Reassessing Myanmar relations

What is the issue?

- There is a longstanding refugee crisis going on in Myanmar.
- On the other hand, the Ind0-Myanmar ties is waning and this needs to be addressed.

What is Myanmar’s stand on ethnicity?

- Myanmar has an ethnic nationalistic approach right from the British colonial rule.
- It has always nursed an opposition for Indian people and for the Indian state.
- The opposition was there when the British left in 1947-48, and was reflected in the citizenship regulations of the post-colonial state.
- To this day, Indians regardless of their religion are derogatorily referred to as “kalas” (aliens).
- The Tamil community that remained in Myanmar, for instance, has been compelled to assume Burmese names, customs and language.

- The dominant narrative remains one of a Bamar majoritarianism is unwilling to accommodate even the half-dozen significant ethnic minority groups.
The Myanmarese state and society refuse to even acknowledge there being a people called Rohingya.

What is India’s actual stand on Myanmar ties?

Indian investors are preferring to invest in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam than in Myanmar with its anti-Indian bias.

A mere 35,000 Indians visited Myanmar in 2015 (compared to 150,000 Chinese).

In the same year, Indians invested around $730 million, constituting a mere 1.4% of the foreign direct investment (FDI) in the country.

In comparison, Chinese investments of $18 billion constituted 34% of the total FDI.

It is possible to list a number of “under progress” projects in connectivity, energy and so on.

How does Myanmar’s interest affect India?

Myanmar’s role is often exaggerated over the rampant collusion between various armed groups operating along the India-Myanmar border.

As far as cooperation in fighting insurgents goes, the Myanmarese are doing it only to the extent if it is in their interests.

Through the last couple of decades the nation is sheltering fugitive Pakistani nuclear scientists.

The nation is running drugs and arms smuggling rackets which severely affects bordering Indian states.

It is also playing host to Chinese listening posts.
For the past three decades, India’s plan on Myanmar in order to promote its interest from counter-insurgency to balancing China has produced lacklustre results.

The elites in Myanmar have always feared being swallowed by India and China, and it’s not as if Chinese domination is somehow more acceptable to them today.

How can India revamp its ties with Myanmar?

- India should stop seeing the region from the perspective of its own geopolitical insecurities.
- India need not engage to prevent Myanmar from coming under Chinese dominance.
- It is in Myanmar's interest to prevent itself from being dominated by China.

- It is unnecessary to indulge in the military-majoritarian regime to the extent India has been doing.
- India should back Bangladesh over the Rohingya issue and rally international support for Dhaka’s efforts for regional stability.
- Contrary to conventional wisdom, India can afford to adopt a stricter approach.

Source: Business Standard