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REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION IN MYANMAR

By Lina Gong

This NTS Alert examines the implications of Myanmar's recent reforms for its neighbours – China, India, Thailand and Bangladesh. Issues of major concern to the four countries include energy, humanitarian consequences and other non-traditional insecurities resulting from Myanmar's internal challenges. The recent reforms, which advance democracy and national reconciliation, are seen to address these long-standing issues and are universally encouraged by Myanmar's neighbours. Nevertheless, they represent just small steps forward, and more efforts are needed to achieve national reconciliation.



Aung San Suu Kyi (centre), a central figure in Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD), is seen here surrounded by her supporters. The opening up of space for democracy in Myanmar could have positive implications for neighbouring countries.

Credit: Burma Democratic Concern.

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Introduction

In November 2010, Myanmar held its first national elections in two decades, and in March 2011, a new president was sworn in. Since coming into power, the government has carried out several reforms that look promising for democracy and national reconciliation.

National reconciliation matters not only domestically but also to Myanmar's immediate neighbours, as the instability has created much insecurity in the region. The protracted ethnic conflict and struggle for democracy have forced over a million people to flee, with the majority going to Thailand, and significant numbers in China, India and Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2012). Myanmar's domestic instability has also created other non-traditional security (NTS) challenges. Drug trafficking, for example, is an important source of revenue for Myanmar's ethnic armed groups (UNODC, 2010:34, 210). Myanmar is now the second largest producing country of various drugs and the primary source of supply in the Asia-Pacific (UNODC, 2010:41). Energy is another issue that influences the attitude of its neighbours towards national

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reconciliation. Myanmar is courted by its neighbours as it has the world's 10th largest natural gas reserves (Kanwal, 2010:136).

It is thus timely to examine the implications of the new political developments in Myanmar for its neighbouring countries – China, India, Thailand and Bangladesh – in relation to the various NTS threats. In addition to a discussion of the likely positive impacts of Myanmar's reforms for the region, this NTS Alert also explores how the four neighbouring countries view and contribute to national reconciliation efforts in Myanmar.

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Myanmar's reforms

Before examining the ramifications of Myanmar's recent reforms for its neighbours, it would be useful to look more closely at the reforms that have been implemented. Most significant among them are the ones that represent an opening up of space for democracy and national reconciliation which has resulted in an increasing number of political actors becoming engaged in the process (UNGA, 2011). Notable among these actors is the National League for Democracy (NLD) helmed by Aung San Suu Kyi, a highly influential force in the pro-democracy camp.

Ceasefire agreements have also been reached between the government and some ethnic armed groups. Opportunities for expanding the humanitarian space in Myanmar have also emerged. For example, restrictions on the ability of UN agencies to gain access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been lifted (Refugees International, 2012). In addition, as part of the political and economic reforms in Myanmar, the government has declared a campaign to eradicate opium poppies and get rid of Myanmar's status as one of the world's top drug producing countries (Marshall, 2012). Some of the recent developments in Myanmar are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Recent political developments in Myanmar.

Category	Specific developments
Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Release of political prisoners. • Amendments to registration rules for political parties, enabling the National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in the coming by-elections. • Removal of restrictions on political campaigning.
Ethnic conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ceasefire agreements with nine armed ethnic groups, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South). • Peace talks with the Karen National Union (KNU) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP). • Continual fighting with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).
Freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easing of censorship. • Permission for peaceful assembly. • Formation of trade union.
Humanitarian space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the existence of internally displaced persons (IDPs). • Approval of access for UN agencies to assist IDPs.

Source: Saw (2011), Wai (2011, 2012), Human Rights Watch (2012:301), Mon ethnic (2012).

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Implications for Myanmar's neighbours

The ceasefire agreements, the dialogue between the government and the NLD, and the release of certain political prisoners herald new prospects for reconciliation between and among Myanmar's different ethnic groups and political forces. These developments could have positive impacts on Myanmar's neighbours – China, India, Thailand and Bangladesh – which have been absorbing the negative impacts of Myanmar's internal conflicts and issues for decades. The following discussion provides insights into some of the regional insecurities arising from Myanmar's domestic instability, and the possible impacts of the new reforms in terms of the resolution or easing of some of these threats.

China

China is usually viewed as a protector of the Myanmar military government (Yhome, 2010:151). While Western countries imposed sanctions in response to the human rights abuses in the country, China maintained a friendly relationship. In 2007, China vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution which had called for democratisation and the end of military attacks on the country's ethnic nationalities (UNSC, 2007).

China had benefited from its strong bilateral relationship with Myanmar, winning important infrastructure contracts and carrying out extensive investments in Myanmar despite strong protests by local communities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, recent developments signal a shift in relations and policy priorities. An example is the suspension of the Myitsone hydropower project due to public pressure.

Although China had previously had a good relationship with the military government, and continues to have strong ties with the current nominally civilian government, national reconciliation in Myanmar is not expected to fundamentally affect China's interests and influence in Myanmar (Yhome, 2010:162). This is because China does also engage with Myanmar's ethnic nationalities as well as the NLD. For instance, in December 2011, China's ambassador had a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi (Ho, 2011).

Moreover, national reconciliation in Myanmar is in China's interest. The resolution of the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar would restore peace and stability along the China-Myanmar border. Clashes between government armed forces and ethnic armed groups, such as the 2009 Kokang incident, have threatened China's security, in terms of traditional as well as non-traditional threats. In the Kokang incident, two Chinese citizens were killed and another fifteen injured. More than 37,000 refugees fled into China's side of the common border (Li, 2011:114). The influx of refugees imposed logistical and financial burdens on Yunnan province, one of China's less developed regions.

In addition, the unstable border allows transnational crimes in both directions. The drug trade has been the major revenue source for the northern ethnic armed groups. The Special Regions in Shan State and the Kokang autonomous region are the primary source of various drugs (UNODC, 2010:115).

Sanctions imposed on Myanmar by Western countries have further weakened state capacity, encouraging some military officers to engage in illicit drug smuggling and natural resource extraction to generate income (Englehart, 2005:641). The drug trade originating from Myanmar has become a major problem that affects China's social and economic development. China now has the largest number of injecting drug users. This proliferation of drug use has in turn led to the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis C and B (UNODC, 2011:30). In addition to drug trafficking, the porous border areas have also become a venue for smuggling, illegal migration and other criminal activities (Li and Lye, 2010:184).

With Myanmar's new government moving to reconcile with the pro-democracy movement and the country's ethnic nationalities, Western countries have accordingly lifted the sanctions on the country. A socially reconciled Myanmar is in a better position to build its governance capacity and would be more capable of cracking down on transnational crimes. Hence, national reconciliation in Myanmar is desirable to China, and China is supportive of the process. Over the past three months, China had hosted several rounds of peace talks between the Kachin Independence Organization and the government of Ruili, a Chinese town bordering Myanmar (Feng, 2012).

India

Myanmar's relationship with India – another neighbour and rising power – is not as close as its relationship with China. In the late 1980s, India had supported the democracy movement represented by Aung San Suu Kyi. A policy shift occurred in 1992–1993, and India stopped vocal criticism of the junta (Egreteau, 2010:299, 303). This policy change has yet to yield significant improvement in the relationship; in



The 2009 Kokang incident led to an influx of more than 37,000 refugees into China, imposing logistical and financial burdens on Yunnan province.

Credit: TZA.

2008, bilateral trade was only USD1 billion compared to the USD2.6 billion China-Myanmar trade (Egretau, 2010:309). This could be attributed to the fact that India remains pre-occupied with security issues in South Asia.

An improved bilateral relationship would be conducive to India's quest for energy. Myanmar has abundant reserves of around 600 million barrels of oil and 88 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Routray, 2011:140). Despite the increasing importance that India attaches to Myanmar, it still lags behind in its competition with China for energy from Myanmar. For instance, in 2008, Myanmar withdrew India's preferential status and made public its intent to sell its oil to the China National Petroleum Corporation (Routray, 2011:140).

The revival of the NLD in Myanmar's political landscape brings with it the hope that the India-Myanmar relationship will improve, as the NLD can serve as a bridge for communications between the two governments. The recent reforms in Myanmar have already resulted in a deepening of bilateral cooperation. During President Thein Sein's visit to New Delhi, the two countries agreed to expand their cooperation in the areas of energy, infrastructure and border trade (India and Burma, 2011).

National reconciliation in Myanmar could also have an impact on the resolution of humanitarian issues in India caused by the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar as well as the insurgencies in India's North Eastern Region. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are an estimated 8,800 Myanmar refugees in New Delhi and a further 70,000 undocumented refugees in the north-eastern state of Mizoram (Kumari, forthcoming). Faced with a difficult life, and with UNHCR assistance only available in New Delhi, some refugees make the journey to New Delhi (Chin Refugee Committee, 2011:5). However, life in New Delhi is also not easy for the refugees. Discord between refugees and the local population of New Delhi is rising due to differences in language and appearance. The recent reform measures may spark voluntary repatriation, and this is obviously welcomed by the Indian government.

Over the past decades, the seven states in the North Eastern Region that border Myanmar have witnessed the development of armed movements. The demands of these groups – independence, autonomy, tribal rights – are similar to those of the ethnic nationalities in Myanmar (Routray, 2011:141). India's ethnic armed groups have sought sanctuary and support from government forces or agencies across the border in Myanmar, and vice versa. For instance, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, allowed Indian insurgent groups to build up extensive underground connections in Myanmar's remote regions, while Indian intelligence agencies offered to help train Myanmar's Kachin rebels (Egretau, 2008:940). Moreover, the ethnic insurgent groups on both sides of the India-Myanmar border have reinforced each other's positions through such activities as smuggling and the distribution of small arms and light weapons (Yhome, 2011:181).

Thus, as with China, it is certainly in India's interests to see that the reforms in Myanmar succeed. The embracing of democracy and freedom by Myanmar's new government matches mainstream political ideas in India, and this provides a platform for further bilateral communications. The new Myanmar government has also reached out to buyers other than China, opening up new opportunities for India to secure energy. The ceasefire between the Myanmar government and the ethnic nationalities could also help reduce the factors that contribute to the insurgency in India's North Eastern Region.

Thailand

Thailand is host to 92,000 registered refugees and 54,000 unregistered asylum seekers in nine camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border (UNHCR, 2012). This number continues to grow as fighting continues. As in China and India, the existence of refugee camps has become the focus of increasing discontent in local communities, due to competition for resources and job opportunities, environmental impacts and so on. Another problem is that women refugees may fall into the sex industry. This could lead to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in Thailand as these women do not have proper education and the means to protect themselves (Chachavalpongpun, 2011:165).

Thailand has complained that the refugees are becoming a burden and plans to send over 140,000 back to Myanmar (Thailand rues, 2011). However, at the same time, Thailand remains dependent on cheap migrant labour from Myanmar to support its economy. In a recent visit to Myanmar, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan noted that the return of Myanmar nationals will be a significant challenge to Thai economic development (Ashayagachat, 2012). Thus, while repatriation may ease perceived burdens in one area, it has the potential to exacerbate them in another, illustrating that the prospects for reform in Myanmar represent a double-edged sword for Thailand.

In addition to the humanitarian consequences, political violence in Myanmar has spilled over into Thailand. In 1997–1998, the Myanmar military government collaborated with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) to attack and burn refugee camps in Thailand where members of the Karen National Union (KNU) had been residing. In 1999, five members of a rebel group seized Myanmar's embassy in Bangkok for 22 hours, holding hostage diplomats as well as Thai and foreign nationals (Chachavalpongpun, 2005:80, 81).

Also, Thailand, like China, is a major destination for drugs originating in Myanmar. In 2009, 1.98 million tablets of methamphetamine were seized in Thailand, many of which were trafficked from Myanmar (UNODC, 2010:209). The Thai government had criticised the military government for pouring drugs into its country (Aung, 2011).

Given the negative consequences of Myanmar's domestic instability, the Thai government welcomes the prospects of voluntary refugee repatriation and the new efforts to eradicate opium. Moreover, it is willing to support Myanmar's engagement with the international

community to encourage further political reforms. In a statement at the high level segment of the 19th session of the UN Human Rights Council in February 2012, Thailand's Foreign Minister expressed appreciation of the positive changes in Myanmar and called for the acknowledgement of such developments (MFA, 2012). Nevertheless, there are major challenges ahead due to the interdependence of these two neighbouring states. In addition to the refugee issue, the 2 million Myanmar citizens in Thailand are also a source of tension. While the cheap labour contributes to Thailand's economic development, the basic rights of these migrant workers are frequently violated as many of them are undocumented (Aung, 2011).

Bangladesh



National reconciliation in Myanmar could play a role in easing the influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh. Some of these refugees are seen here in a makeshift camp.

Credit: FAMSI.

The most significant transnational impact of the Myanmar ethnic conflict on Bangladesh is the Rohingya issue. In 2008, Bangladesh was host to 29,000 officially documented Rohingya refugees and 36,000 unrecognised Rohingyas. In addition, there were 200,000 undocumented Rohingyas living in Bangladesh (Kiragu et al., 2011:1). Energy security and drug trafficking are other issues that affect Bangladeshi government policy on Myanmar (Banik, 2011). These concerns were raised during the Bangladeshi Prime Minister's visit to Myanmar in December 2011 (Aziz, 2011). Bangladesh is also concerned about the Rohingya armed groups operating from bases along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, as they are a destabilising factor (Ahmed, 2010:70–3).

Bangladesh, like Myanmar's other neighbours, thus welcomes the recent reforms in Myanmar and expects these changes to serve as a catalyst for the resolution of the NTS challenges caused by Myanmar's ethnic conflicts and political struggles. However, given the widespread negative feelings of the Bamar majority (in Myanmar) towards the Rohingyas, inter-communal tensions are

expected to continue, and it is doubtful how much progress can be made on this front. That said, a more open and stable Myanmar presents better opportunities to address these concerns and for greater economic development and human security in Bangladesh.

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Conclusion

It could be seen, then, that the success of the reforms in Myanmar has important ramifications not just for the country, but also for stability and development in the region. National reconciliation contributes to the strengthening of the control and administration of border areas, and could help ameliorate the non-traditional insecurities originating from Myanmar. The signs of change may even prompt the voluntary repatriation of Myanmar refugees now in neighbouring countries (Sargent, 2012), thus eliminating a point of discontent between Myanmar and its neighbours.

Nevertheless, although the recent changes in Myanmar are encouraging, the reform process is still at a preliminary stage. Sporadic fighting between government troops and ethnic armed groups still occur. Although negotiations with the Kachin Independence Organization are under way, government troops are still attacking Kachin territory, forcing more than 10,000 people to flee to China (Wong, 2012). Government troops continue to commit human rights violations – such as forced labour, torture and rape – against the ethnic nationalities. In January 2012, government troops in Karen State forced convicts to work as porters in ongoing operations in combat zones (Human Rights Watch, 2012:302).

Thus, the national reconciliation process has a long way to go, and there is a need for the Myanmar government to implement further reforms in a firmer and more consistent way. The international community could also support this process by, for instance, appreciating that sanctions and diplomatic pressure may be unhelpful – these measures undermine the possibility of rehabilitating the very institutions necessary for democratic reform, such as an independent judiciary and a competent civil service (Englehart, 2005:623).

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