INDIA'S BALANCING ACT

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INDIA'S decision to halt all arms sales and transfers to Myanmar underscores New Delhi's desire to enhance bilateral ties with the United States, analysts said.

"India is attempting to balance its national interest in maintaining good relations with Burma with a desire to not be seen to be out of step with the international community's criticism of the junta's crackdown," Dr Rahul Sagar, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Singapore Management University, told TODAY.

"It has taken the step in an effort to placate critics at home and perhaps more importantly to signal a willingness to work alongside the US, which it has traditionally opposed on such matters because of India's own sensitivity on external interference relating to Kashmir. India tends — as a principle — to uphold the norm of sovereignty and dislikes international interference in the internal affairs of states."

Over the past few years, New Delhi has boosted its defence cooperation with Yangon as part of its efforts to battle Myanmar-based insurgent groups operating in North-Eastern India, as well as to counter China's increasing strategic presence in Myanmar.

But now, it seems international pressure on India — one of Myanmar's few allies and whose bilateral trade is currently about US$1 billion ($1.4 billion) — has paid off.

During his meeting with visiting Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win earlier in the week, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urged Yangon to show greater urgency in promoting national reconciliation that includes Ms Aung San Suu Kyi.

Analysts however reckon that India's recent moves are unlikely to pressure Myanmar into embracing democracy, as demanded by the international community.

"There will be other sources of supply of arms to the military junta in Myanmar, besides India," Dr Joo Jae Woo, visiting senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, told TODAY.

Describing India's move as being "symbolic", Dr Sagar noted: "The strategy of sanctions usually never works when another power (that is, China) is willing to bail out the target of the sanctions (that is, the junta)."

India's move has instead provided yet another example of its increasingly ad hoc foreign policy, Dr Sagar said.

"The country continues to oscillate between all manner of commitments and ideas. It is fundamentally unsure of itself and its place in Asia; it does not think it has the guile or power to compete with China; and it continues to lack a long-term perspective, which manifests as confusion and hesitation in responding to developments."

In the meantime, China — whose bilateral trade with Myanmar during the first three quarters of last year hit US$1.435 billion — is also unlikely to be pressed into adopting similar actions.

"While New Delhi deemed the deed necessary, however, China still has a lot of reservation for its long-upheld principle of non-interference in others' domestic affairs. Historically, China has not done much regarding domestic political affairs of the neighbouring states," said Dr Joo, who added that economic interdependence between China and Myanmar has also been growing.

Noting China's broader strategic ambitions in Asia especially the Indian Ocean region, Dr Sagar said: "It will do what it can to support an important regional ally whose resources and geographic position are important to China's long term plans. The Chinese may, as they always do, quietly seek moderation and perhaps cosmetic gestures of reconciliation from the junta, but they are unlikely to upset the current power balance."

New Delhi's actions could however benefit China, which, like India, has invested heavily in Myanmar's promising oil and gas sector in recent years.

"If the international community continues to apply pressure or to step up the pressure, the junta will be able to hold out with Chinese support — and will be driven further into China's arms," Dr Sagar said.

"The junta ought to be cautious of such isolation since the Chinese will use this leverage to their own advantage — as all states do of course," he added.