

# India's growing military muscle

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

In recent years, while world attention has focused on China's military, India has begun to refashion itself as an armed power with global reach: a power willing and able to dispatch troops thousands of miles from the subcontinent to protect its oil shipments and trade routes, to defend its large expatriate population in the Middle East and to shoulder international peacekeeping duties.

"India sees itself in a different light not looking so much inward and looking at Pakistan, but globally," said William Cohen, a secretary of defense in the Clinton administration who in his new role as a lobbyist represents American firms seeking weapons contracts in India. "It's sending a signal that it's going to be a big player."

A more robust military is also vital for protecting millions of Indian workers in the Gulf, who are from time to time threatened by political volatility. But the most pressing motivation may be the fast-moving Chinese.

It is modern India's first military outpost on foreign soil. India also appears to be positioning itself as a caretaker and patroller of the Indian Ocean region, which stretches from Africa's coast to Australia's and from the subcontinent southward to Antarctica.

"Immediately after independence, true, we had to engage ourselves for developing our country economically, politically because we were exploited under colonial rule for more than 200 years," Pranab Mukherjee, India's External Affairs Minister (former Defence Minister) said in an interview a few years ago.

Now, he said, things have changed: "Naturally, a country of this size, a population of this size we will be required to strengthen our security forces, modernize them, update them, upgrade our technology."

"We are ready to play a more responsible role," he added, "but we don't want to impose ourselves on others."

"What is important," said Rahul Gandhi some years ago, "is that we stop worrying about how the world will impact us, we stop being scared about how the world will impact us, and we step out and worry about how we will impact the world."

Middle-aged Indians remember a time when their country would watch thousands of Indians in jeopardy in a foreign land and know that there was nothing their military could do.

In 2006, when conflict between Israel and Hezbollah threatened Indian expatriates in Lebanon, four Indian warships happened to be in the Mediterranean. The navy rushed the vessels to Lebanon and brought more than 2,000 people on board, not only Indians, but Sri Lankans, Nepalese and Lebanese eager to escape the fighting.

When a tsunami throttled Asia in 2004, including this country's own southern coast, the Indian Navy dispatched 16,000 troops, 32 warships, 41 planes and a floating hospital for rescue operations, according to news accounts.

Such changes bring pride to many Indians. But some

China has recently raised its military budget to 11.1% per cent (more than \$100 billion) and naturally India will follow in its budget.

It is reported that India has been the world's biggest importer of arms and China, the world's top arms importer for much of the past decade fell to the fourth place on an annual list. This statistics was published on March 19, 2012 by the Sipri.

The Institute's report shows demand from emerging economies in particular India drove the volume worldwide arms transfers between 2007 and the last year to a level of 24% percent higher than in the previous four years.

India recently said that it would increase its military budget by 13% per cent next year (2012-13) to \$38.4 billion as it seeks to counter Chinese build-up.

Indian purchases range from naval to aircraft to ground forces. It is reported that India is getting Russian-made 120 Su-30MK and 16 MiG-29K fighter jets. The Paris-based Dassault Aviation is understood to be in final talks on a contract to supply at least 126 Rafale combat planes to India to clinch the first-ever export deal for the jet.

By some estimates it is reported that India will spend more than \$1049 billion on weapons and systems in the next 15 years.

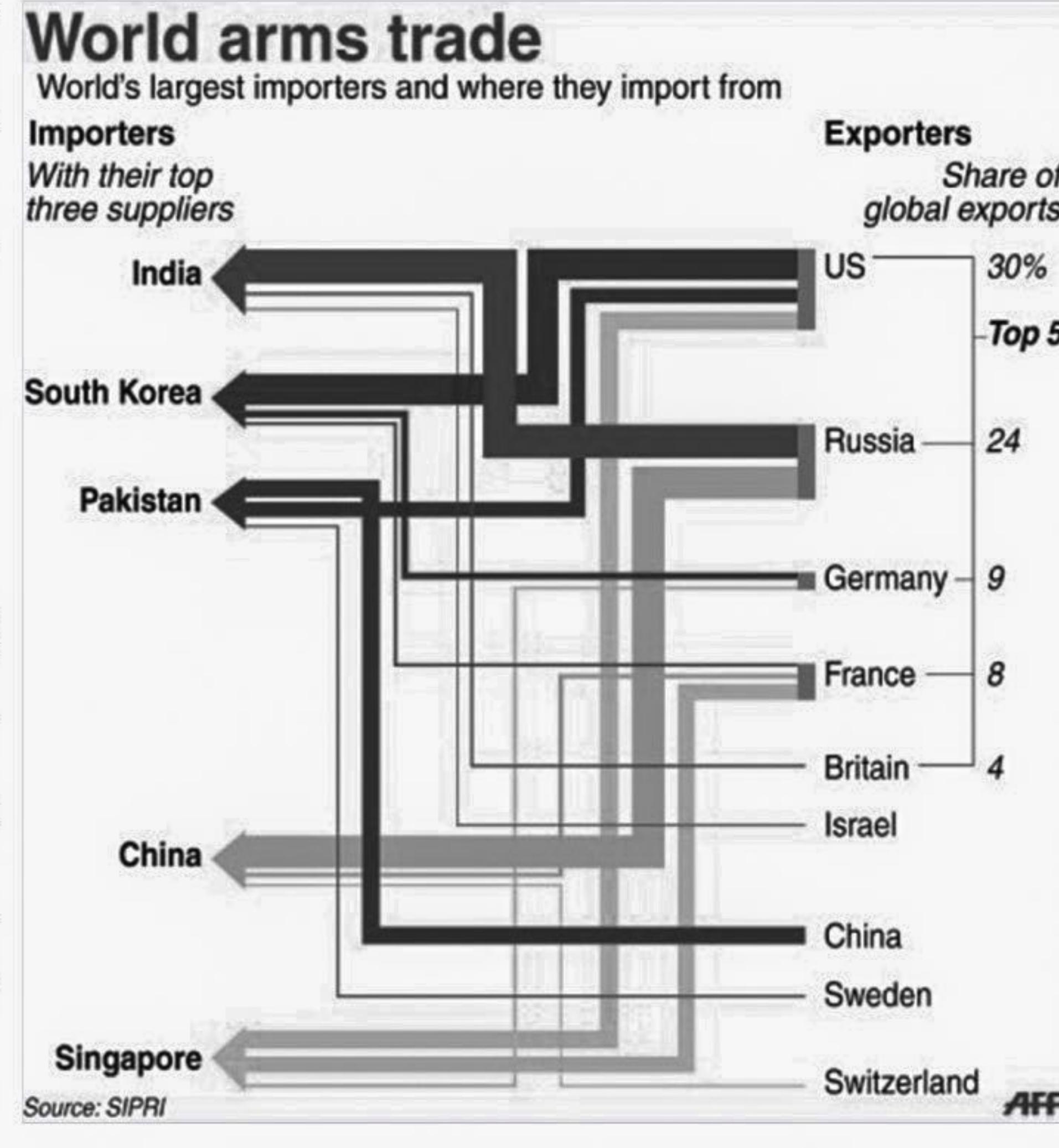
Manoj Joshi, a security expert in New Delhi reportedly said that India was trying to overcome decades of underinvestment: "There is a huge backlog and India is not so much racing as running as hard as she can to stay still."

Alongside India, the five largest arms importers today are all Asian countries, the data show prompting fears of an arms race in a region still blighted by deep poverty.

It is interesting to note that while India assesses its defence requirements in relation to China, Pakistan defines its defence capability in relation to India. This triangular interaction gives rise to the arms race in South Asia.

India is slowly but steadily maturing into a conventional great power. Times have changed when India which gave the world the idea of Gandhian non-violence and, has long derided the force-projecting ways of the great powers is now showing military muscle to demonstrate that India is "rising" and should be given the role in world affairs commensurate with its size, resources and population.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.



also fear that India may become the kind of swaggering power it has opposed since it became independent from Britain in 1947.

India is buying armaments that major powers like the United States use to operate far from home: aircraft carriers, giant C-130J transport planes and airborne refueling tankers. Meanwhile, India has helped to build a small air base in Tajikistan that it will share with its host country.

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## How Myanmar liberates Asia

ROBERT D. KAPLAN

**M**YANMAR'S ongoing liberalization and its normalization of relations with the outside world have the possibility of profoundly affecting geopolitics in Asia and all for the better.

Geographically, Myanmar dominates the Bay of Bengal. It is where the spheres of influence of China and India overlap. Myanmar is also abundant in oil, natural gas, coal, zinc, copper, precious stones, timber and hydropower, with some uranium deposits as well. The prize of the Indo-Pacific region, Myanmar has been locked up by dictatorship for decades, even as the Chinese have been slowly stripping it of natural resources. Think of Myanmar as another Afghanistan in terms of its potential to change a region: a key, geo-strategic puzzle piece ravaged by war and ineffective government that, if only normalized, would unroll trade routes in all directions.

Ever since China's Yuan (ethnic Mongol) dynasty invaded Myanmar in the 13th century, Myanmar has been under the shadow of a Greater China, with no insurmountable geographic barriers or architectural obstacles like the Great Wall to separate the two landsthe Hengduan Shan range borders the two countries. At the same time, Myanmar has historically been the home of an Indian business communitya middleman minority in sociological terms that facilitated the British hold on Myanmar as part of a Greater British India.

But if Myanmar continues on its path of reform by opening links to the United States and neighboring countries, rather than remaining a natural resource tract to be exploited by China, Myanmar will develop into an energy and natural resource hub in its own right, uniting the Indian subcontinent, China and Southeast Asia all into one fluid, organic continuum. And although Chinese influence in Myanmar would diminish in relative terms, China would still benefit immensely. Indeed, Kunming, in China's southern Yunnan province, would become the economic capital of Southeast Asia, where river and rail routes from Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam would converge.

Much of this infrastructure activity is already under way. At Ramree Island off Myanmar's northwestern Arakan coast, the Chinese are constructing pipelines to take oil and natural gas from Africa, the Persian Gulf and the Bay of Bengal across the heart of Myanmar to Kunming. The purpose will be to alleviate China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca, through which four-fifths of its crude oil imports pass at present. There will also be a high-speed rail line roughly along this route.

India, too, is constructing an energy terminal at Sittwe, north of Ramree, on Myanmar's coast, that will potentially carry offshore natural gas northwest through

Bangladesh to the vast demographic inkblot that is the Indian state of West Bengal. The Indian pipeline would actually split into two directions, with another proposed route going to the north around Bangladesh.

Commercial goods will follow along new highways to be built to India. Kolkata, Chittagong and Yangon, rather than being cities in three separate countries, will finally be part of one Indian Ocean world.

The salient fact here is that by liberating Myanmar, India's hitherto landlocked northeast, lying on the far side of Bangladesh, will also be opened up to the outside. Northeast India has suffered from bad geography and underdevelopment, and as a consequence it has experienced about a dozen insurgencies in recent decades. Hilly and jungle-covered, northeast India is cut off from India proper by backbreakingly poor Bangladesh to the west and by Myanmar, hitherto a hermetic and undeveloped state, to the east. But

Myanmar is a vast kingdom organized around the central Irrawaddy River Valley. The ethnic Burman word for this valley is Myanmar, hence the official name of the country. But a third of the population is not ethnic Burman, even as regionally based minorities in friable borderlands account for seven of Myanmar's 14 states. The hill areas around the Irrawaddy Valley are populated by Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karen and Karen people, who also have their own armies and irregular forces, which have been battling the Burman-controlled national army since the early Cold War period.

Worse, these minority-populated hill regions are ethnically divided from within. For example, the Shan area is also home to Was, Lahu, Paos, Kayans and other tribal peoples. All these groups are products of historical migrations from Tibet, China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Cambodia, so that the Chin in western

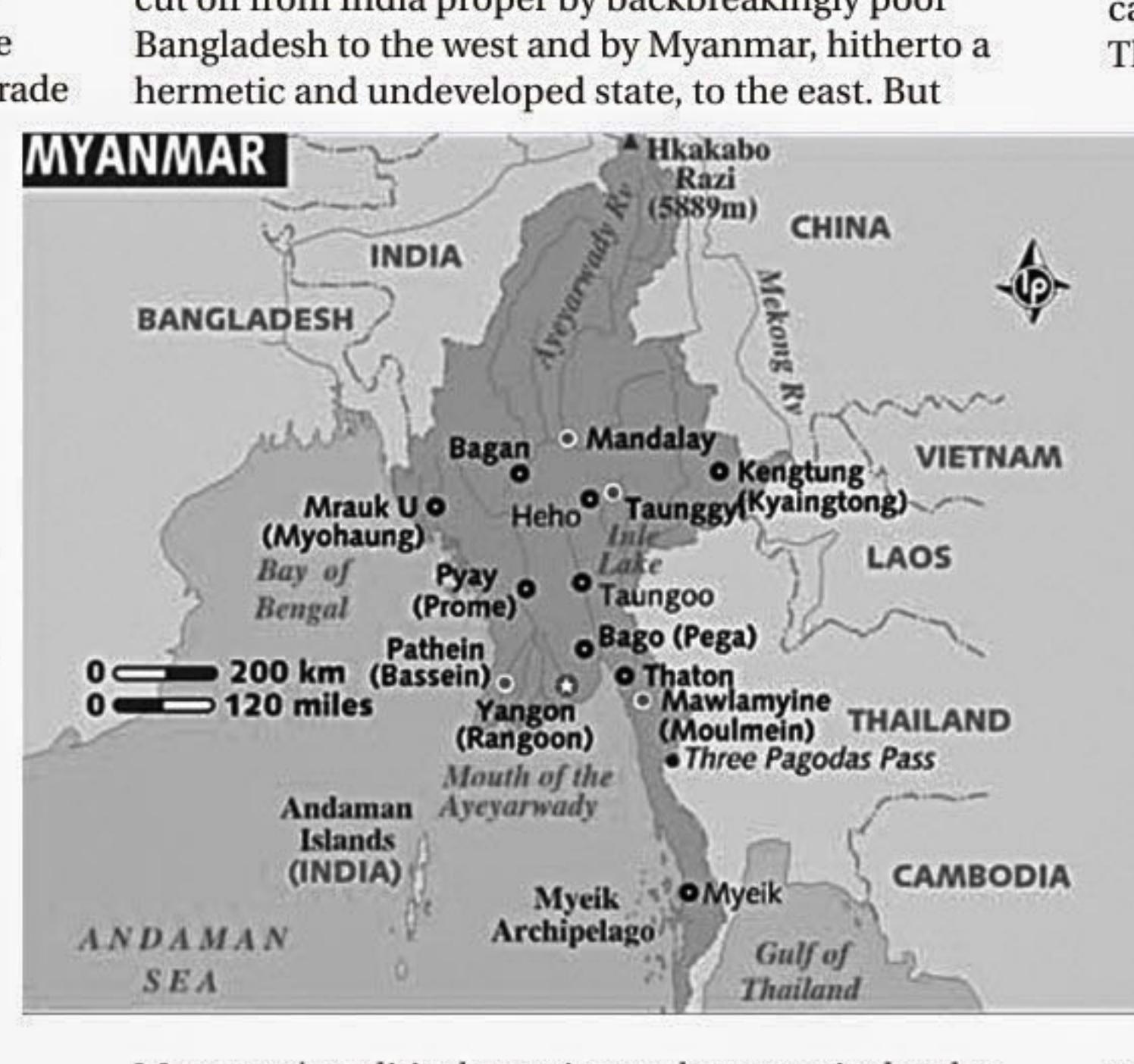
Myanmar have almost nothing in common with the Karen in eastern Myanmar. Nor is there a community of language and culture between the Shans and the ethnic Burmans, except for their Buddhist religion. As for the Arakanese, heirs to a cosmopolitan seaboard civilization influenced by Hindu Bengal, they feel particularly disconnected from the rest of Myanmar and compare their plight to disenfranchised minorities in the Middle East and Africa.

In other words, simply holding elections is not enough if all elections do is bring ethnic Burmans to power who do not compromise with the minorities. The military came to power in Myanmar in 1962 to control the minority-populated borderlands around the Irrawaddy Valley. The military has governed now for half a century. Myanmar has few functioning institutions that are not military-dominated. A system with generous power awarded to the minorities must now be constructed from scratch; peaceful integration of restive minorities requires vibrant federal institutions.

Myanmar, it is true, is becoming less repressive and more open to the outside world. But that in and of itself does not make for a viable institutionalized state. In sum, for Myanmar to succeed, even with civilians in control, the military will have to play a significant role for years to come, because it is mainly officers who know how to run things.

But given its immense natural resources and sizable population of 48 million, if Myanmar can build pan-ethnic institutions in coming decades it could come close to being a midlevel power in its own rightsomething that would not necessarily harm Indian and Chinese interests, and, by the way, would unleash trade throughout Asia and the Indian Ocean world.

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Myanmar's political opening and economic development changes this geopolitical fact, because both India's northeast and Bangladesh will benefit from Myanmar's political and economic renewal.

With poverty reduced somewhat in all these areas, the pressure on Kolkata and West Bengal to absorb economic refugees will be alleviated. This immeasurably strengthens India, whose land borders with semi-failed states within the subcontinent (Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh) has undermined its ability to project political and military power outward into Asia and the Middle East. More broadly, a liberalized Myanmar draws India deeper into Asia, so that India can more effectively balance against China.

But while the future beckons with opportunities, the present is still not assured. The political transition in Myanmar has only begun, and much can still go wrong. The problem, as it was in Yugoslavia and Iraq, is regional and ethnic divides.

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## Is the US focus on Asia a first step away from being a global power?

ALISTAIR BURNETT

**M**EDIA coverage of President Barack Obama's high-profile visit to Australia and plan to boost US presence in Asia may mask America's shrinking global footprint. The combination of concern over China and the US debt crisis could set Washington on a course to becoming a mere regional power in the Asia Pacific.

According to IISS, defense spending is rising in Asia much of it driven by China, which accounts for 30 percent of the region's military budget and falling in Europe and US. The think tank attributes the trends to economic growth in Asia and what it calls strategic uncertainty. And that uncertainty has provided the US with a tempting opportunity to reassert itself in the region while cutting back elsewhere.

Last November, the Hawaiian-born Obama announced what his administration is calling a pivot towards Asia, representing a significant shift in policy since he took office. The change is driven by changing perceptions of Chinese power, but it's also partly a result of diminishing US financial clout.

In the early days of his administration, Obama went out of his way to avoid offending China. On his first visit to the country, he took a lot of flak from political supporters as well as opponents and human rights groups for toning down criticism of China's human-rights record. Then in July 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton challenged China's territorial claims to the South China Sea, stating that the US had a national interest in freedom of navigation there and calling for a regional code of conduct, even though Beijing prefers to deal bilaterally with its neighbors in such territorial disputes.

This new focus on Asia and promise to reinforce US military forces in the region are planned at the same time as growing debt mandates steep reductions in the Pentagon's spending, equipment and manpower. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has proposed reducing personnel by 100,000, cutting new spy planes and transport aircraft, and slowing spending on the new Joint Strike Fighter.

So, it seems inevitable the pivot will mean reduced military commitment in Europe and other parts of the world. The US is already planning to withdraw two combat brigades from Europe and trying to encourage its NATO allies to pick up the slack. The nascent Africa Command, Africom, could have its budget cut as well.

The navy, essential to the projection of US power globally, will fight to retain its current complement of 11 aircraft carriers, but success is by no means certain. Mitt Romney, has made an issue of the navy's size, arguing it is at its smallest since 1917 and promising to build 15 ships a year. However, many defense analysts argue his plan is unaffordable without deep cuts in the army and air force, given Republican demands to cut government spending.

Last year's intervention in Libya offered a glimpse of where US policy may be going. Initially, the Obama administration was markedly less enthusiastic than Britain and France. The Europeans took the lead in front-line action, although the Americans were essential for destroying Libyan air defenses and the supply of precision munitions. In Libya, this was dubbed "leading from behind," but it illustrated how Washington wants to pass responsibility for the defense of Europe and western influence in neighboring regions, such as North Africa, to the Europeans.

Despite the Libya intervention, the call for shifting responsibility seems to be falling on deaf ears at the moment as Europeans cut their defense spending and confront their own economic crisis by reducing their budget deficits.

The plan to focus on East Asia could still be derailed, of course. When asked what was most likely to blow his government off course, the late British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan replied, "Events, my dear boy, events." In the case of the US pivot, the most likely event a known unknown in the Rumsfeldian sense is a conflict in the Middle East where the US commitment to Israel could lead to American military forces being used against Iran to try to stop Tehran developing nuclear weapons.

In explaining the pivot to the Asia-Pacific in a speech to the Australian parliament last November, Obama said the US was winding down its military commitments in Iraq, after US combat troops left in late 2011, and Afghanistan, from which the US plans to have withdrawn all but trainers and advisers within the next two years, to focus further east. But even if Obama ends up sending forces into action again next door in Iran, that would most likely delay, rather than derail, the shift in focus to the Asia-Pacific, given the strategic consensus in Washington that China is its main challenger.

The Obama administration insists the US will maintain its worldwide military reach. However, while no American leader is likely to take the political risk of declaring that the US is no longer a global power, Washington could well be on a course to becoming a de facto regional power in the Asia-Pacific simply because it cannot afford to contain a growing China and maintain a global military presence.

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