarding a strong political commitment from New Delhi and concerning the enhancement of bilateral trade. Also, many promising initiatives such as the establishment of the Joint Consultative Commission or the unveiling of a new 1 billion USD fund to improve connectivity between India and ASEAN (Yhome, interviewed by author 22 July 2016) have yet to prove their true value to the bilateral relationship. With regard to Myanmar, Modi’s “Act East Policy” still seems to require an upgrade.

## 4.2. Aung San Suu Kyi: “India’s friend”?

Aung San Suu Kyi has strong biographical ties to India. She spent part of her youth in the country accompanying her mother Khin Kyi, who had been appointed as Burma’s ambassador to India in 1960. Suu Kyi graduated from Lady Sri Ram College in New Delhi and has many personal friends in India (Parthasarathy 2016). Famously, she has referred to India as her “second home” (PTI 2014b). Without a doubt, Suu Kyi has “a natural propensity towards closer relations with India” (Malik, interviewed by author 19 July 2016). Former ambassador Rajiv K. Bhatia described her as “India’s friend”, which should be a benefit for India, as analyst Khriezo Yhome of the Observer Research Foundation notes:

Suu Kyi has strong ties with India and knows India and its peoples. This is surely an advantage for both countries. [...] As foreign minister, India will be dealing with a person who understands India, but when it comes to bilateral ties between the two neighbours, she will work for her country’s national interests and Delhi would understand. (Yhome, interviewed by author 22 July 2016)

While the preconditions for a closer bilateral relationship are very good, the NLD government will probably have to deal first with problems at home, such as ethnic, religious and economic issues, before turning to major foreign policy initiatives (Hazarika, interviewed by author 15 July 2016). Regarding India–Myanmar relations, continuity can be expected. Former ambassador Gopaldaswami Parthasarathy said in an interview:

There is no reason for us to believe that there will be any change in Myanmar’s foreign policy of not doing anything that could have an adverse bearing on India’s national security interests. (Parthasarathy, interviewed by author 30 June 2016)

This and Suu Kyi’s personal bond with India, however, do not mean that Myanmar’s foreign policy will automatically favour New Delhi or that the relationship cannot be damaged, as Parthasarathy notes:

Like her father, Suu Kyi is first and foremost a Burmese nationalist [...]. She will deal with India as a friendly neighbour and base the relationship on what it does to fulfil the aspirations of Myanmar’s people. Like most of her fellow citizens, she was unhappy at the crude chest-thumping that accompanied the cross-border raid India carried out last year [2015] on Myanmar’s soil. We would do well to remember this while dealing with Myanmar [...]. (Parthasarathy 2016)

While the assumption that Aung San Suu Kyi is “India’s friend” is certainly true, New Delhi has to be aware that she will be guided by pragmatism (Bhonsle, interviewed by author 25 June 2016) and will never let emotions influence her politics (Roy, interviewed by author 25 June 2016).

### 4.3. Myanmar as a balancing factor in the India–Myanmar–China triangle?

The potential prospect of Myanmar playing a role in improving the relationship between India and China has intrigued many observers, particularly after Aung San Suu Kyi herself articulated that idea in an interview with an Indian TV journalist. Certainly, one could envision Myanmar as a field of collaboration between New Delhi and Beijing, for example in the areas of development cooperation or energy. However, this would not only require a complete abandonment of any remnants of a zero-sum logic but above all mutual interest from both sides. Since there are important areas of conflicting views, for instance regarding transnationally operating insurgency groups or virtually all matters pertaining to the Myanmar armed forces, it is difficult to envision such a wide-ranging Indian–Chinese rapprochement in Myanmar. In an interview, former Indian ambassador to Myanmar Rajiv Bhatia called the idea “an impractical suggestion” for which “there are no takers [...] in India” (Bhatia, interviewed by author 12 July 2016). From today’s point of view, it has to be regarded as a mere fantasy.

### 4.4. India–Myanmar–Bangladesh trilateralism?

The economic and strategic importance of the Bay of Bengal has led to repeated calls for closer cooperation among bordering countries. In particular, the prospect of trilateral approaches among India, Myanmar and Bangladesh has been raising interest. The basic idea is to transform already existing bilateral dialogues between India and Myanmar and between India and Bangladesh into trilateral talks, thereby fostering closer economic cooperation and, ultimately, closer political bonds among the three countries. Such a trilateralism could help address issues such as maritime security, illegal migration, development of borderlands, cross-border connectivity and transnational energy supplies (Yhome 2014: 9-12). However, the divide between Dhaka and Naypyidaw could be too much to overcome in the near future. According to Khriezo Yhome, there are emotive issues, such as the Rohingya question, that are exceedingly difficult to resolve and that are going to hinder any closer cooperation between the two countries, be it bilaterally or trilaterally. Consequently, there “is no sign of any movement towards [a] trilateral approach in the capitals as of today” (Yhome, interviewed by author 22 July 2016). Given the current situation, the idea of India–Myanmar–Bangladesh trilateralism has to be seen as unrealistic.

#### 4.5. Myanmar as a future SAARC member?

A final interesting point to examine is the prospect of Myanmar's possibly joining the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Thus far, Naypyidaw only has observer status within the organisation. A full SAARC membership for Myanmar would represent a historic precedent, since Myanmar would be the only permanent member of both SAARC and ASEAN, thereby bridging the border between the regions of South and Southeast Asia. This "overlapping regionalism" could bring interesting new perspectives not only for issues of connectivity and trade but also and maybe even more importantly for the establishment of a comprehensive regional security environment. The idea of Myanmar joining SAARC was first voiced by India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s (Malik 2016: 75–76; Haacke 2006: 33–34). Having rejected Rajiv Gandhi's earlier invitation, Myanmar officially applied for SAARC membership in March 2008 (Yhome 2008). The bid was supported by India, yet failed nevertheless (Saez 2011: 40). According to some analysts, India should encourage Myanmar to apply once again for membership and support such a bid even more emphatically, just as it had successfully done when Afghanistan became a full SAARC member in 2007 (Rahman 2009; Singh 2012: 33).

Is a SAARC membership for Myanmar really a conceivable option? According to Rahul K. Bhonsle, there are only limited prospects for this to occur. The first SAARC membership bid in 2008 was probably never meant to succeed but was intended to put pressure on ASEAN not to suspend Myanmar under the military junta (Bhonsle, interviewed by author 25 June 2016). As early as 2003 there had been warnings that an expulsion of Myanmar from ASEAN could become a viable option (Dosch 2016: 54). With Myanmar again firmly established in ASEAN today, there are fewer incentives to reach out to SAARC. ASEAN is widely seen as the "logical regional arrangement" for Myanmar (Malik 2016: xvi). Additionally, Myanmar's ASEAN membership has had and continues to have China's support, which is of no small significance to any government in Naypyidaw (Malik, interviewed by author 19 July 2016). Furthermore, China would probably also play an important role in SAARC expansion. It has shown interest in joining the organisation, and countries such as Pakistan and Nepal might push hard for Chinese membership if Myanmar were to be invited (Yhome, interviewed by author 22 July 2016).

Hence, joining SAARC is for Myanmar at best "a hypothetical question" at present (Roy, interviewed by author 25 June 2016). Former ambassador Bhatia stated accordingly: "I do not foresee Myanmar as a member in SAARC" (Bhatia, interviewed by author 12 July 2016). What is more, recent developments point to a new approach by New Delhi towards its neighbourhood, which would further abandon SAARC and instead strengthen BIMSTEC, in

which Myanmar is already an important member state (Bhatia 2016a). Notwithstanding possible significant improvements in bilateral relations between Myanmar and India, Myanmar as a future SAARC member remains a highly improbable outcome.

## 5. Conclusion

Although dramatic shifts in the broader diplomatic and security dimension of India–Myanmar relations are rather unlikely, there are certain steps New Delhi could and should take to show its willingness to do more for Myanmar. Rupa-jyoti Borah of the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore has suggested five measures India should consider (Borah 2017: 5). First, there should be a generous extension of development aid and additional lines of credit to Myanmar. As the findings of this paper have shown, there is much room for improvement in this regard. Second, India could expand its successful bilateral development assistance in the IT sector by providing more technical support and manpower. Third, New Delhi should think about relaxing visa rules for Myanmar nationals in order to foster people-to-people contacts. Additionally, specific exchange and scholarship programmes for students from Myanmar could be helpful. Fourth, unilateral concessions in the field of trade would give India, as the bigger partner, substantial credibility in the relationship. In a new form of “Good Neighbour Policy”, India could allow certain products from Myanmar to be imported with few or no tariffs attached. Fifth and finally, a stronger involvement of the Indian private sector in the infrastructure segment and beyond might help alleviate problems of implementation. As argued in this paper, India’s difficulties in meeting scheduled dates for the completion of key bilateral projects have severely damaged New Delhi’s reputation in Myanmar. Any assistance in order to avoid such complications in the future should be seriously considered.

There is a long way to go in order to make a truly fresh start in India–Myanmar relations. While the window of opportunity is certainly wide open, New Delhi has to avoid the failures of the past, particularly by ensuring the successful execution of foreign policy initiatives under the “Act East” paradigm. There should be no more “gaps between promise and implementation” (Malik, interviewed by author 19 July 2016). All too often, India has damaged its own interests with erroneous decisions, thus becoming a “would-be” instead of a real great power (Chatterjee Miller 2013; Wagner 2005). India has been regarded as an “anti-Machiavelli”, committing virtually all the mistakes that an actor striving for power should avoid (Rösel / Gottschlich 2008: 139). Considering India’s foreign policy towards Myanmar, one might conclude

that New Delhi has “never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity”, to quote Israeli diplomat Abba Eban’s famous assessment. For India, it is time to change this perception through a different policy approach and closer collaboration with Myanmar’s NLD government.

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