Making up for lost time

Indian Prime Minister has begun his three-country tour. His first stop is Myanmar, where he will be participating in the ASEAN and East Asia Summits (EAS) in Nay Pyi Taw.

PM’s visit to Myanmar is significance for two reasons. First, this is his first visit to the country as Prime Minister (his earlier visit was in 2014 to attend the ASEAN-India summit meetings) and second, he debuts in the multilateral EAS. The visit gives Prime Minister an opportunity to spell out his vision on India-Myanmar bilateral relations as also India’s wider interests when he meets other regional leaders at the EAS.

Introduction:
Earlier, despite India’s push to Look East policy with an Act East policy, PM did not visit Myanmar due to elections in Myanmar in November 2015 and in the U.S. in late 2016; the finalisation of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its assertiveness in the South China Sea; the India-China border stand-off; and Myanmar’s

Now Prime Minister is visiting Myanmar after India-China Doklam stand-off and at a moment when there is a growing international concern about the sectarian violence in the country.

The Rohingya crisis
The conflict involving Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine province has been simmering for a few years. In the last week of August, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA, now designated as ‘terrorists’) launched a major attack on police posts, in Rakhine state, resulting in significant casualties.

The attacks and clearance operations against it have resulted in some 400 deaths, mostly Rohingya; widespread arson and burning of villages allegedly by both sides; displacement of thousands within Rakhine state and across the Naf river to Bangladesh; and severe disruption in food and humanitarian supplies.

The scale and coordinated nature of this attack have generated deep anxiety within Myanmar’s leadership, on the nature of the security threats they are encountering.
The international community is worried about the reports of harsh response of the Myanmar security forces resulting in civilian casualties and forced migration. The Indian Prime Minister, during his visit, will have to navigate this complex and painful terrain of sectarian violence in the neighbouring country. There is a need for integrating both developmental as well as humanitarian aspects in response to the security situation in the Rakhine state.

**Myanmar’s more dependence on China:**
Given that the visit will be taking place after the Doklam crisis, there will be a temptation in India to see the visit of the prime minister as an attempt to build a robust relationship in the neighbourhood to counter the growing Chinese presence in the region.

It should be noted that the Myanmar government today is more dependent on Chinese support than it was two or three years ago. Its dependence on China characterised by

- a largely extractive relationship focused on natural resources and access to the Bay of Bengal where it already has an oil and gas terminal,
- concession to build a Special Economic Zone and
- Seeks a possibly controlling stake in a **natural deep sea harbour at Kyaukpyu** that could form part of its ambitious BRI.
- China has been a major player in the peace negotiations between the armed ethnic groups and the Myanmar government.
- Further, because of the on-going conflict in the Rakhine state, the Myanmar government will be dependent on the support from China on various human right platforms including the Security Council.

Successive Indian prime ministers have refrained from assessing the relationship with Myanmar through the prism of China and instead focused on developing a comprehensive bilateral relationship.

**Bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar**
In the economic realm, the bilateral trade between the two countries is around $ 2.2 billion, and there is scope for significant improvement. These cover large directly funded and executed connectivity infrastructure projects like

- Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project and
- The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway has picked up momentum in the recent past.
- High value capacity and human development projects like the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology in Mandalay. There is a possibility that new connectivity projects or cooperation on Special Economic Zones may be announced during the visit.
- Small border area development projects in Chin and Naga areas of Myanmar
- Soft lines of credit for other infrastructure projects amounting to nearly $750 million

When they are all completed and fully operational by about 2020, they will amount to a substantial mass and base for an expanded relationship.
Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of commercial trade and investments. Both stand on narrow bases. Primary agricultural and forest products from Myanmar, and oil and gas need to expand in ways that also contribute to Myanmar’s development needs and meet India’s $3 billion trade target set in 2012.

1. India and Myanmar have been promoting regional frameworks such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).
   - The Goa BIMSTEC summit, in October last year, stressed the importance of strengthening transit agreements and early conclusion of Free Trade Agreement (FTA).
   - The first meeting of National Security Chiefs of the BIMSTEC countries was held in March this year.

In the light of recent developments, Prime Minister and his counterparts in Myanmar may examine new frameworks to cooperate on regional security issues.

   1. In the political domain, India has scaled up its engagement with all the important power centres in Myanmar.
      - In the recent past, President, State Counsellor (Aung San Suu Kyi) and Myanmar military Chief have visited India.
      - In an interesting development, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh visited Myanmar in August this year. During his interactions, he referred to Myanmar as ‘Brahmadesh’ and updated his hosts on the improvements to the Buddhist circuits in India.
      - The fact that a Chief Minister of the most populous state chose Myanmar for his first overseas visit suggests that this neighbour has acquired a prominent position in the cultural map of India.

In line with such thinking, new nodes of cultural cooperation may receive significant attention during Prime Minister’s visit

   1. Trade has been the keystone of our post-Independence relationship.
      - Indian imports of beans and pulses that play a vital part in our food security and Myanmar’s economy.
      - Standing at around a million tonnes and $1 billion in value, over 90% of which is exported to India, it is vital to Myanmar’s farmers and foreign exchange earnings, greater even in the value of its exports of rice to China that are prone to periodic restrictions, tough inspections and crackdowns at the Myanmar-China border.

Unfortunately, the recent decision to impose quantitative restrictions on the trade in pulses does exactly the opposite. In part, this is because of our own concerns vis-à-vis speculative global trade in pulses and in part on account of resistance to such a move in Myanmar.

PM’s visit should focus on

Beyond these topical issues, and the issue of Indian insurgent groups in Myanmar, the visit will most likely be taken up by the fundamentals of the bilateral
relationship. The two countries reached several agreements and Prime Minister should use his visit to review the progress of the various bilateral projects that was underway.

- The substantive development partnership, trade issues, and
- revival of cultural and people-to-people ties
- Defence relations too have been growing steadily, especially between the two armies and navies.
- Security related talks have been taking place at the National Security Adviser (NSA) level
- Underlining our strong cultural, people-to-people and diaspora relationship, PM will also visit Bagan where the Archaeological Survey of India relationship. The two countries reached several agreements and Prime Minister should use his visit to review the progress of the various bilateral projects that was underway.

- The substantive development partnership, trade issues, and
- revival of cultural and people-to-people ties
- Defence relations too have been growing steadily, especially between the two armies and navies.
- Security related talks have been taking place at the National Security Adviser (NSA) level
- Underlining our strong cultural, people-to-people and diaspora relationship, PM will also visit Bagan where the Archaeological Survey of India relationship. The two countries reached several agreements and Prime Minister should use his visit to review the progress of the various bilateral projects that was underway.

- The substantive development partnership, trade issues, and
- revival of cultural and people-to-people ties
- Defence relations too have been growing steadily, especially between the two armies and navies.
- Security related talks have been taking place at the National Security Adviser (NSA) level
- Underlining our strong cultural, people-to-people and diaspora relationship, PM will also visit Bagan where the Archaeological Survey of India relationship. The two countries reached several agreements and Prime Minister should use his visit to review the progress of the various bilateral projects that was underway.

- The substantive development partnership, trade issues, and
- revival of cultural and people-to-people ties
- Defence relations too have been growing steadily, especially between the two armies and navies.
- Security related talks have been taking place at the National Security Adviser (NSA) level
- Underlining our strong cultural, people-to-people and diaspora relationship, PM will also visit Bagan where the Archaeological Survey of India relationship. The two countries reached several agreements and Prime Minister should use his visit to review the progress of the various bilateral projects that was underway.

A recent positive development was the agreement to launch a weekly bus-service between Mandalay in central Myanmar and Imphal. There is need to push for operationalisation of the service at the earliest possible.

- India had earlier agreed to undertake the task of repair and upgradation of 71 bridges on the Tamu-Kalewa friendship road, the Kalewa-Yargyi road segment and the Yargyi-Monywa stretch. Progress in these segments is important as they form part of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.
- In maritime connectivity, the joint study group on shipping was set up to examine the commercial feasibility of direct shipping links. India’s interest to strengthen maritime connectivity with Southeast Asia in the recent years is a good opportunity for India to involve itself the Dawei port in southern Myanmar, a port that might emerge as main sea link between India and Southeast Asia and the main point of proposed India-Mekong Economic Corridor.

**Conclusion**

In India, we often say Myanmar is our “gateway” to the East. Against the rhetoric, the existing connectivity between the two neighbours remains much to be desired. With long land and maritime boundaries, surely, the neighbours are yet to take full advantage of geography.

Historically, India has been a major player in Myanmar’s socio-economic landscape till the 1960s. The advent of military dictatorship and its economic policies reduced India’s interactions with Myanmar. As the political transition in Myanmar picks up momentum, it provides an excellent opportunity for Prime Minister to explore new avenues of cooperation.