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## Pragmatism in India's Myanmar Policy Since 1991: Defense and Security Implications for India

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### Abstract

The Indian Northeastern region is the main reason for India to enhance its security relations with Myanmar. Insurgency in Northeastern India involves multiple armed separatist factions operating in India's Northeastern states, which are connected to the rest of India by the Siliguri Corridor, a strip of land as narrow as 23 kilometers wide. Hence, defense and security relations are always welcome and extremely needed by India in its bilateral relations with Myanmar. This paper focuses on defense and security implications for India after it changed its Myanmar's policy since 1991. The objective of this paper is to analyze how India's pragmatic approach with Myanmar enhanced India's defense and security relations with Myanmar. As the method of gathering data in this study, primary data, through interviews with experts and content analysis were adopted. The findings of this study are analyzed through three perspectives, namely defense and security cooperation, arms sales and transfer, and military operations between the two countries. Constructivism theory combined with the concept of geopolitics were used as a guide in analyzing India's defense and security implications. The findings of this study demonstrates that India has tremendously benefited in terms of security cooperation, arms sales as well military operations once its bilateral relations with Myanmar improved.

**Keywords:** India, Myanmar, Defense, Security, Implications.

### Introduction

Myanmar's geostrategic and security importance to India is well known. Mostly, this importance is related to India's Northeastern states. India's security concern in this matter is closely related to geo-economy. India must bring Myanmar into the scenario for several reasons, namely economic development, mitigation of drug trafficking, and fighting the insurgencies in its Northeastern region. India is well aware that closer and vibrant Indo-Burmese relations are very much vital for stable, peaceful and developed Northeastern states. This region is secluded, distanced as well as lack of good communication and transportation system with the rest of India. Hence, the economic development and growth as well as transportation of consumer goods and products of India's Northeastern region are more viable, easier and more economical through Myanmar's assistance, rather than

through expensive, cumbersome, and time-consuming transportation of consumer goods and products from the rest of India (Singh, 2012; Chiru, 2017; De, 2019). Another issue in which India is seeking Myanmar's cooperation is in the mitigation of drug trafficking. After Afghanistan, Myanmar stands as the second biggest producer of opium where the main producer is in the Golden Triangle. Variety of drugs such as amphetamine, and heroine enter into India through porous Indo-Burmese border. With the existence of cross-border ethnic linkages, criminal and insurgent networks as well as the India-Myanmar cross-border trade, the issue of drug trafficking has seen some increment since 1995. The trafficking activities through border town Moreh for instance has led to the growth of illegal flow of drugs into India's Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur from Lhaso, Mandalay and Bhamo in Myanmar. In this case, Myanmar's cooperation is extremely needed by India to suppress the illicit drug trafficking activity from flowing into Indian territories

(Singh, 2012; Koiremba & Nunes, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2019). The Northeastern states' insurgency is another issue that requires India to have closer relations with Myanmar. This is also a well-known reason in India-

Myanmar good bilateral relations. The separatist movements and ethnic insurgencies in India's Northeastern region have been an internal security challenge for India since many decades ago. Many separatist movements such as NSKN-Khaplang and NSKN-Isak Muivah, ULFA, and Manipuri People's Liberation Army (PLA) are operating safely in the border areas of thick jungle and hills in Myanmar. Previously, Myanmar has turned a blind eye into this problem mainly because of India's assistance to Myanmar's pro-democratic movement. Nevertheless, the India-Myanmar military cooperation has taken its shape in 1995 with the execution of

Operation "Golden Bird" intended to crush these separatist groups, but this military operation was not completed as Myanmar pulled off its participation to protest India's decision to honor Myanmar's prodemocracy leader – Aung San Suu Kyi with Nehru Prize for International Understanding in the same year.

However, in recent years Myanmar becomes more responsive to India's security challenge in its Northeastern region. In May 2012, during the visit of the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Myanmar, the leaders of both countries have renewed their mutual commitment to fight all forms of insurgency and terrorism. They also reiterated their joint statement that both India and Myanmar will not let territories inimical to the other to be used for sanctuary, training, or other form of operations by the insurgent and terrorist groups (Singh, 2012; Mohan, 2013; Rahman, 2012). It is evident that the elimination of insurgency in India's Northeastern states will be difficult for India to do without military cooperation from Myanmar.

### **Literature Review – Pragmatism in India's Myanmar Policy**

The basis of pragmatism is reality. 'Pragmatism' as explained in Collins Dictionary is the "thinking of or dealing with problems in a practical way, rather than by using theory or abstract principles." The word

'pragmatism' appears very frequently in the studies of International Relations. Molly Cochran argues that in a world comprises of so many nation-states where each nation-state has its own national interests and at the same time these nation-states often compete with one another in order to survive as well as to achieve their own interests, it is practical for these nation-states to act in line with pragmatic principle (Cochran, 2012). As nation-states leaders usually shape their countries' foreign policy in line with their own national interest,

they are in the know of their countries' existing conditions, and they give serious attention to power and its alignments. Pragmatism is attributed to the school of 'realism' in International Relations. Shane J. Ralston argues that the world is anarchic by nature. In this anarchic world, nation-states compete for geopolitical power, influence and domination. Nation-states are unitary actors in International Relations and innately aggressive. Nation-states usually try to balance their power relative to other nation-states internally through the accumulation of resources or through military-economic capabilities (Ralston, 2011).

Pragmatists are very much receptive to the idea of Constructivism. This argument is supported by author Simon Frankel Pratt "pragmatism in International Relations falls firmly into the broader constructivist tent. Constructivism in International Relations is mainly premised on the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world" (Pratt, 2016). Authors Ulrich Franke and Ralph Weber support this notion by arguing that human action and practice are the primary concern of pragmatism in International Relations. Human action and practice are usually being constituted by rules, sequentiality and sociality. They can be treated interchangeably (Franke & Weber, 2011). John Kaag and Sarah Kreps argued that pragmatists approach foreign policy matters by becoming sensitive to the particular political and social circumstances of the day. Pragmatic policy makers usually attempt to integrate the geopolitical and geoeconomic elements with social instruments in order to address the crises faced nation-states and the international community they lived in (Kaag & Kreps, 2012). Author Inis L. Claude Jr. supported this idea by saying that "perhaps, pragmatically shaped policy will serve the interest of the state better than principled-derived or rule-constrained policy" (Claude, 1993).

Pragmatism in India's Myanmar policy has influenced the progression of the bilateral relations between the two countries. This is the major movement in India's international relations with regard to its immediate neighbor - Myanmar. From the perspective of border security, Thin Thin Aung and Soe Myint argued that both countries are in need of one another. The India-Myanmar relations became crucial due to the insurgency in India's Northeastern region along the India-Myanmar border. India needed Myanmar's cooperation in curtailing and eliminating the ethnic insurgent groups for the reason that Myanmar's army had an effective control upon its entire territories bordering India (Aung & Myint, 2000). The argument of Aung and Myint is supported by Pierre Gottschlich. According to Gottschlich, the most important issue for India in its relations with Myanmar are security in India's Northeast region and bilateral trade relations between the two countries. He argued that India, after more than 65 years of its relations with Myanmar doesn't have any grand strategy regarding to its immediate neighbor. Gottschlich also argues that Myanmar as a balancing factor in India-Myanmar-China relations (Gottschlich, 2017). India needs to maintain peace in its Northeastern province, in which this situation is difficult to achieve when Myanmar becomes a safe haven for separatist and guerrilla organizations. Hence, effective border control is really needed by India to check these activities, and to prevent illegal migration as well as contraband trade from Myanmar's side. Therefore, India needs Myanmar's commitment as a partner in order to have a functional border control mechanism (Gottschlich, 2015).

## Method

### *Qualitative Method (Interview)*

This paper uses a qualitative research method. Primary data is obtained through interviews with subject matter experts. There are three selected respondents for this study. The respondents are from the Indian Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Indian Army senior officer, and a Retired Indian Army senior officer. The respondents' opinions and views are important as those views provide explanation on this issue. Inputs from the respondents are significant in order to strengthen and authenticate the findings of the study. The respondents involved in the study are kept anonymous. The details are as follows:

Respondent 1: R1, Senior Security Analyst

Respondent 2: R2, Senior Army Officer

Respondent 3: R3, Retired Senior Army Officer

Qualitative research approach helps to explain and explore the defence and security impacts for India after the country changed its foreign policy towards Myanmar since 1991.

## Results and Discussion

### *India-Myanmar Defence and Security Cooperation*

As mentioned above, the more secure the India-Myanmar border is, the more robust the economic activity will be. For instance, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMT) project has been facing

with a delay due to the fact that the project traverses a zone of conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State, in which the armed conflict is going on between Myanmar armed forces, the rebels of the Arakan Army, and with the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The separatists in India's Nagaland also are responsible for the delay in the completion of the KMMT project. Hence, it is evident that defence and security cooperation between India and Myanmar are the vital facet in the bilateral relations of the two countries. The Indian Northeastern states' political and ethnic instability always become a major push in India-Myanmar security relations. The political instability in the area and also in Myanmar's Sagaing Division due to separatist movements and insurgencies are endemic since several decades ago. V. K. Krishna Menon while speaking at the UN General Assembly in April 1957 said that "What hurt Burma would hurt India because of links of friendship, geography, and history between the two countries" (Bhaumik, 2016).

It is evident that the rebel factor is one of the most vital factors in India-Myanmar relations since 1991.

China assisted India's Northeastern rebel groups since 1960s. Although the Chinese assistance stopped in early 1980, the rebels were already well-trained and well-equipped. China's assistance to the rebels included arms provision and military training. Several batches of Naga, Mizo, and Manipuri rebels were trained by China. Apart from that, China also gave sanctuary to the Burmese communist insurgents. Since early 1950s, the Naga National Council (NNC) in India's Naga Hill side of the border has been in close contact with the Eastern Naga Regional Council (ENRC) in Myanmar's Sagaing Division. The NNC and ENRC joined hands in promoting 'Greater Naga' where the Naga ethnic in India and Burma would live together in one country. The ENRC was also in close contact with Kachin Independence Army (KIA) where KIA provided a safe passage for the Naga Army fighters to cross to China through Myanmar. When the Indian Army frequently conducted raids and tightened their grip in the Naga hills since 1970s, the NNC made their shelters and hideouts in Myanmar's

Sagaing Division. The Northeastern separatists' leaders currently are still trying to entice China into helping them out to fight against India. The NSCN-Isak Muivah and ULFA have very close relations with China (R1, 2016; *Tibetan Review*, 2019; *Times of Islamabad*, 2019). Although the NNC was disintegrated after the Shillong Accord in 1975 (R1, 2016), its break-away faction who opposed the Shillong Accord set up the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) (R1, 2016) moved its headquarters to a remote area in Tepak Mountains in Myanmar's Sagaing Division. The leadership of NSCN was well accepted by the Hemi Nagas who dwelled in the area. The Manipuri separatists and the ULFA also set up their bases around the same vicinity. The Myanmar's Sagaing Division is a safe haven for these separatist movements due to the inhospitable and treacherous Sagaing Mountains. The Mizo National Front (MNF) also built a number of bases in Myanmar's Chin Hills located further south of Sagaing Mountains. Although the MNF's bases were dismantled in 1986 but many India's Northeastern rebel groups still maintain their bases in Myanmar. In 2016, there were 27 rebel camps located in Myanmar that belong to the NSCN-Khaplang, the ULFA, and the Manipuri rebel group. The Manipur Peoples Liberation Front (MPLF) maintains a number of camps around the town of Tamu in Myanmar, while its main camp is situated right on the Indian border with Myanmar (Ne Now News, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2019).

India is very keen on getting Myanmar's assistance in attacking these rebel camps as effective as

possible because the camps and bases of the Indian Northeast rebel groups located in Myanmar's side of the border serve at least three worrisome purposes for India:

1. The camps serve as a vital zone linking the rebels with easy access to China for getting weapons as well as combat training.
2. The camps provide for a safe training ground for training new recruits on the art of guerilla warfare, and for a regrouping location for the rebels' guerilla units when they are under attack in India.
3. Bangladesh is no longer considered by the separatist groups' leaders as a safe sanctuary as they viewed the current government of Bangladesh as pro-India (Bhattacharya, 2020; Anand, 2019).

Apart from the problem of rebel movements in India's Northeastern region that warrants India to be actively in defence and security cooperation with Myanmar, there are other reasons for this kind of relations between the two countries, which are equally important.

This importance is shown through, for instance the Indian

Armed Forces' activities. There have been regular Myanmar's port visits by the Indian naval vessels. In 2006, the Indian Navy transferred two BN-2 Defender Islander aircrafts for maritime surveillance and several deckbased air-defence guns to the Myanmar Navy. Among the importance agenda in India-Myanmar defence cooperation is the military training. The Indian Army gave special warfare training in 2006 to Myanmar soldiers. During the official visit of Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services – General Min Aung Hlaing to India in 2012, India extended its offer to continue to give training to Myanmar soldiers. The Indian Army transferred several Armored Personal Carriers (APC) and light artilleries to Myanmar Armed Forces in 2007. The Indian Air Force in the same year also offered Myanmar to upgrade the avionics of

Myanmar's fighter aircrafts. As India and Myanmar are facing with common non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, piracy, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, illegal fishing as well as human trafficking, both countries are expanding their security cooperation. During the visit to Myanmar in 2012, the then Indian Prime Minister highlighted this issue and

realized that India security cooperation with Myanmar is vital to be expanded in order to maintain peace along the land borders of the two countries as well as protecting IndiaMyanmar maritime trade through sea route between Sittwe in Myanmar and Kolkata in India.

The India-Myanmar defence and security cooperation gained its first momentum when the then Indian Chief of Army Staff – General B. C. Joshi paid his goodwill visit to Myanmar in May 1994. The visit was among the early steps taken by India in courting Myanmar military junta through the framework of India's Look East Policy. Following his visit, India sent some military hardware supplies to Myanmar. The IndiaMyanmar defence and security momentum were further accelerated in January 2000 when the Indian Army delegation led by General V. P. Malik – the then Indian Army Chief visited Myanmar with the mission to forge further the India-Myanmar military relationship. In the same year, General Maung Aye - Myanmar Army Chief returned this visit in July by making a one-day visit to Shillong, Meghalaya (*Zee News*, 2000) and once again to New Delhi in November. In New Delhi, General Maung Aye gave assurance to India of

Myanmar's cooperation in suppressing the insurgent groups in India's Northeastern states (Sengupta, 2001). Apart from cooperation in countering insurgencies in India's Northeastern region, India and Myanmar also signed an agreement to increase their cooperation in tackling cross-border drug trafficking and terrorism. After these visits, the Indian military hardware supplies sent to Myanmar. India has been supplying Myanmar with non-lethal military equipment such as boots and combat gear, as Myanmar is keen in finding other sources of military equipment (R2, 2016).

Another successful milestone in the India-Myanmar defence and security cooperation were recorded in January 2013 with the visit of the Indian Defence Minister – Arun Jaitley to Myanmar to continue the trend of the growing military-to-military relations between the two countries. In the visit, accompanied by the Indian Army Commander of Eastern Command based in Kolkata, and the Indian Navy Vice Chief, the visit was evident that India is keen to foster its military relations with Myanmar for the very purpose of addressing its security concerns related to land border and maritime boundaries. The positive and fruitful India-Myanmar

military cooperation is also made possible after Myanmar's democratic reforms since 2010, in which the reforms enabled the military top brasses of the two countries to exchange official visits with the objective of enhancing Indo-Burmese military-to-military cooperation in general. Myanmar too, is looking for India's support as Myanmar government has problem with some of its ethnic groups in the country. For instance, the Indian Defence Minister's visit to Myanmar in 2013 mentioned above was during the height of Kachin insurgency against Myanmar's military. The Kachin Independent Organization (KIO) has cross-border networking with the Indian Northeastern region's separatist group of ULFA (Hussain, 2003; Rammohan, 2013). Apart from KIO, the Indian insurgent group of NSCN-Khaplang also has networking with the Myanmarese Nagas in Sagaing Division of Myanmar, bordering the Indian states of Manipur and Nagaland. These insurgent groups normally joined together in coordinating their activities against India (Bhattacharya, 2018).

Since 2014, India and Myanmar have been working closely in security cooperation, especially concerning the borders of the two countries. For instance, both countries signed a MoU in May the same year on border cooperation to provide a framework of border security cooperation and exchange of information between the two countries' security agencies. The major provision in the MoU is to have coordinated patrols by India and

Myanmar security forces on their respective sides of the border as well as their maritime boundary. In February 2016, India and Myanmar established a new naval patrol pact in formalizing key aspects in the on-going maritime cooperation of the two countries. The Navies of India and Myanmar signed the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol (IMCOR) at Port Blair in

India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands during the Fourth Myanmar-India Coordinated Patrol (CORPAT-2016). According to the press statement of the Indian Defence Ministry, the signing of the SOP is a "significant achievement and will facilitate smooth conduct of coordinated patrols between two friendly neighbors" (Parameswaran, 2016). Approximately a year later between 26 February and 2 March 2017, Myanmar Navy sent a delegation for a four-day visit to India's Southern Naval Command in Kochi, Kerala. The Myanmar's delegation comprised of three naval officers, namely Lieutenant Commander Thu Rein Tun, Lieutenant Commander Kyaw Zeya Oo and Lieutenant Ye Wint Tun. This visit marked another development in the deepening of India-Myanmar defence and security relations, with the focus on maritime cooperation. It is a sign of the increasing prospects of the bilateral relations between the two countries. It is also a successful gesture in India's Act East Policy in boosting strategic cooperation in India's neighborhood. India and Myanmar share a common land border as well as maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. India and Myanmar are also keen on looking for other avenues of cooperation in defence and security realms (Yhome, 2014). One of the avenues found is for the Indian Navy to provide assistance in setting up meteorological facilities for Myanmar Navy. The Myanmar Navy delegation in their March 2017 visit was given access to the Indian Naval Meteorological and Analysis Centre (INMAC). They also visited the Indian School of Naval Oceanology (SNOM) and other training and simulation facilities, including the Flight and Tactical Simulator and the Water Survival Training Facility in Kochi (Parameswaran, 2017; *The Indian Navy*, 2017; *The Hindu*, 2017).

The year 2018 marked another positive development in India-Myanmar defence and security cooperation. In February this year, India participated in Myanmar's internal peace process, in which India acted as signatory witness to Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) (Solanki, 2018). The Indian Ministry of External Affairs, through its official spokesperson in providing answer to a query on India's presence at the signing ceremony of the Myanmar's NCA, said that:

"India supports the Myanmar peace process. Comprehensive peace and national reconciliation in Myanmar will also be conducive for the peace and prosperity of the North eastern States of India. The presence of our representative demonstrates India's continued support to the peace process in Myanmar" (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

In 2018 also, India and Myanmar came into a decision to expand their military cooperation and border management. The decision was reached in the Joint Consultative Commission Meeting held in July 2018. The meeting was co-chaired by the Indian External Affairs Minister – Sushma Swaraj and her Myanmar counterpart Wunna Maung Lwin in New Delhi. Through the meeting, India gave assurance to assist Myanmar in modernizing the country's army and navy. At the end of the meeting, a joint India-Myanmar statement was released: "India is committed to support the modernization of Myanmar Armed Forces and would be happy to share its experience in functioning in a democratic environment, 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. India expressed its



commitment to cooperate with Myanmar in building a professional and capable Myanmar Navy to safeguard and ensure its maritime security” (Chaudhury, 2018).

The India-Myanmar defence and security cooperation since then has shown improvement. In July 2019, Myanmar’s Senior General Min Aung Hlaing - Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services (CDS) visited New Delhi. During his eight days official visit, a MoU on defence cooperation between Myanmar and India was signed with the aim to strengthen Indo-Burmese military-to-military relations, among others in areas of joint surveillance, training, medical cooperation, and maritime security. In this high-level official visit, he met with all Chiefs of Staff of the Indian Armed Forces, General B. S. Dhanoa - Air Chief Marshal, General Bipin Rawat – Army Chief, and Admiral Karambir Singh – Chief of the Navy. Later on, the Indian Defence Ministry issued a statement highlighting that “Myanmar is a key pillar of India’s Act East Policy towards prioritizing relations with its East Asian neighbors. India has steadily increased defence co-operation with Myanmar in recent years” (Indian Ministry of Defense, 2019).

### ***India’s Arms Contract, Transfer, and Sale to Myanmar***

India actively started its arms transfer to Myanmar in 2006, with two BN-2 Defender Islander aircrafts for maritime surveillance and ten units of deck-based air-defence guns to Myanmar. Before that, in 2003 India transferred 80 units of 75mm howitzer guns to Myanmar. In 2007 and 2008, India transferred ten units T-55 battle tanks, artillery shells, bullets, and guns. According to the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAW), India exported three HMS-X2 ASW Sonars to Myanmar armed forces in 2015 (R3, 2016). In 2017, India became one of the top five arms exporters to Myanmar together with China, Russia, Israel, and Ukraine. Between 1991 and 2016, India sold nine fighter aircrafts, 20 armored vehicles, and three naval ships to Myanmar (Kundu, 2019; Asrar, 2017). As many Western countries such as the US and the UK are recently turning away from Myanmar due to Myanmar’s military operations against the Rohingya ethnic in Rakhine, in which Bertil Lintner wrote that the UN suspects those military operations launched against the Rohingya may have had genocidal intention, Myanmar is seen to have placed hope on India for arms transfer and sales. When Myanmar’s Navy Chief – Admiral Tin Aung San visited India in September 2017 India made a promise to consider supplying military equipment to Myanmar’s armed forces (Lintner, 2019). Earlier, India had already provided Myanmar with mortars, rocket launchers, radars, rifles, night-vision devices, and road construction equipment such as bulldozers, tippers, and soil compactors. The Times of India mentioned that India supplied lightweight anti-submarine torpedoes known as *Shyena* to Myanmar Navy. The Indian home-made torpedoes deal worth USD\$37.9 million was signed between India and Myanmar in 2017. The Indian lightweight torpedoes meant for export to Myanmar were developed by India’s Defence Research and Development

Organization (DRDO) based in New Delhi, and manufactured by India’s engineering and electronic giants – Larsen & Toubro (L&T) and Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL). The first batch of *Shyena* torpedoes was received by Myanmar in July 2019 (Pandit, 2017; Sujay, 2019). In December 2018, India announced that six HJT-Kiran jet trainers manufactured by India’s Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) would be donated to Myanmar Air Force. In the same announcement also, India said that a special team would be stationed in

Myanmar to assist Myanmar's pilots and ground crews. India also said that it planned to sell the weaponized version of the training aircrafts – HTT 40 to Myanmar Air Force (Selth, 2019).

The MoU signed between India and Myanmar on defence cooperation in July 2019 in New Delhi stands as a witness to the improved military-to-military relationship between India and Myanmar. In August 2019, more than ten Tata *Safari Storme* sport utility vehicles (SUVs) with military specification were handed over by the Indian Army to Myanmar military. This news highlighted another advancement in the bilateral defence and security relations between India and Myanmar. The signed MoU between the two countries included the transfer of a Russian-made Kilo Class diesel-electric submarine to Myanmar to enhance its naval capabilities. India bought this submarine from the USSR in 1988. This submarine, named *INS Sindhuvir* is the first submarine ever acquired by the Myanmar Navy. It was prepared for refurbishment and modernization at the port of Vishakapatnam in Andhra Pradesh by India's state-owned Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL) and was reported to be made operational by the end of December 2019 for Myanmar to protect its maritime interests (*The Week*, 2019; Panda, 2019). Myanmar was keen to acquire a submarine in order to synchronize

with its Southeast Asian neighbors, and this intention was made public in 2017 by Myanmar's Deputy Defence Minister – Rear Admiral Myint New (Phyo, 2017). Many ASEAN countries have acquired submarines lately, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.

### ***India-Myanmar Military Operations***

The India-Myanmar military cooperation started to improve since 1991. Myanmar participated in a joint military operation "Golden Bird" with India between April and May 1995. In this joint India-Myanmar military operation, India's 57th Mountain Division managed to block a huge rebel column encompassed more than 200 rebels from NSCN, ULFA, and Manipuri separatists who were moving through the Mizoram-Myanmar border. The rebel columns had previously picked up weapon consignments from Cox Bazar in Bangladesh and headed towards Manipur. However, Myanmar's military pulled off half way of the joint operation to show their protest against the decision made by the government of India to award the Nehru

Peace Prize to Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The pulling out of Myanmar's military in the joint operation had resulted in the trapped rebel columns to escape. The "Golden Bird" joint military operation between India and Myanmar failed. The Indian Eastern Army Commander at that time – Lieutenant General H. R. S. Kalkat made a furious remark that "India should leave its Burma policy to the Army. We are soldiers, they (Myanmar junta) are soldiers and our blood is thicker than the blood of bureaucrats" (Bhaumik, 2015; Singh, 2015; Ghosh, 2015).

However, to some Indian security analysts, Operation "Golden Bird" was not a total failure. Fourteen rebels were killed by the Indian Army and 38 insurgents were also reported killed by the Myanmar Army.

Around 23 rebels were either apprehended or surrendered to the India-Myanmar joint security forces. More

than 50 weapons were also confiscated from the rebels in this operation, and in general Operation "Golden Bird" was considered successful in giving a major blow to the separatist movement (Dahiya, 2016; Ojha, 2015). In 2006, India and Myanmar were believed to have conducted a small-scale joint military operation inside Myanmar. The objective of this covert

operation was to flush out the NSCN-Khaplang's rebels. The Indian Assam Rifles together with the commandos of the Indian Army crossed into Myanmar's territory to attack two camps of NSCN-Khaplang on 9th June 2006. It was reported that around 83 NSCN-Khaplang's rebels were killed by the India-Myanmar joint military forces in this operation (Singh, 2015). "Operation Chandel" was another important joint India-Myanmar military coordinated operation in June 2015. The operation was launched several days after more than twenty Indian Army soldiers were killed and fifteen others wounded in an ambush by the Northeast rebels in Chandel district, Manipur. The objective of "Operation Chandel" was to strike the Indian rebel camps inside Myanmar's territory. Prime Minister Narendra Modi authorized this operation and it was more of a "hot pursuit" operation in tracking down and destroying the rebel camps in Myanmar territory. It was reported that around fifty rebels were killed in this military operation. In July 2018, Myanmar Army launched a military operation against insurgent groups at the India-Myanmar border, especially the NSCN-Khaplang (Singh, 2015; *Elections India*, 2015).

As a result of this military operation, many of the leaders of the insurgent groups went into hiding further deep at the unspecified locations in the jungle in Myanmar's Sagaing Division, to avoid capture by the Myanmar Army. Many of them believed that the India-Myanmar border is not conducive anymore to launch attack against India, due to the military operations conducted against them by the India-Myanmar military forces (*India.com*, 2018). The military operation against the NSCN-Khaplang in July 2018 was believed to have been launched by the Myanmar Army due to the pressure made by India after the NSCN-Khaplang rebels repeatedly attacked India's security forces along the Indo-Burmese border two months earlier (*Look East*, 2018). The NSCN-Khaplang maintains its bases in Myanmar's side of the border and the group always provide support and combat training to other insurgent groups of India's Northeastern region such as ULFA, NDFB, and PLA. These insurgent groups usually launch their joint attacks against India's security forces (Bora, 2018). Among several India's Northeastern insurgent groups, the NSCN-Khaplang is the most notorious. The NSCN-Khaplang spearheaded the formation of an anti-India rebel coalition in 2015. The coalition comprised of four rebel groups – ULFA, KLO, NDFB, and NSCN-Khaplang. Hence, India closely coordinated with Myanmar in taking several initiatives

1. To weaken the rebel coalition by pushing and flushing out other anti-India rebel movements from their areas of influence in Myanmar's Sagaing Division;
2. To force NSCN-Khaplang to stop attacking India security forces;
3. To provide development for Myanmar's backward Sagaing Division with India's fund (Bhaumik, 2015).

India and Myanmar launched two joint military operations in 2019. The first was Operation "Sunrise I" against the insurgents along the borders of Myanmar's Rakhine States that are bordering with India's states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram (the Indian Northeastern states), launched between 22nd to 26th February. The insurgent – the Arakan Army is giving threats to the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport (KMMT) project. The KMMT transport project is very important to India as it will connect Kolkata in India to Sittwe port in Myanmar. The KMMT will finally end up linking Mizoram, one of the India's troubled Northeastern states. The KMMT project also will be a new gateway to India's Northeastern region, thus reducing the distance from Kolkata to Mizoram by nearly one thousand kilometers, and the travel time will be cut short by approximately four days (Bhalla, 2019). The Arakan Army is a Myanmar's Rakhine

insurgent group founded in April 2009. Reportedly, the Arakan Army is currently having around 7000 members. The Arakan Army is actually the armed section of the United League of Arakan (ULA). Its headquarters is located at Laiza in Myanmar's Kachin State. The Arakan Army, together with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) formed a coalition of insurgent groups known as the Northern Alliance (NA). The KIA gave training to around 3000 cadres of the Arakan Army in the past two years (Katoch, 2019). It was reported that on 30th March 2019, the Arakan Army abducted thirteen people working for a Myanmar-based contractor involved in the construction of road between Paletwa in Myanmar to Mizoram in India. The Paletwa-Mizoram roads is part of the US\$500 million KMMT project expected by both the Indian and the Myanmar governments scheduled to be completed by the year 2020. Earlier, on 16th March 2019, a ship carrying steel tresses for the construction of a bridge in Paletwa was targeted and burned down by the Arakan

Army insurgents (Naqvi, 2019; Tar, 2019). The second was Operation "Sunrise II" against the Indian Northeastern rebel groups, launched between 16th May and 8th June (Singh, 2019). The target of this joint military operation between the two countries was to suppress a few rebel groups operating in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur. The India-Myanmar security forces managed to bust several rebel camps belonged to the ULFA, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO), and the NSCN-Khaplang. Around 72 rebels of these insurgent groups were captured in this military operation (Talukdar, 2019). In this military operation, a few camps belonged to the insurgent groups were destroyed. However, the Myanmar Army lost around thirteen soldiers in the operation. Operation "Sunrise II" was considered successful when around 80 insurgents belonged to several rebel groups were caught and their camps destroyed. In 2018, the Myanmar Army identified around 50 rebel camps located in Myanmar's side of the border that belonged to the insurgent groups from India's Northeastern region (Siddiqui, 2019).

The military operations were launched as a result of the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Myanmar in 2018. Prime Minister Modi gave his support to Myanmar in its effort to secure peace and reconciliation, as political stability in Myanmar is vital to India in preserving India's own security along its border. Modi's support includes India as signatory witness in ceremonies to Myanmar's NCA. Modi's government also provides military training to Myanmar Army, and conducts joint military exercises with them. This support includes the India-Myanmar Bilateral Military Exercises (IMBAX) in 2017, 2018, and 2019. In these military exercises, India gave training to Myanmar Army to participate in the UN's peacekeeping missions (Siddiqui, 2019). In February 2012, Myanmar Navy participated in a joint naval exercise with India together with the navies of fourteen other countries known as Milan Naval Exercise) held at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal (Anand, 2015; Parameswaran, 2019). India is well aware that it needs to build up the military capacities of Myanmar Armed Forces if it wanted to see the success in fighting with the insurgent groups in India's Northeastern states. There has been an on and off coordinated joint military operations of both countries in suppressing the insurgents along the land border since the year 2000. This situation has led the insurgent groups to take advantage in gaining control over the border, carried out their attacks in India's side and after that crossed over to the Myanmar's side of the border for shelter.

## Conclusions

The defence and security cooperation with Myanmar is very important for India as the country is now looks at itself as a regional power in the Indo-Pacific, and India is heading towards this direction through enhanced and strengthened bilateral as well as multilateral relations with almost every nation in the AsiaPacific region, especially with the Southeast Asian nations. The improved defence and security cooperation of

India and Myanmar is part and parcel of India's pragmatic approach in its policy towards Myanmar. As India aspires to look beyond the region of South Asia, a good bilateral relation with Myanmar in strategic sector becomes very crucial. India is in need for the enhancement in its bilateral ties with Myanmar, and vice-versa, in defence and security in order to have better coordination in patrolling the borders of both countries from any insurgency, especially in the Indian Northeastern states. Better bilateral relations between India and Myanmar would also ensure that neither side will allow the rebel groups to use their territories for activities hazardous to each other's security. Although India is not currently the biggest arms supplier to Myanmar, but the affordable Indian-made defence equipment transferred or sold for Myanmar's domestic needs is far better than relying on arms supplies from seasoned foreign vendors who might fuel an arms race in the region (R3, 2016).

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