

From 'Warm' to 'Cold': Political Relations between India and Burma, 1948-1988

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India and Burma formally established diplomatic relations in 1948, a milestone that opened a new chapter in the history of the two neighbouring states. Between 1948 and 1962, bilateral ties were generally characterised as 'warm': Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, in particular, built a working partnership grounded in post-colonial solidarity, non-alignment, and a shared commitment to independent national development. General Ne Win's military coup of 1962, however, proved a decisive turning point, setting the relationship on a markedly different trajectory. Over the next quarter-century, from 1962 to 1988, the earlier pattern of engagement largely reversed. Burma's transition from civilian to military rule in 1962 inaugurated a long decline in relations with India, which grew progressively cooler and more strained as the years passed. During this later period, bilateral engagement was confined almost entirely to the political and diplomatic sphere, with other dimensions of the relationship remaining marginal. This article traces the fluctuating course of India–Burma political relations across the first four decades of Burmese independence, examining the shift from warm friendship to a colder, more distant footing.

Keywords: India-Burma relations; 'warmth' and 'coldness'; diplomatic history; Cold War; 1948-1988

India and Burma are neighbouring states whose ties extend deep into the past. Indian influence had already left its mark on Burmese trade, politics, religion, and culture by antiquity. After unifying the country and founding the Pagan dynasty in 1044, King Anawrahta established Theravada Buddhism as Burma's principal religion. Sanskrit and Pali, both of Indian origin, subsequently entered the Burmese lexicon alongside this faith: the former was applied to secular authority and kingship, the latter to the transcription of Buddhist scripture. Under British colonial expansion, India and Burma came to form part of a single imperial structure, with Britain annexing Burma to British India in 1886 and placing it under Indian administration (Hughes, 2013, 251). Throughout the period in which Burma remained a province of British India (1886–1937), colonial policy encouraged substantial Indian migration into the territory. Desai (1954) records that, a decade after annexation, some 18,000 Indian soldiers were garrisoned in the 'Burman Province' (Desai, 1954, 18), while by 1861 Rangoon's police force was composed entirely of Indians. By 1931, the Indian-origin population had reached over one million of Burma's fourteen million inhabitants, constituting roughly half of Rangoon's population (Egretreau, 2008, 938). At independence on 4 January 1948, Burma was home to an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 Indians, and this substantial community continued thereafter to sustain economic, cultural, and religious exchange between the two nations.

Following Burma's administrative separation from India in 1937, the leaders of the two national liberation movements offered one another support in their respective struggles against British rule. Burmese leaders monitored India's independence movement closely, particularly during the final years before 1947, and the parallel political standing of the two men who would head their countries' first governments – Aung San as Vice-Chairman of Burma's Executive Council and Jawaharlal Nehru in the equivalent Indian post – reinforced this sense of shared purpose. When Aung San and six colleagues on the Executive Council were assassinated on 19 July 1947, Nehru sent his condolences, declaring that 'Burma and Asia have lost one of their courageous

and visionary sons' and assuring the Burmese people that India would 'stand with them in the difficult days ahead' (Zaw et al., 2001, 88). Geography, culture, religion, shared scripts, and this common colonial history thus combined to shape the modern India–Burma relationship.

India and Burma formally established diplomatic relations in 1948, immediately following Burmese independence, on foundations that combined geopolitical, cultural, and historical considerations with long-standing traditional ties and the place each country occupied in the other's foreign policy. Between 1948 and 1962, the relationship was, on the whole, friendly and cordial. General Ne Win's coup of March 1962, however, which inaugurated a period of sustained military rule, set in motion a cooling and increasingly tense relationship that persisted for decades thereafter.

Method

This study draws on established historical-science methods, principally the historical and logical approaches. The historical method is used to reconstruct, in chronological sequence, the course of India–Burma political relations between 1948 and 1988 and to draw out its specific implications. The logical method, applied to the available source material, underpins the analysis of the relationship's fluctuations across this period, the dynamics and evolution of key events, and the factors that shaped bilateral ties. These are supplemented by analysis, synthesis, comparison, contrast, statistical treatment, and historical periodisation, deployed together to arrive at an accurate assessment of the subject.

The article's central hypothesis is that political relations between India and Burma shifted from warmth (1948–1962) to coolness (1962–1988) chiefly because of changes in Burma's domestic and foreign policy following the 1962 coup, compounded by regional and international upheavals during the Cold War that eroded the cooperative foundation laid in the early post-independence years. This overarching hypothesis is verifiable against historical sources, diplomatic records, and the declared policies of both governments, and it is supported by three subsidiary propositions. First, on Burma's domestic trajectory: the decline in political relations after 1962 stemmed primarily from the Ne Win government's implementation of the Burmese Way to Socialism, its pursuit of a neutral stance, and its restriction of external contact and cooperation with India. Second, on divergent political systems: the widening gap between India's parliamentary democracy and Burma's single-party military regime eroded political trust and narrowed the space for bilateral cooperation. Third, on the regional balance of power: the Sino-Indian rivalry following the 1962 border war, together with shifting regional security structures, exerted a significant influence on Burmese foreign policy, encouraging Rangoon to keep its distance from New Delhi.

This article sets out to clarify the formation, development, and transformation of India–Burma political relations between 1948 and 1988, to analyse the factors behind the shift from a warm, cooperative phase to a more distant one, and thereby to assess the character, nature, and impact of this relationship on the foreign policies of both states and on the wider South Asia–Southeast Asia regional context during the Cold War. Its scope is confined to the political dimension of the bilateral relationship. Temporally, the study begins in 1948, when the two countries established formal diplomatic relations following independence, and concludes in 1988, the year of Burma's political crisis, which opened a new phase in the country's domestic and foreign policy. Spatially, the research concentrates on bilateral ties between India and Burma, while taking into account such regional and international factors as the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the influence of major powers, to the extent necessary to illuminate the formation, development, and decline of the relationship.

Theoretical Framework

The article draws on three strands of international relations theory – idealism, realism, and constructivism – to analyse and explain the shift from warm, cooperative relations to a period of coolness between India and Burma across 1948–1988. Idealism holds that state behaviour is shaped not only by power and material interest but also by conceptions of peace, independence, sovereignty, cooperation, and international order (Weber, 2005). Applied to India and Burma, shared colonial experience, a common commitment to safeguarding national independence, and a mutual perception of pursuing a relatively

autonomous foreign policy during the Cold War together furnished a shared foundation of values that built trust and encouraged political cooperation between 1948 and 1962. On this reading, the 'warmth' of the relationship reflected not merely overlapping geopolitical interests but an ideological and perceptual affinity between the two leaderships, particularly under Nehru and U Nu. After 1962, however, the change of regime and the military government's adoption of the Burmese Way to Socialism, together with a turn towards foreign-policy isolation, eroded this ideological and perceptual affinity and thereby undermined trust, contact, and political cooperation. Idealism thus helps to explain the shift from 'warmth' to 'coldness' as a process in which shared values, norms, and perceptions progressively diminished.

Realism, by contrast, holds that states pursue power and, operating within an 'anarchic' international system, are compelled towards a strategy of 'self-help', competing with one another to secure their own survival; sustained cooperation is consequently regarded as unlikely (Kauppi & Viotti, 2019). This framework is used here to examine the part played by national interest, security, power, and the wider geopolitical environment in the transformation of India–Burma relations over the period. Because states in an anarchic system consistently prioritise their survival, security, and national interest, the degree of cooperation or competition between any two states depends largely on how far their respective interests align. The compatibility of Indian and Burmese interests, together with each state's need to preserve strategic autonomy, underpinned the warm political relationship of 1948–1962. Following the 1962 coup, the change of regime in Burma prompted a realignment of Rangoon's priorities around interest and security: the Ne Win government stressed sovereignty, self-reliance, and restricted external engagement while pursuing a more isolationist foreign policy, altering the degree to which Burmese and Indian interests coincided. The relationship was further shaped by the wider contest for power in Asia, by Sino-Burmese relations, by border-security questions, and by the broader upheavals of the Cold War, all of which reshaped both states' strategic calculations and narrowed the scope for bilateral political cooperation. Realism thus attributes the shift from 'warm' to 'cold' relations to changes in national interest, security priorities, and the geopolitical environment, and treats bilateral relations not as static but as continually adjusted by states in response to a changing strategic environment and the imperative to protect their interests.

Constructivism, finally, holds that identity, norms, beliefs, and values are themselves structural forces that exert a powerful influence on political and social conduct, and it accords normative structures an importance equal to, if not greater than, that of material structures. For constructivists, each state possesses a national identity – a particular way of perceiving itself – and this identity helps to define the goals it pursues, whether in security, foreign policy, or economic development (Kauppi & Viotti, 2019). In the case of India and Burma between 1948 and 1962, a shared colonial experience and their common status as newly independent Asian states fostered a post-colonial identity built around independence, sovereignty, peace, anti-colonialism, and a preference for autonomy in foreign affairs. This convergence of identity, norms, and perception facilitated political trust and, in turn, a friendly and warm relationship. The 1962 coup marked a decisive break: the change of regime and the adoption of the Burmese Way to Socialism shifted Burma's ideological outlook, political identity, and conception of sovereignty, intervention, and external relations, as the country placed growing emphasis on self-reliance and the restriction of outside influence while pursuing a more isolated foreign policy. These changes altered not only Burma's external conduct but also the shared perceptions and norms that had previously sustained its closeness to India. From a constructivist standpoint, then, the shift from 'warm' to 'cold' relations can be understood as a transformation in identity, perception, and norms within the bilateral relationship: as each state's understanding of itself, of the other, and of the international environment changed, their interests and foreign policies were redefined, with corresponding effects on trust and the level of cooperation. Constructivism therefore helps to explain not only the behavioural changes in Indian and Burmese foreign policy but also the deeper conceptual shifts underlying the evolution of their political relationship.

The 'Warmth' of Relations between India and Burma, 1948–1962

India and Burma formally established diplomatic relations on 4 January 1948, opening a new era in bilateral ties (Pradhan, 1981, 77). India marked Burma's Independence Day with congratulations that reflected the spirit of neighbourly solidarity, expressed in the words of Prime Minister Nehru: 'In the past and in the future, the people of India will stand shoulder to shoulder with the people of Burma, and whether in good

fortune or misfortune, we will always share together. This is a great and solemn day not only for Burma but also for India and all of Asia' (Zaw et al., 2001, 89). The relationship was reinforced further by India's assistance in drafting foundational documents for the fledgling U Nu government, most notably the Constitution: at U Nu's invitation, the eminent Indian constitutional expert B. N. Rau travelled to Burma in 1948 to assist in this work (Gundevia, 1984, 15).

From 1948 onwards, the Burmese government introduced a series of measures intended to increase the economic benefits accruing to its own citizens and to curtail the rights of foreigners – measures that fell disproportionately on Indians, who formed the largest foreign-origin community in post-independence Burma. The Land Alienation Act, for instance, barred non-Burmese residents from purchasing land, while the Land Nationalization Bill, passed on 11 October 1949, prohibited non-farming citizens from holding more than fifty acres (roughly twenty hectares) and provoked fierce opposition from the Indian moneylenders, or Chettiyars, who controlled extensive landholdings in Burma (Hughes, 2013, 251). Nehru, mindful of relations between the two countries, declined to support the Chettiyars' campaign, maintaining that although the Bill affected Indians in Burma severely, it was not discriminatory in intent. The close personal friendship between Nehru and U Nu did much to prevent such episodes from escalating into open confrontation.

Independence brought Burma serious difficulties, not least entrenched ethnic conflict, including the Karen uprising and the activity of other rebel forces, and the new Prime Minister, U Nu (1948–1962), found himself in urgent need of assistance from India, the Commonwealth, and the United States. At the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference held in Ceylon in January 1950, India joined other member states in agreeing a loan of six million pounds to Burma, of which India itself provided one million (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1951b, 4), and in 1958 the Indian government approved a further \$46 million loan to the U Nu government (Gottschlich, 2015, 142). Such measures reflected a peaceful, friendly, and unconditional Indian foreign policy towards Burma. Addressing parliament on 17 March 1950, Nehru insisted that India's assistance did not amount to interference in its neighbour's internal affairs: 'that is not our purpose and we do not use any means to interfere in other countries, but whenever possible, we will be ready to help them without any conditions attached to intervention' (Nehru, 1961, 292–293).

India's engagement extended beyond addressing the immediate security and financial crisis: it also sought to establish a durable foundation for the long-term relationship, through regular consultation, the development of cooperative mechanisms, and the exchange of views on questions of world peace and international relations. This friendly, warm relationship in turn contributed to the growth of the Non-Aligned Movement, which campaigned for peace and national independence and against imperialist and colonial domination; both countries participated actively in the 1955 Bandung Conference and in the Non-Aligned Movement more broadly.

Barely three years after the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Burmese Minister of External Affairs, Sao Hkun Hkio, and the Indian Ambassador to Burma, M. A. Rauf, signed the Treaty of Friendship in Rangoon on 7 July 1951 (Pradhan, 1981, 81). The treaty proclaimed that 'peace and friendship between the two countries will be eternal and unchanging' and that 'the two countries will forever strive to strengthen and further develop the existing sincere relationship between their people', while further providing that 'the two countries agree that their representatives should meet regularly to exchange views on matters of mutual interest and consider ways and means for mutual cooperation between the two countries on these matters' (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1951a). This marked a significant milestone in the close, friendly relationship between the two states and stands, from an idealist perspective, as a representative case study: the treaty embodies a shared commitment to peace, to respect for independence and sovereignty, to the promotion of friendly relations, to the building of trust between two newly independent nations, and to the prioritisation of cooperation over competition.

Following the signing of the Treaty, diplomatic delegations travelled frequently between the two countries, drawing bilateral relations still closer. Nehru held the friendship in high regard, describing Burma as

a neighbour 'dear to us' and 'near to us' (Nehru, 1961, 294), and remarking on another occasion that 'we are in frequent touch with the Government of Burma on many matters. We are not only friendly in the normal sense of the word, but if I may say somewhat more friendly' (Pradhan, 1981, 84). In 1949 and again in 1958, India supplied military assistance, training, logistical support, and arms transfers that helped U Nu's democratic government withstand severe communist and ethnic insurgencies, although no formal deployment of Indian troops was ever authorised. This political, economic, and military assistance contributed materially to Burma's post-independence peace and socio-political stability, while the close political and diplomatic ties between the two states created favourable conditions for the Indian community in Burma to expand its role as entrepreneurs, investors, and workers across various sectors of the economy – a further important strand binding the two peoples together.

The Friendship Treaty consolidated India's position as Burma's closest political partner: the two countries went on to deepen political consultation and economic cooperation, address the position of Indians resident in Burma, and coordinate within international forums, sustaining India's considerable influence over its eastern neighbour throughout the 1950s. Although not directed against any third party, the Treaty carried significant strategic implications for both China and Pakistan, particularly against the backdrop of the Cold War and the shifting balance of power across South Asia and Southeast Asia. For China, it helped slow the expansion of Chinese influence in Burma during the early 1950s and encouraged Beijing to adopt a more flexible stance towards Rangoon – notably, the two countries' relationship during this decade came to be described as 'Pauk-Phaw', meaning 'blood brothers' in the Myanmar language. For Pakistan, a state of comparable strategic weight to India and China, the Treaty reflected New Delhi's broader effort to construct a 'friendly neighbourhood ring' around the subcontinent, and India's deepening ties with Burma reinforced Pakistan's search for security partners beyond the region as a counterweight to New Delhi, not least given China's own close relationship with Pakistan, India's principal adversary (Larik et al., 2022, 18). Pakistan's enduring strategic attractiveness to the major powers stems from its geography: it borders India, China, Afghanistan, and Iran to its east, northwest, west, and southwest respectively, fronts the Indian Ocean to the south, and links South, West, and Central Asia with China's western regions (Rahman et al., 2022, 124).

Following the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949), a Kuomintang faction retreated into Burmese territory pursued by units of the Chinese army, leaving the Burmese government deeply concerned at this foreign military presence within its borders. Having failed in 1953 to persuade the United States to press China into withdrawing its forces from north-eastern Burma, Rangoon brought the matter before the United Nations, where India lent its support to a resolution calling for disarmament and the evacuation of foreign troops from Burmese soil. During the ensuing UN debate on 5 November 1953, India's representative, V. K. Krishna Menon, warned that 'what harms Burma also harms us (India). We do not have a military alliance, but Burma is closely connected to us, and of course the situation in Burma is of great concern to us' (Zaw et al., 2001, 90).

When Chinese troops again crossed into Burmese territory in 1956, U Nu turned once more to India for support, and, through Nehru's mediation, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai made his first visit to Burma and agreed to discuss the border question directly with U Nu (Mohan, 2013, 6). U Nu and Nehru, moreover, shared broadly similar views on world affairs and were both committed advocates of Asian solidarity, and both countries pursued a 'non-aligned' stance in international relations, frequently supporting one another at the United Nations and other international gatherings. Burma aligned with India's position on China, for instance, supporting India's proposal in September 1950 to admit China to the United Nations, while India joined Burma in January 1951 in voting against the US resolution branding China an aggressor on the Korean peninsula (Gupta, 2013, 85) – the only two states outside the socialist bloc to do so, and a vivid illustration of the closeness between them during this decade.

As tensions along the Sino-Indian border intensified at the start of the 1960s, China moved to strengthen its ties with Burma, with which it had held formal diplomatic relations since June 1950. On 28 January 1960, the two countries signed the Friendly Agreement on the Question of the Burma–China Boundary and the associated Boundary Treaty, committing themselves to mutual recognition of sovereignty, the peaceful

resolution of disputes, abstention from any military alliance directed against the other, and cooperative economic and cultural development (Steinberg & Fan, 2012, 64). This non-aggression pact placed New Delhi at a considerable disadvantage, and Burma's subsequent neutrality during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war further eroded what had previously been a friendly relationship with India. China, for its part, extended its first aid package to Burma during this period, began purchasing Burmese rice above market prices, and discussed facilitating the transport of goods from Yunnan through Burmese territory. It was against this backdrop that General Ne Win seized power in a military coup on 2 March 1962, setting India–Burma relations on a markedly different course.

The India–Burma relationship of 1948–1962 thus rested on a solid foundation: close geographical, historical, and cultural ties; Burma's importance to India's own development; and the close personal friendship between Nehru and U Nu. This friendship, combined with Burma's strategic significance for India, fostered a moderate and tolerant approach to issues bearing directly on both countries. Although the rise of Burmese nationalism after independence carried the potential to strain the relationship, Burma's resources and strategic position remained sufficiently important to Indian policymakers that Nehru recognised the need for patience and understanding in cultivating a long-term partnership with his eastern neighbour. In this early period, India–Burma relations centred primarily on political and diplomatic matters, with bilateral trade cooperation playing a comparatively minor role; nevertheless, the relationship established during these years laid the groundwork for the more comprehensive cooperation of subsequent decades.

India–Burma Political Relations, 1962–1988: 'Cold and Tense'

Where 1948–1962 had been marked by friendly, neighbourly relations, the following quarter-century, 1962–1988, saw those ties decline almost to the point of freezing altogether. General Ne Win's coup of March 1962 marked the decisive turning point, ushering in a period of military rule and bringing Burmese democracy to a close after just fourteen years. Having seized power, Ne Win concentrated all authority in his own hands and subjected Burma's political, social, economic, and cultural life to strict military control (Clapp, 2007, 6). The coup drove many former democratic leaders, including U Nu himself, into exile in India, where Nehru welcomed U Nu warmly and permitted his family to remain without regard to any reaction this might provoke from the Ne Win government. India, along with numerous other states, voiced its opposition to the establishment of military rule in Burma.

Once in power, Ne Win pursued a series of policies damaging to Burma–India relations. On 30 April 1962, the Revolutionary Council announced the Burmese Revolutionary Programme on the Path to Socialism, setting out the new regime's development goals and asserting that it 'does not serve the interests of any group, organization, class, or party, but rather aims for an economy whose sole objective is to satisfy the highest material, spiritual, and cultural needs of the entire nation' (Vu, 2005, 462). The Programme envisaged a multi-sector economy comprising state, cooperative, and private components, with the state sector accorded a foundational role, the cooperative sector given support, and the private sector permitted only within strict limits. To this end, the Ne Win government ordered the expulsion of the foreign community, including Indians and Chinese, so as to eliminate rapidly the role of Indian and Chinese business interests and to establish state socialism as the sole route to Burmese economic independence. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of Indians left Burma during the 1960s and 1970s, with roughly 100,000 departing in 1964 alone (Routray, 2011, 301), a development that further deepened the antagonism between India's civilian, democratic government and Burma's military, authoritarian one.

Between 1962 and 1972, the Ne Win government focused its attention on balancing relations among the three major powers – the United States, the Soviet Union, and China – and paid little heed to India, which, despite its status as a neighbouring power of international standing, featured only marginally in Burmese foreign policy. Rangoon pursued instead a policy of passive neutrality that minimised contact with all states other than China, culminating in its withdrawal from the Non-Aligned Movement at the 1979 Havana summit, a move driven by fear that continued membership would displease Beijing and interpreted as an attempt to preserve good relations with China at a time when the Movement was drawing closer to the Soviet Union amid strained

Sino-Soviet relations (Selth, 1996, 221). India responded with concern, expressing the hope that Burma would rejoin the Non-Aligned Movement (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1980, 8).

From the moment he took power, Ne Win – a committed nationalist deeply suspicious of foreign influence – set about eliminating foreign economic, political, and cultural presence from Burma under the banner of the Burmese Way to Socialism, ordering an end to all ongoing foreign programmes and abolishing foreign private ownership in banking, commerce, and industry. Emphasising self-reliance and declining to play an active role in international affairs, his government pursued a policy of passive neutrality that minimised Burma's contact with the wider world throughout his tenure, and his domestic and foreign policies together exerted a consistently negative effect on relations with India, marking the gradual transformation of the bilateral relationship from the warmth of the U Nu years into a cold and underdeveloped one.

When the Sino-Indian border war broke out in October 1962, Burma adopted a position of neutrality that Indian officials interpreted as tantamount to a pro-Chinese stance (Zaw et al., 2001, 91). Taken together, Ne Win's growing alignment with China, the internal transformation of the military regime, the adoption of the Burmese Way to Socialism, and Burma's neutrality during the border war combined to send India–Burma relations into steady decline. Of the three major powers, Burma maintained by far its closest relationship with China, and the Burmese military government accordingly grew increasingly reliant on, and influenced by, Beijing's pragmatic foreign policy.

In 1964, the Burmese military government launched a programme of nationalisation that struck hard at Indian businesspeople, who at the time controlled as much as sixty per cent of Burmese trade (Dam, 2015, 18), forcing the majority of Indian and Pakistani residents to emigrate, often stripped of their possessions, and further souring relations between the two governments. From the end of 1964, however, ties began to normalise as the two sides held a series of meetings and agreed on a peaceful resolution. High-level visits between the two countries also resumed: at the invitation of the President of India, Ne Win paid an official visit to India in February 1965, during which the two sides affirmed a shared commitment to non-alignment (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1966, 1), declaring in their Joint Statement that 'a common position on international issues stemming from the pursuit of a non-aligned policy has helped to develop close and good neighbourly relations between the two countries' (Zaw et al., 2001, 92). The visit fostered a greater mutual understanding of the difficulties facing each country, a result made possible by both governments' shared pursuit of non-alignment as a means of repairing their previously strained relationship.

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi paid a reciprocal visit to Burma in March 1969 (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1970, 22), an occasion that allowed both governments to exchange and publicly set out their views on bilateral and international questions. Together, Ne Win's 1965 visit to India and Gandhi's 1969 visit to Burma helped normalise and sustain political and diplomatic relations through the 1970s, following the strain and stagnation of the early 1960s. Throughout Ne Win's rule (1962–1988), high-level exchanges between the two countries continued, but remained largely formal and diplomatic; India maintained a broadly neutral stance and showed limited interest in its Burmese neighbour, its leaders continuing to prioritise a rhetorical commitment to 'democratic values' while treating 'security concerns' as a secondary consideration in policy towards Burma (Singh, 2007, 1).

From the mid-1980s, a broader trend towards peace and dialogue emerged across international relations generally and within Asia and Southeast Asia in particular. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Burma in 1987 following a long period of frozen relations, and the two leaders used the occasion to discuss ways of further strengthening and expanding their countries' friendly ties in a spirit of mutual understanding. During the visit, Gandhi called at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's most sacred Buddhist site, and returned to the Burmese people the palm-leaf manuscripts of General Maha Bandula, which had been confiscated by the British and held at the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 1988, 5) – a gesture that marked a notable shift in Indian foreign-policy thinking towards Burma.

Events in Burma the following year, however, drove India back towards the democratic, 'idealist' values that had traditionally informed its foreign policy. On 8 August 1988, thousands of students and other citizens took to the streets of Rangoon and other major cities to protest against government corruption, the suppression of democracy, and economic mismanagement – an episode known in Burmese history as the '8888' uprising. The military government's brutal suppression of the protests claimed the lives of thousands of Burmese students and civilians,¹ and the episode proved the final catalyst both for the founding of the National League for Democracy under Aung San Suu Kyi on 27 August 1988 and for the coup, led by Defence Minister General Saw Maung, that removed Ne Win's government on 18 September 1988. Saw Maung and his close associates thereupon established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), with Saw Maung as its chairman (Devi, 2014, 48).

The '8888' uprising triggered protests around the world and prompted the United Nations, the United States, and Western governments to impose an embargo and economic sanctions on Burma. The US, for example, enacted legislation barring investment in Burma and the import of Burmese goods, prohibited Burma's access to US financial services including dollar transactions, and barred Burmese military and government officials and their families from entering the United States and the European Union. Through their leading positions within international financial institutions, the US and its Western allies also blocked the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank from pursuing development programmes in Burma. The resulting isolation cut Burma off from crucial funding, as major donors curtailed or suspended support and development programmes were halted, leaving the country unable to draw on the World Bank, the IMF, the Asian Development Bank, or other international financial institutions.

Even before the '8888' uprising, Sino-Burmese relations had shown clear signs of improvement: during Ne Win's visit to China on 4 May 1985, Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping remarked that 'there are no major problems to be solved between China and Burma' (Steinberg & Fan, 2012, 139). Throughout the Ne Win era, far from opposing the Burmese military government, China actively supported and funded it, while Burma in turn allowed Chinese enterprises to operate across a range of economic, financial, and commercial sectors. After the 8888 crackdown, China was virtually alone among major powers in maintaining diplomatic relations with Rangoon and continuing to provide aid, while openly opposing Western interference in Burma's internal affairs. On 22 September 1988, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman expressed Beijing's deep concern at recent developments while stressing that 'China had firmly believed in and followed the five principles of peaceful coexistence; China would not interfere in the internal affairs of Burma and hoped that the Burmese government would resolve internal problems on its own in a sound way, avoid bloodshed, and restore normalcy as early as possible' (Myoe, 2011, 107).

During a visit to Thailand on 13 November 1988, Chinese Premier Li Peng set out Beijing's approach towards Burma in similar terms: 'China has consistently adhered to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and Burma is no exception. Burma is a neighbouring country of China. We hope that the situation there can be stabilised. There exist trade relations between China and Burma, which have not been suspended' (Myoe, 2011, 107). The events of 1988 are widely regarded as marking a decisive shift in the bilateral relationship compared with what had gone before: bilateral trade between the two countries nonetheless still reached US\$1.5 billion (Selth, 1996, 214), and Chinese firms were given priority by SLORC in investment, equipment supply, production, and the provision of other services. In 1991, the two governments signed a bilateral agreement on economic and technical cooperation under which China extended a substantial aid package, directed mainly towards civil infrastructure such as bridges, roads, railways, and seaports (Selth, 1996, 214); China went on to provide further loans and aid and to forgive numerous debts, contributing some \$100 million in aid by 2005, while between 1991 and 2005 the Bank of China and the Export-Import Bank of China together extended credit exceeding \$1 billion (Hong, 2008, 5). Because Sino-Burmese rapprochement had

¹Myanmar government sources put the death toll at around 350, though other sources suggest it was considerably higher, running into the thousands. Bertil Lintner, for instance, estimates that some 3,000 protesters were shot dead in Rangoon and elsewhere following the military's intervention (see also Lintner, B. (2009). *The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 44).

begun before 1988 and intensified considerably once international sanctions took effect, the new military government was able to withstand the isolation imposed by the US and its Western allies, and the steadily strengthening relationship between Burma and China came correspondingly at the expense of Burma's ties with India.

In the aftermath of the 1988 protests, India emerged as one of the most vocal critics of the Burmese military regime in international forums, declaring its support for the pro-democracy movement and praising the 'unwavering will of the Burmese people in their struggle for democracy' (Hughes, 2013, 254). India's forceful reaction to the suppression of protesters, many of them of Indian descent, brought bilateral relations to their lowest ebb in 1988 (Yhome, 2009, 1). During the uprising, the Indian Embassy in Rangoon lent active support to pro-democracy figures and organisations, including Aung San Suu Kyi, former Prime Minister U Nu, and the All Burma Federation of Students' Unions. In July 1992, India permitted the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma to establish its headquarters in New Delhi (Haacke, 2006, 34), and in the same year joined the US and other Western states in supporting a United Nations resolution condemning the Burmese military government's inhumane treatment of pro-democracy activists and its human-rights violations (Routray, 2011, 303).

India was, moreover, the only country in the region to declare open support for Burmese pro-democracy forces and political refugees, granting activists, dissidents, and refugees residency and freedom of expression from which to oppose the Saw Maung regime. In late 1988, the Indian government sanctioned the establishment of refugee camps in Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam to assist Burmese students and pro-democracy activists (Ayob, 2015, 50). Rangoon regarded these measures as blatant interference in its internal affairs, yet the military government lacked any legitimate basis on which to press New Delhi to reconsider its stance.

Between 1989 and 1990, India launched an All India Radio campaign broadcasting nationwide in support of Burma's pro-democracy movement (Hughes, 2013, 254), a step the Burmese military junta condemned as interference in its internal affairs. SLORC Vice-Chairman General Than Shwe charged that India had 'encouraged and supported insurgent groups within the country' and 'interfered in Burma's internal affairs, actions inconsistent with the normal conduct of a friendly neighbour' (Hughes, 2013, 254). Burmese military leaders further accused the Indian government of colluding, through its embassy in Rangoon, with pro-democracy activists, and of supporting the Kachin and Karen ethnic groups in conflicts along the Burma–India border – accusations that, on both sides, further strained the relationship.

In sum, across the prolonged fluctuations of the 1962–1988 period, India appeared to allow Burma to slip beyond its sphere of influence, particularly in the economic and security domains, even though Burma continued to hold considerable strategic and economic importance for India. This thirty-year period of coolness drove the two countries further apart and afforded China substantial political, economic, and military advantages within Burma. India was ultimately brought to recognise, at considerable cost, that its condemnation of the Ne Win dictatorship and its efforts to isolate Burma had damaged the security of its own north-eastern region. These lessons, combined with the shifting international, regional, and domestic contexts of both countries, made it increasingly urgent for India and Burma to work towards improving and strengthening their bilateral relationship for their mutual strategic benefit.

Conclusion

India–Burma relations evolved over a long historical trajectory, beginning with early trade and political contact, deepening under British rule, and taking on new significance once both countries achieved independence. In the early years following the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, from 1948 to 1962, the relationship was close and cordial, reflecting the personal friendship between Nehru and U Nu, while India's economic and military assistance to Burma's government and people during this period laid a solid foundation for warmth and goodwill. Given their long-standing geographical, cultural, religious, and commercial ties, and their shared land and maritime borders, India and Burma have come to occupy increasingly important positions

in each other's foreign policy across the political, economic, and security domains, a trend that has become still more pronounced from the end of the Cold War through the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The relationship that unfolded between 1962 and 1988 stood in stark contrast to this earlier period of friendship and cordiality. Ne Win's rise to power through the 1962 coup transformed Burma from a civilian into a military regime and set in motion a decline in relations with India that became increasingly strained, and at times openly tense, in the years that followed. Socialist economic and social policy, nationalization, the large-scale expulsion of Indians under Ne Win, the broader Cold War context, and the expansion of Chinese influence within Burma together rendered the relationship fragile and exposed its many limitations; from 1962 to 1988, bilateral engagement was confined largely to the political sphere, with other areas of cooperation remaining marginal, while the Burmese military government's domestic and foreign policies severely curtailed democratic activity within the country. From 1988 onward, the military government's suppression of pro-democracy protesters in the '8888' uprising, India's consequent opposition to the Burmese dictatorship in international forums, and the isolationist policies pursued by the US and Western states towards Burma combined to drive India–Burma relations to their lowest ebb in the years 1988–1991.

It was, in effect, precisely at the moment India turned cold towards the Burmese military government that Burma was pushed further into China's orbit, a relationship that developed to the point of being described as a 'brotherly' one, or *Pauk-Phaw*, in Burmese usage. China's growing weight in Burma has thus exerted a substantial influence on India–Burma relations, and it was this reality, together with the changing international and regional environment after the Cold War, that ultimately compelled India to adopt a more 'realistic' approach to improving, sustaining, and developing its relationship with its eastern neighbor.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the Editor-in-Chief and the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of, and meticulous comments on, the manuscript of this paper.

Funding

This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number 601.02-2023.11.

Authors' Contributions

Nguyen Tuan Binh: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing.

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