

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia: Interview on India-Myanmar relations with The Wire

Prof. Happymon Jacob (HJ): Hello and welcome to the National Security Conversation. In October 2021, India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla made a two-day visit to Myanmar, a country with which India shares a 1700-kilometre border. A press release issued by the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi highlighted that, and I quote, "Any developments in that country have a direct impact on India's bordering regions." For India, dealing with Myanmar's military regime has meant a fine balancing between safeguarding national security interest, while at the same time signaling its preference for a political settlement and return to democracy in Myanmar. It has not been easy. First, India is deeply concerned about Myanmar's soil used by anti-India insurgent groups. Secondly, it needs to balance, if not outrightly condemn, the increasing Chinese economic and military influence inside Myanmar. So, what does the coup mean for India's interests in Myanmar? Has the Burmese military grown closer to China in the wake of the coup, as reports indicate? What does this mean for the insurgency in India's Northeast, especially in Manipur and Nagaland? To discuss the Foreign Secretary's visit to Myanmar, and India's Myanmar policy in general, I have with me, Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia. Ambassador Bhatia is a Distinguished Fellow at Gateway House in Mumbai. He was the Director-General of the Indian Council of World Affairs from 2012 to 2015. And prior to that he served as India's Ambassador to Myanmar. Welcome to National Security Conversation, Ambassador Bhatia.

Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia (RB): Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

HJ: Ambassador Bhatia, let me begin this interview by asking a very straightforward question. Does the recent visit of India's Foreign Secretary to Myanmar, among other things, mean that India has provided *de facto* recognition to the military regime in Myanmar?

RB: I think this is not the case because India never withdrew recognition from the government of Myanmar. You know, even after the coup the Indian Embassy headed by our ambassador has been dealing with the government on a daily basis. Therefore, according tacit recognition means that we withdrew it and now we are offering it. It is not the case. It is a totally different case from what is happening in Afghanistan. And therefore, I would say that impression is not really accurate.

HJ: How would you compare this with Afghanistan in that sense? Have we officially withdrawn recognition from the government in Afghanistan?

RB: No, the government that we recognised in Afghanistan ceased to exist. The Government of India came to the conclusion that even to maintain its embassy in Kabul is not tenable or feasible, so the embassy was withdrawn fully. And therefore, when a new set of people seized power and became the government in Afghanistan, it had to be recognition ab initio, and that

recognition has not been extended. In contrast, in Myanmar, there is a continuous government and Indian government continues to handle with it.

HJ: Ambassador, for the sake of our viewers, could you explain the whole recognition issue a little more? In the case of Afghanistan, you had a new set of people who came to power in Kabul, who took over the government, and India withdrew its embassy staff from Afghanistan. India did not officially say that we are withdrawing recognition from the government in Kabul, did we? How does it work, in your vast experience?

RB: I have to fall back on my somewhat dated knowledge of international law, which I studied earlier. But as a practicing diplomat until a decade back, I have some familiarity, although I'm not a man of legal background. Recognition is of two kinds. One is recognition of the state. The other is recognition of the government. Recognition of a state that typically comes up in the case of the birth of a new state in new nation-state such as Bangladesh in 1971. So, when that phenomenon emerged, in due course, recognition was granted to the state of the Republic of Bangladesh – to the Islamic Republic of Bangladesh. Then there is recognition of government and this has to be, you know, *de jure* and *de facto* recognition: legal and factual. So here in case of Afghanistan, as we just discussed, the previous government ceased to exist. It simply evaporated. The president fled, and everybody just ended over power, or power was seized away from them by a new group of people. So you have a situation where not just India, but no other foreign government has granted the permission to Taliban, not even the friendliest of them all – Pakistan and China. Therefore, let us forget about recognition by India, even the Taliban government's friends have not given recognition, even though on *de facto* terms they continue to deal with the government, the Foreign Minister, and the rest of it all. But India is a case apart. India withdrew its embassy. India did not deal formally with the new set of people. At this stage, that is what the position is as far as my understanding goes, Professor.

HJ: Right. In other words, in the case of Myanmar, there was the certain power transition, by force or whichever way it was. That was not the case in the case of Afghanistan. Now, let me come back to the question of Myanmar. In a recent article in *The Hindu* newspaper, you argued that India has followed a “calibrated middle path position” vis-a-vis the military regime in Myanmar. Now, what does this approach, a “calibrated middle path” mean? Where exactly is the middle part? Where does it stand compared to the approach that the Western world has taken towards Myanmar?

RB: Yes, the Western world is very clear. It really is seriously opposed to the military government. Ideally, it would not like to have anything to do with it. It has followed the policy of condemnation and has imposed continuously a series of sanctions against the people in power. And they've been repeatedly asking for the release of all political prisoners and in fact, the restoration to power of NLD led by Madame Aung San Suu Kyi. On the other hand, you have countries such as Russia and China, which have been proactively dealing, you know,

conducting transactions with the military government. In the case of India, the middle path comes from the fact that first of all, the policy is very clear. The policy is that India stands for the continuation of the transition to democracy, which was happening until January 31 – that is just before the coup. And that way India very much favours the idea of releasing all political prisoners et cetera. But on the other hand, India is also very clear that its traditional policy is to deal with anybody and everybody who wields actual power in a country. Therefore, from the beginning the Indian ambassador has been having regular interactions with the military government. Therefore, India remains very clear that it has to deal with the military government, essentially in order to protect its own interests, and I’m sure we will be talking about those interests.

HJ: Sure, Ambassador Bhatia, I get your argument about the words expressed by the Indian government vis-a-vis the situation in Myanmar. But it actually goes a little more than the middle path, isn’t it? Because apart from stating a few sentences, India has to condone what is happening in Myanmar: the arrival of the junta through a takeover, through a coup, as it were. I’m not being moralistic about it, I’m trying to understand whether it is still a middle path or more than a middle path.

RB: I think essentially what I’m saying we are not really referring to Buddhism, are we, here? We are dealing with diplomacy and realpolitik. What we are trying to convey is that it is a balanced, calibrated, and well-thought-through position that the government has adopted. It comes from India’s long experience of dealing with this country and handling similar situations. I can say that I’m a little bit of a spokesman of that line, because the last time India faced this challenge was in the early 1990s when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao was running the affairs of the country and earlier Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s pro-democracy line had really brought our relationship with Myanmar down to zero. So at that time, this dual-track policy had been developed. The idea was that India will extend diplomatic, moral, political support to the cause of democracy but it will start dealing with the military government. That is how slowly the India-Myanmar relationship became warm and productive. It is that background which impels me to say that once again, there is a similar – though not the same – situation. You have the democracy transition derailed; you have not given up on democracy in Myanmar. You are supportive of the cause of democracy, but at the same time, the priority for India is to protect and safeguard its hardcore interests relating to security and the larger strategic space.

HJ: You mentioned a point earlier on, which is that whoever is in power in another country, we will deal with them. As we know, India is currently is currently in talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan, although they have not given recognition to it. India’s diplomatic relationship with Myanmar continues notwithstanding the difference between the two cases. So, you seem to view this as a reflection of “we will deal with whoever is in power in another country”. I see the realpolitik behind that logic, and I agree with you on that. The question that I have

then is – and I’m sure a lot of our viewers will also have this question – why not recognise the Taliban?

RB: I appreciate the question. I would not like to be pulled too much into Afghanistan, because while I am familiar with what is happening, I'm not really an expert on Afghanistan. But allow me to say that on Afghanistan and on the question of Taliban’s recognition we are bound by the UN Security Council Resolution, which has laid down several very clear-cut markers, not just for India, but for the whole world. Unless and until Taliban is able to adhere to them – and you remember all of them: namely, they must have a representative inclusive government, they must respect women and children, they must respect ethnic minorities, and above all, they must give ironclad guarantees that their soil will not be used for terrorist operations against third countries. Until all that happens, I think the question of recognition remains in the cold storage.

HJ: I think that’s a very sound angle to my rather tricky question. But Ambassador Bhatia, would you agree with me if I were to argue that while India’s policy of least resistance towards the junta in Myanmar will only further strengthen the brutal military regime in Myanmar? New Delhi may have very little choice but to refrain from taking any measures against the military, indirect or direct. Would you agree with that statement? We have very little choice there.

RB: You know the whole thing has to be seen in the larger regional context. First of all, it will not be accurate to say that India is only uttering a few sentences towards the question of democracy. India has gone on record and worked quite hard, both at the UN and in the region, to support the forces of democracy. The feeling in Delhi is that the most appropriate body to promote reconciliation in Myanmar is ASEAN, and as you are aware, the Indian Government has gone on record extending full support to ASEAN’s five-point consensus formula on Myanmar. And continuously I think, Delhi has been holding consultations at the level of the Foreign Minister and below with their counterparts to promote the idea, no matter how difficult that path is. At the same time, you also noticed that for the last 10 or 11 months, there was no higher level of contact than the level of the ambassador. It is only now that Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Foreign Secretary, decided to visit Myanmar for a larger agenda. Therefore, we can actually say very clearly, that the policy has been collected, factoring in various considerations, and it is being executed a certain degree of calibration.

HJ: Right. Ambassador Bhatia, let’s tend to the China question here. Hypothetically speaking, if China were not a big factor in the India-Myanmar equation, would India have adopted a more nuanced policy towards the coup in Myanmar? I know you are not in the government, but as an analyst, having been India's ambassador to Myanmar, do you think India would have had a slightly different policy towards Myanmar had China not been a big factor? China is a big factor, so it’s only a hypothesis in that sense.

RB: That's a very innovative question and I think I must compel some thought and some reflection. It does not require any knee-jerk kind of answer. Essentially I would say that perhaps India's policy may not have been materially different from what it is today. I would put forward the following logic. The argument is that India is a great supporter of democracy everywhere. India is very happy when democracy flourishes in its neighborhood, in the extended neighborhood, and in other parts of the world. But India has never been an exporter of democracy. India strongly believes that it has to continue practicing a good model of democracy and project that model to the world to say that our model – democracy with development – works. If you are interested, we will be more than happy to share our experience and even our expertise through training facilities and other best practices, et cetera with anybody who's interested. But beyond this, I think India is not in the game of, you know, complicating matters of a neighbouring or another country because we are also bound to by the policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country. So, I would say that even if the China factor had not been there, India would have had limitations it probably would not cross and on the other hand, because instability in Myanmar creates direct negative impact on India, India would have to compulsorily deal with those who wield power in Naypyidaw.

HJ: Ambassador Bhatia, give us a little history here. Historically speaking, what are some of the factors that have influenced India's policy towards Myanmar? How does the recent coup in some sense offset or change that traditional approach that we have had to towards Myanmar?

RB: Thank you very much. This is a section which is very close to my heart and if you allow me, one of the persons who deeply impacted, I think, India's traditional policy on Burma – now, Myanmar, was K. M. Panikkar. Panikkar, writing in 1943, when Burma was under Japanese attack and occupation, had said that the defence of Burma is the defence of India. He went on to say that no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India, when it comes to the question of defending Burma. Now, this was then. My modern interpretation of this particular formulation is that the stability and security of Myanmar is of crucial importance for the stability and security of northeastern India and therefore, India. Hence, I can say that our current policy must ensure the need to promote stability which is obviously only possible through democracy, but also the security at least of that part of the region – Western Myanmar and northeastern India, which are contiguous to each other. Therefore, this emphasis on security is also very important. Now, coming straight to the present. You are fully aware that our northeastern state, Mizoram has been compelled to host several thousand refugees who have fled from Western Myanmar due to repression and instability there. We also have a situation where a number of anti-India insurgent groups keep operating from the Myanmar soil, and on top of that, there is a whole series of unlawful acts that keep going on in the border lands. So all this requires close cooperation between the authorities in Delhi and Naypyidaw. And that is what I think Delhi is trying to do.

HJ: Going back to the late 1980s when India offered some refuge to the pro-democracy protests, when the junta actually cracked down on the pro-democracy protests in Myanmar. We are looking at a very different approach that India has towards the pro-democracy protests and protesters in Myanmar. What in your opinion explains the difference between the 1980s and today? Of course, geopolitics play a role, but in your opinion, what are the big differences?

RB: A big difference today is that there is not so much of pressure on India from the democracy camp. You know, there are not too many reports of NLD people running into India. Instead, probably many of them have gone in the other direction – Thailand – rather than into India. The other is that India now has the actual experience of having dealt with that complicated situation 30 years back. If I may add on a personal note, I was Joint Secretary handling Myanmar at that time in the Ministry of External Affairs. I can testify that at that time, you know, the political direction was very clear, you know: go flat out and help the democracy cause. So, for example, All India Radio was broadcasting you know, anti-Myanmar government and pro-democracy commentaries, which were done by the daughter of a former Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu. All that is gone. India is totally fired by realpolitik, but with the heart. That is where the balancing or calibration or middle path keeps coming in.

HJ: You have served in Myanmar, and you've met both Aung San Suu Kyi and the Myanmar military leaders. Given that intimate knowledge of these people, where do you think this confrontation is going to go? Looking ahead, do you think there is likely to be some sort of conciliatory approach from the junta to the NLD to Aung San Suu Kyi, et cetera? Where do you think this is heading?

RB: This is once again an attempt to try to lean on wisdom of the past and the understanding of the present to try to look into the future. I think this is what true scholarship should keep doing, and thank you so much for this question. I would say that in the past, there was a phase which was very similar to the present phase. Then also, the generals felt very insecure. Therefore, they were very hardcore. They were not willing to show resilience of flexibility, exactly as the present the military leadership is doing. But subsequently in the previous era, a time came when the junta felt sufficiently entrenched and felt the time has come to come up with a constitution which can offer a hybrid, or control the, democracy. That is how the 2008 constitution was born. Knowing that the other side, the democracy camp, had no choice, they simply accepted that constitution. They went in for a referendum. And the 2008 constitution was put into effect in 2011. President Thein Sein, a retired military general, became the head of the state and the head of the government. So if we go by the need for a situation when military is really in full control, which is not the case today, the military does have an upper hand, but its control is contested. It is contested not only by the traditional insurgent groups, but a large part of the populace has shown very clearly that they are not for the coup. On top of that, elements of the opposition have also been using violence in order to counter the violence by the military. So, we are in a very delicate and difficult situation right now. This is

the reason why the military has not responded properly to the ASEAN's five-point formula. In fact, as you know, three days back, they have come up with their own formula. Five points, which probably will not be taken too seriously. But we should hope that without waiting for a time when the military would become far too confident to start the peace dialogue that either the country itself, or the region itself, will find a mediator or a set of mediators, who can get to the two sides to start talking and proceeding because I think all of the parties concerned know that violence is not the way out that this country has to find a way to internal reconciliation.

HJ: The former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi had been attracting a lot of criticism, until of course she was jailed again last year. You've met her several times. What are your impressions of her as a person, as a leader, and her stance towards India? There was also some criticism notwithstanding the criticism about how her government dealt with the Rohingya situation, but also about a tilt towards China. But what are your impressions about her as a person and as a leader?

RB: Madame Aung San Suu Kyi is an outstanding political leader in Asia. Her life is stamped by sacrifice for the nation. Her father was barely in his thirties when he became the founding father of Burma and then he was killed. He was assassinated in office as you know. Her mother was Burma's Ambassador to India in Nehru's time. She grew up here, she has a large set of friends in India, and she studied at LSR. Yes, I had the privilege and honour of meeting her more than once. I always came away impressed by the depth of her qualities, her scholarship, her calmness, her faith in Buddhism, and her intense love for her country and her people. She always said, "Do not worship me, I'm not an item sitting on some table. I'm a politician." It is that trait which then drove her to pursue to politics which probably, at least partially, contributed to where we are today. The central issue after five years of being in power 2015 to 2020 was that she wanted to move, probably, away from hybrid democracy to full-fledged democracy. A system in which the army will return to the barracks and will have no, or very limited role, in government. Now, this concept has not been accepted by the military leadership in Myanmar, which is the heart of the problem. So if you are an admirer of Madame Aung San Suu Kyi, you can say that she wanted to lead the real revolution to real democracy. If you are a critic of Madame Aung San Suu Kyi, you can say that she either was too hasty or she did not see the depth of the philosophy to which the military is adhering to. Hence, the coup happened and the rest, as they say, is history.

HJ: Are you an admirer or a critic?

RB: I am both. In the sense that at the individual level, I have a great sense of admiration for her. As a scholar, as a historian, as a student of Myanmar affairs, I have to concede that I wish she had been a little bit more pragmatic, because the people of her country are suffering very badly today.

HJ: Ambassador Bhatia, let's talk very briefly about the refugee situation. For the last several years, you have had the Rohingya refugees coming into India, they are located in various parts of India, including in the south in Tamil Nadu. Now you have the non-Rohingya Myanmar refugees coming into India. India is not a signatory to many of the international instruments on refugees. How do you assess India's treatment or approach towards refugees general and the Myanmar refugees in particular?

RB: It is a complex problem for the government and the polity to handle. We are a very large country; we have very large problems of our own. The last time India gave shelter to 10 million refugees, it ended up into a very, very big domestic and international crisis. As you know, we are referring to Bangladesh and the road that led to the birth of Bangladesh. So, I think authorities are now far more cautious and restrictive. The idea therefore, is to avoid a situation where far too many refugees coming to India. However, the fact is that we have contiguous borders. People walk in and that is how you hear and you see and you know that there are a certain number of Rohingyas spread out in some parts of the country. Since we do not have a clear, self-contained act on the subject, it has to be handled selectively by the authorities and also, they have to go by the court decisions in this regard. Fundamentally, if you are asking me what should be done – as a former diplomat, I really am constrained to say that the best thing is, if message goes out from India, that we are really unable to handle a very large number of refugees. Yet when some people out of sheer necessity and desperation do find their way into the country, we have to fall back on our traditional kindness and hospitality, so that we are not seen as a nation of heartless people. This balancing the necessity of the state and the traditional Indian societal kindness, they both have to be blended, and that is what I think the government keeps doing, rather than develop a very clear-cut, self-contained, and self-sustaining policy.

HJ: One or two last questions, Ambassador Bhatia. One is about India's infrastructure projects in Myanmar. What has been the fate of these projects in the wake of the coup – particularly the Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Projects, compared to the Chinese investment in Myanmar? Primarily the China-Myanmar economic corridor under the BRI. Do you think the Chinese probably have an upper hand in Myanmar in the wake of the coup, or India is managing the situation quite well to protect its interests there? What is your assessment of how this is going?

RB: The coup has affected the projects of all countries collaborating with Myanmar. China is no exception. The Chinese have been very worried about progress on their projects. They were the only country which saw that some of their companies were actually attacked, damaged, and burnt, when initially China was seen to be supporting the military and opposing the democratic forces. That misfortune did happen, all of us were affected, but certainly, you are absolutely right at hinting that our two mega-projects too have been adversely affected. In

fact, Kaladan was affected even before the coup because of the situation in the Rakhine, but I think it will take some time for the government to stabilise the whole thing fully. You will notice that in the press release issued by the Ministry of External Affairs on the Foreign Secretary's visit, there was minimal reference to the projects. It was a fairly formal reference to the project. Let me shift quickly to the larger China factor. I would like to say, first of all, that China-Myanmar relationship today has been quite close. I think in Madame Aung San Suu Kyi's time this became truly closer. This was the time when President Xi Jinping came to visit Myanmar after many years, and she went there several times, always was received by President Xi Jinping. Keeping all that in mind, we have to fall back once again on a received lesson from history, which is that whichever entity is ruling Naypyidaw – or earlier Rangoon – China manages to secure a good, healthy relationship with that with that entity. This is a given. Keeping that in mind, and falling back on Pannikar, who said that the defence of Burma is the defence of India, India has to make sure that China's footprint in Myanmar remains within limits, and India offers a viable alternative for Myanmar so that Myanmar's intrinsic inclination and impulse for a balanced policy, or an independent policy, remains intact. If we forget that particular dimension and leave the space more and more open to China, then we would be hurting ourselves.

HJ: Ambassador Bhatia, here is my final question. How do you see the domestic political situation in Myanmar panning out in the months ahead, especially in the context of the fact that they have pretty much rejected the ASEAN Five-point formula? How is this going to shape up, and what should be India's policy towards Myanmar? Do you think we should continue the policy that we have or should there be any other policy? Do you have any other policy recommendations for the government?

RB: Professor Jacob, all of us are struggling. All of us meaning those who are supporters of the present policy line by India, or those who would prefer it to be much more supportive of democracy, all of us are struggling to read the future. I think instead of going into five years from now, I think your question is right, what will happen in the next few months? Say in the second year after the coup. Here I think we don't see anyone of repute within the country. There is no Desmond Tutu to lead the reconciliation in Myanmar today. Therefore, out of necessity, we have to bank on the international community to come forward and help. India and Japan within QUAD have a big task to perform, namely to put some realism, before the U.S. and Australia. But beyond that, I think the only possibility is that those powers in ASEAN, which are capable to take an independent view, countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and to some extent, Thailand also, they need to be supported by countries such as India and Japan with or without playing a role there. It is fundamentally for ASEAN to take the lead, because they understand this country better than any of us. I would therefore say that perhaps South Block should start devoting a little more time than one visit in eleven months. We had sort of forgotten this country for the first ten months and now, we decided to do this. My only suggestion would be that it doesn't have to be only a G2G relationship. There is a



whole lot of the democracy constituency there. It is time for our political parties, our strategic community, think tanks, universities, the youth leaders – if we truly care for this country, and we must, because it is a very important neighbour. Then it is important for us to open up the non-governmental relationship so that explore together and find ways to help the unfortunate people who are suffering in Myanmar today.

HJ: Excellent insights, very, very balanced positions, and some sound advice. Thank you so much Ambassador Bhatia, for talking to me, and thank you so much for coming on the show.

RB: Thank you. It was really a great privilege for me to be here. Thank you and good luck to you.