

Quad Nations Will Achieve Nothing by Giving Sermons to Myanmar



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The arrest and detention of Myanmar's charismatic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, by the Myanmar Army, on the morning of Monday, shocked and took the world by surprise. It should, however, have been evident earlier, that something was amiss when, breaking precedents, India's army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane and foreign secretary Harsh Vardhan Shingla undertook a joint visit to Myanmar on October 3 last year.

There are regular exchanges of visits between the army chiefs of the two countries, and between their foreign offices. But, the October 3 visit to Myanmar was the first occasion of a joint visit by India's army chief and foreign secretary, who, then jointly held meetings with the commander in chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and Myanmar's political leader, State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, who is respected domestically and internationally. New Delhi was evidently keen on getting a high-level appraisal of developments within Myanmar.

The military ties were expanded recently, when India provided the Myanmar navy with its first submarine.

A Myanmar presence in the Bay of Bengal would always be welcomed by India. But, the most important facet of the relationship has been the continuing cooperation between the two armies in dealing with the movement of armed separatist groups along and across the 1,640-kilometre India-Myanmar border. Cross-border terrorism from across our borders with Myanmar has significantly reduced in recent years, as most of the armed separatist groups in India's northeast have been substantially weakened internally. Moreover, the peace process, especially in states like Nagaland and Assam, has gathered strength.

It needs to be borne in mind that Myanmar has a vast range of problems in dealing with armed insurgent groups all across its borders with China and Thailand. There are, at present, 26 armed insurgent groups in Myanmar. The most powerful of these groups is the 20,000 strong United Wa State Army, operating across Myanmar's borders with China and Thailand. Closer to India's borders with Myanmar and China are four ethnic separatist groups which have close relations with China. These groups have been involved, even recently, in fierce fighting with the Myanmar Army. Separatists from India find support from such groups and, thereafter, establish links across the China-Myanmar border, in China's Yunnan Province. India, which has a deliberately low profile in these border areas, is now in a far better position to deal with separatist groups in its northe-

astern states, which cross the India-Myanmar border, and establish contacts with separatist Myanmar groups like the Kachin Independence Organisation.

What has really transformed India-Myanmar ties has been its economic content, arising from the training of skilled personnel from Myanmar in India. There has also been appreciation in Indian infrastructure projects in Myanmar. Moreover, less than a week ago, Myanmar received 1.5 m doses of AstraZeneca vaccines from India. Low key diplomacy and sensitive handling by India has brought Myanmar around to trust Indian good faith and goodwill. The Kaladan Multi-modal Corridor, built by India, will be establishing direct road links between

our landlocked northeastern states and the Bay of Bengal, through the Sittwe Port in Myanmar, which has been built with Indian cooperation.

China would dearly love to have a naval base in the Bay of Bengal. Beijing has sought to build the port of Kyaukphyu, not too far from the Sittwe port, built by India. The Chinese strategic aim is, quite evidently, to link its landlocked Xinjiang Province to the Bay of Bengal. Myanmar will face continuing Chinese pressure to enable it to fulfil its maritime ambitions in the Bay of Bengal. Undue American pressure on Myanmar's internal affairs would only push Myanmar, against its own will, into a closer embrace of China. Since India is the only member of the Quad located in this region, the other members of the Quad need to be sensitised about the need to avoid pushing Myanmar into a closer Chinese embrace.

Japan is the only other Quad member which understands the importance of having a constructive relationship with Myanmar. We see precious little by way of a conscious effort by other Quad members to resort to a policy of tactful advice and persuasion on human rights issues, combined with a policy of positive economic engagement with Myanmar. There is little prospect of being able to achieve the larger security objectives of the Quad, by moralising, or sermonising Myanmar.

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