



Democratic Reform and the Peace Process: The UN, Myanmar and China

Speaker: Vijay Nambiar, Former Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Myanmar

Chair: Amb. Ashok K. Kantha

Date: 14 June 2017

Conference room, Sapru House, ICWA

With ongoing tensions in Myanmar and its slow peace process, the seminar was primarily intended to look at the wider picture of internal and external dynamics in Myanmar. Seminar began with the opening remarks from the Chair on how fragmented the discourse has become, as in today's time when there are regional groupings like BCIM and BIMSTEC and talk of trade facilitation. On the other hand there is a great geopolitical game which is ongoing in Myanmar. The speaker talked about the assertiveness of China and also about possible India's role in Myanmar.

The talk began with speaker stating that he would give a multilateral sense and the UN perspective of Myanmar. He started with talking about the UN's role in democratization process in Myanmar and essentially with the problem of Rakhine. UN's involvement began in 1990s with the clampdown on army. For two decades Myanmar's military regime was object of International isolation, sanctions and finger pointing resolutions appointed against by United Nation General Assembly. The speaker said it was only in May 2008 with Cyclone Nargis that came at a critical juncture and led to humanitarian responses from countries like France which also talked about 'Responsibility to protect'. It also provided UN in moving beyond the naming and shaming to work with Myanmar government. UN has been steadily working in Myanmar on human rights, democratization and national reconciliation.

On democratization, he said Thein Sein played an important role in promoting democratization process. Unlike Aung San Suu Kyi, Sein was willing to listen to the outsider's institutional ideas. He briefly talked about the internal politics and the elections which led to the landslide victory of NLD, though it had to still work under the aegis of the Constitution set up by the army.

Speaker then pointed out that one of the major challenges faced by government is the 'communal tension'. He talked about the crisis situation in Rakhine. In 2012 the communal

tension led UN to engage with Rakhine. He said that in UN there were more talks of Rakhine than the peace process. However on one hand UN faced an international pressure to do more on the other hand there was fabricated social media news on the alleged UN's assistance to only one group inside Myanmar.

The increased radicalization and violence in Rakhine has led to large scale migrations. He said that even with the progress of democratization process; there remains a major hiatus between the communities in Rakhine. There was huge pressure from the western countries to solve the issue of Rakhine; however China was out of the issue. The newly elected NLD government is not been able to deal with issue effectively thus far. Speaker said that the Kofi 'Anan Commission' can help in the positive progress of the slow democratization process.

He talked about the unresolved peace process and the slow reconciliation process in Myanmar. He pointed out that there exists a huge mistrust among ethnic groups, an increased radicalization and no political dialogue. There were attempts by Sein's government on National ceasefire however the peace process has taken a different turn. In 2010 Kachins took the lead when there were tensions in North and one could see a united front being formed. There were talks in 2010 with the presence of China, USA, UN and various NGOs. But it was only in 2015 that Kachin's agreed to sign the National Ceasefire Agreement. However with the recent tensions in Konkang region has led to major groups backing out of the agreement with their concerns of lack of inclusivity in the agreement. Speaker said that what we see today is there is a major breach between the ethnic armed groups and those non signatories want to have a political dialogue without being the signatory of National Ceasefire Agreement.

Speaker talked about the vacuum that exists in Myanmar today, with no UN's presence, the lady facing pressure on the uproar in Rakhine, and the unchanging army's position. This vacuum has been filled up by China. He talked about increased role of China in Myanmar. Speaker emphasised that UN can become an important external balancing factor. He said that in near future Myanmar will need UN to play a greater role in the peace process.

He concluded by stating some generalizations like there still exists a mistrust between army and the lady and there is no major change in decision-making. Lastly, he emphasised on a greater role to be played by India by building up the chemistry especially on the infrastructural projects

Discussion: There were questions on the UN's role in the peace process in Myanmar, on the credibility of Aung San Suu kyi's leadership and on the role of ASEAN in Myanmar. Speaker responded by saying that on the question of UN's role, the Kofi Anan Commission on Rakhine can play a positive role in the peace process in Myanmar. He said that ASEAN role has been more centred on a private domain than public, as there is assistance from Indonesian NGOs.

Report prepared by Aakriti Vinayak, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speakers

Vijay K Nambiar joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1967. He studied Chinese in Hong Kong, and served in China from 1970-72 and returned to South Block and Udyog Bhavan until 1976. He then served as First Secretary in Tito's Yugoslavia. He was posted from 1979 to 1982 in the Indian Mission at the United Nations (UN) in New York and served in Delhi during the 1983 NAM Summit and after. From 1985 to 1987, he was India's Ambassador in Algeria. He returned to Delhi as Joint Secretary East Asia in the MEA in 1987 and helped prepare for Rajiv Gandhi's historic visit to China in 1988.

Subsequently, he served as India's Ambassador/ High Commissioner in Afghanistan (1990-1992), Malaysia (1993-1996), China (1996-2000), Pakistan (2000-2001) and Permanent Representative to the UN in New York (2002-2004). Post-retirement, he served as Deputy National Security Adviser of India (2004-2006). He was then deputed by the Government of India to serve in the United Nations Secretariat as Under Secretary-General, Special Adviser to Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2006-2007), then as Chef de Cabinet to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2007-2012) and later as Adviser on Myanmar (2012-2016).

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