

## Asian Regional Powers: Junta's Lifelines but Not Change Agents?

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### Introduction: Myanmar and Its Foreign Policy

The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), was formed after a military coup on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1988, in response to a widespread breakdown of government authority. SLORC was reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in November 1997 and the latter currently rules Myanmar by decree.

Myanmar is the second largest country (after Indonesia) among the ten states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to which it was admitted in July 1997. Myanmar is situated at the junction of China, South Asia and Southeast Asia, and it shares land borders with five neighbouring states, as depicted in Table 1:

Table 1

Myanmar's Borders

China (north & north-east)	1,384 miles
India (north-west)	903 miles
Bangladesh (west)	169 miles
Thailand (east & south-east)	1,304 miles
Laos (east)	146 miles

Source: [www.myanmar.com/Union/history.html](http://www.myanmar.com/Union/history.html)

With a population of around 56 million and a small economy, Myanmar is wedged between the two most populous and fastest growing economies in the world – China and India. Myanmar has always been conscious of the geopolitical and demographic realities of bordering these two major Asian powers when formulating its foreign policy. The fact that the country is inhabited by some 135 (officially recognised) indigenous ethnic groups, with many of those groups straddling the porous borders also complicates the policy calculus of Myanmar's foreign relations having to consider the dynamics of the international and regional systems as well as domestic imperatives of economic, political and security issues.

The cornerstone of Myanmar's foreign policy during the first 14 years of independence under the parliamentary regime had been described as "neutralism" (see e.g. Barrington 1958; Johnstone 1963). With the advent of military rule after the coup of March 1962, many observers saw shades of "isolationism" in its "non-aligned" policy stance (see e.g. Gyi 1981: 9-28). However, according to one senior Myanmar diplomat, no single term such as "neutrality, neutralism, non-alignment, isolationism or independence" could "fully express" Myanmar's "basic foreign policy" up to the late 1980s (Han 1988: 19). On the other hand, Myanmar's foreign policy has been summarised by its current practitioners as "independent" and "non-aligned" (in the Cold War context) up to 1971 and as "independent" and "active" thereafter. As such, "Myanmar will not align with any bloc on international issues except to consistently stand on the side that is right" while it "actively participates in activities for world peace; opposes war, imperialism and colonialism; and maintains friendly relations with all countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Myanmar)." Nevertheless, Myanmar's economic and political relations with the two major Asian powers have grown considerably in the last 15 years in an unprecedented manner resulting in a convergence of national interests in the respective relationships and a competition of sorts between China and India over Myanmar's natural resources has developed. In fact, from the beginning of the military's rule in 1988, China has been increasingly involved in Myanmar's economic and military development. Moreover, China has turned out to be a potent shield against Western punitive measures and a counterpoise to international pressures for political liberalisation. Similarly, India

has assumed a significant role in supporting the military regime through expansion of trade, investment and development assistance since the mid 1990s. The following sections will elaborate on Myanmar's evolving relationship with each of these two major Asian powers.

### **Myanmar – China Relations since Independence**

After Myanmar regained its independence in 1948, it has welcomed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC; hereafter China) in 1949. From Myanmar's perspective, it seemed that China had always regarded Myanmar as "essential" to its security and the latter "stands high in the degree of importance China attaches to its peripheral areas (Han 1988: 62)". For the last five decades, the Sino-Myanmar relationship has been premised upon the five principles of peaceful co-existence, as agreed upon by Myanmar, China and India in 1954, which constitutes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs):

- Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty;
- To abide by mutual non-aggression;
- Non-interference in each other's internal affairs;
- Respect for mutual equality and to work for mutual benefit;
- Peaceful co-existence

Moreover, the bilateral relationship between Myanmar and China is greatly enhanced by personal diplomacy exercised by leaders of both countries. This practice was launched by Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Myanmar in June 1954 and Premier U Nu's return visit to China in November that year.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This led to a total of nine visits by Zhou Enlai and twelve visits by U Ne Win who was Myanmar's 'paramount' leader for 26 years following the coup of 1962.

However, despite the mutual acceptance of the ideals of peaceful coexistence (purported to be the foundation of Myanmar's foreign policy) and personal friendship between leaders of both countries, Sino-Myanmar relations underwent a series of ups and downs since June 1950 when diplomatic relations were formally established between the two states.

Myanmar's leaders repeatedly emphasised its strict neutrality in its policy towards the United States and Soviet Union while attempting to cultivate personal friendship with China's leaders and lobbying hard to amicably resolve the border issue with China (see Johnstone 1963: 158-197; U Nu 1976: 236-242, 246, 252-264). Thus, a cordial relationship known as *paukphaw* (Myanmar word for sibling or brotherly) relationship was established between the two countries in the mid-1950s on the strength of personal rapport between the top leaders. The Revolutionary Council (RC) that came to power in March 1962 through a military coup continued to enjoy friendly relations with China for half a decade.

However, the issue of China's support for the mainstream and underground communists dogged bilateral relations for some four decades since the Burma Communist Party (BCP) chose armed struggle as a route to power in March 1948. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the government embraced the BCP and provided moral, material, financial, organisational and ideological support, albeit in a low profile manner, while the mainstream communists were assisted through Chinese diplomatic channels and the extensive overseas Chinese network. Furthermore, when Mao's "Cultural Revolution" was exported to Myanmar's overseas Chinese community in mid-1967, the authority defying Red Guard tactics of the overseas Chinese led to the detention of hundreds of Chinese activists, followed by violent riots in the capital city. The riots resulted in huge losses of Chinese lives and property. Tensions escalated and huge demonstrations involving many indignant Chinese were orchestrated in Beijing, Shanghai and Kunming. Subsequently, Myanmar recalled its ambassador and students from China, while Chinese technicians working on technical assistance projects were expelled from Myanmar. China

unleashed a vociferous media war against Myanmar and bilateral relations reached the lowest point of all time.

As a consequence of the rupture brought about by the so-called “1967 Affair” China introduced the dual tack or “two pronged” approach towards bilateral relations by “downplaying the state-to-state relations (...) in favour of party-to-party relations with the BCP” (quoted in Myoe 1999: 223). Covert actions that substantially increased the BCP’s material, financial and human resources augmented China’s overt assistance. As a result, the BCP was able to establish a ‘liberated area’ east of the Thanlwin (Salween) river and launched a number of intense (though unsuccessful) offensives against Myanmar towns and positions on the West side of the river.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the RC government led by General Ne Win, made many overtures to ‘normalise’ relations with China. Diplomatic relations were fully re-established in March 1971, and the official visit of General Ne Win to Beijing in August 1971 at the invitation of Premier Zhou Enlai formalised the normalisation of state-to-state relations in spite of the continued Chinese dual track policy.

The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government of the one party state (the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma instituted in March 1974), also tried to enhance the ties between the two countries by engaging in personal diplomacy, resulting in a communiqué in which China reaffirmed the principles of peaceful coexistence and promised to refrain from aggression (Liang 1990: 225-231). After Mao’s death, the tempo of Chinese assistance to the BCP slackened and the visit of deputy premier Deng Xiaoping to Myanmar in January 1978 signalled the elevation of state-to-state relations to a higher level of importance in bilateral relations. After Deng’s Yangon visit, the VOPB was apparently compelled to relocate on the Myanmar side of the border (Ball 1998: 114). The subsequent rise of the pragmatic Deng to the position of ‘paramount leader’ paved the way for rapprochement, and bilateral relations steadily improved during the

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<sup>2</sup> For details, see Lintner, Bertil 1990. *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)* Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, passim. Ball, Desmond. 1998. *Burma’s Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from 1941 to Cyber Warfare*. Bangkok: White Lotus: 113, 232-233 and, Maung Aung Myoe.1999. *The Counterinsurgency in Myanmar: The Government’s Response to the Burma Communist Party*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Canberra: Australian National University: 225-231.

second half of the 1980s. After 1985, the Chinese Communist Party, for all practical purposes, appeared to have withdrawn its active support of the BCP.

Bilateral relations between Myanmar and China improved rapidly within a year after SLORC was established. The subsequent unravelling of the BCP command structure and the rapid disintegration of the organisation that was precipitated by the armed revolt of the Kokang faction in March 1989 removed the most enduring obstacle to Myanmar-China relations. On the other hand, Western states (United States, Canada, Britain, the Nordic countries, Australia and members of the European Union) as well as Japan (Myanmar's close friend since the 1960s and the most important donor country) withheld official development assistance (ODA) and imposed sanctions and weapon embargos on account of the military's use of force in crushing protest and dissent during the coup and the following weeks that led to an exodus of students and activists into the rebel-held areas in Myanmar's western and eastern borders. Western pressure also kept multilateral lending and aid agencies from catering to Myanmar's developmental needs. China came to Myanmar's defence against Western ostracism and condemnation that remains unabated.

The visit to China of a delegation led by (then) SLORC's number two leader and chief of army in October 1989, Lt. General Than Shwe, was a watershed for Myanmar-China cooperation under the junta that had earlier discarded the socialist system and professed to pursue an 'open door' economic policy. Thereafter, bilateral cooperation expanded considerably in many dimensions (see below) as China became Myanmar's staunchest supporter in many ways. It can be said that China and Myanmar have been enjoying the closest relationship in a long time.

### **International relations and diplomacy**

In the United Nations General Assembly and other international fora such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), Western attempts to condemn and impose

punitive measures on Myanmar on issues of democracy, human rights and forced labour were reputedly attenuated by China's refusal to accept sharp language and concrete measures. These actions could be attributed not only to the close relationship between the two states but also to a convergence of interests between leaders of the two countries in opposing 'Western values' that threaten to interfere with the 'internal affairs' of the respective states. As such, Chinese leaders have repeatedly supported Myanmar's contextual and particularistic interpretation of the aforementioned issues and have argued against the application of universal norms to 'unique' situations like in the case of Myanmar. China and Myanmar also share the view that economic and cultural rights are as important as political rights, and communal rights should override individual rights. China's staunch support for Myanmar on the international front culminated in China's stance against the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) draft resolution, concerning the "Situation in Myanmar", tabled by the United States on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January 2007.

On its part, Myanmar stood by China on the Taiwan issue, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the Hainan island spy plane incident with the United States.<sup>3</sup> Myanmar officials have consistently expressed their appreciation for China's help and constantly rebutted criticisms on the nature of the relationship while denying the existence of Chinese 'influence' on Myanmar's actions. Influential analysts on Myanmar's security seemingly subscribe to the view that the West regards Myanmar as "the weak link in the regional China containment policy" being "advocated by the United States" (Min 1999: 45).

High-level exchanges of leaders and officials (both military and civilian) between the two states have been maintained since Than Shwe's China visit in 1989: including the current

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in response to Lee Teng Hui's "recent statement" on cross-straits relations, Myanmar's foreign ministry issued a press release on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1999 reiterating the country's "full support to China's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty, dignity, and territorial integrity" adding that "Myanmar consistently abides by the 'One China Policy' and recognised Taiwan as an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China" (*New Light of Myanmar* [hereafter *NLM*], July 17, 1999). The foreign ministry's statement issued on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1999 expressed shock and distress on learning about the "bombing" of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by "the NATO forces" and added that "Myanmar deeply deplores this grave incident which is tantamount to violation of the UN Charter and the basic norms of the international law" (*NLM*, May 12, 1999). In the case of the spy plane incident Myanmar's state-owned newspapers prominently carried news and comments relating to China's version of the incident.

SPDC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe (January 1996 and January 2003), Vice-Chairman of SPDC General (now vice-senior general) Maung Aye (October 1996 and June 2000), and Prime Minister Soe Win (February 2006) from the Myanmar side. And from China, President Jiang Zemin (December 2001), Vice Premier Madam Wu Yi (2004) and Vice-Chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress Li Tieying (January 2007). A diplomatic consultation system at the vice-ministerial level was established in 1992, while consulate-general offices, that were closed down in the aftermath of the diplomatic spat in 1967, were restored. Myanmar re-established a consulate-general office in Kunming in September 1993, and China followed suit with re-opening one in Mandalay in August 1994.

### **Military and security cooperation**

Myanmar's practice of observing strict neutrality during the Cold War foreclosed the option of obtaining military aid from the superpowers and their allies and had to rely on its own meagre resources to procure weapons and equipment, which were mainly from the West (Selth 1996: 14-15).

The Western arms embargo prompted the junta to turn to China, and it got a favourable response in the form of relatively modern armaments, ostensibly on favourable terms, allowing the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) to redress the huge shortcoming in conventional war-fighting capacity. The most significant deal with China was in 1990, with China selling to Myanmar, weapons and military equipment worth an estimated value of some USD 1.2 billion. Another agreement with China to supply additional weapons and equipment worth USD 400 million was reported in 1994 (see e.g. Lintner 1994: 1). In addition to selling relatively sophisticated hardware (tanks, supersonic fighters, medium transport aircraft, fast attack boats, missiles, artillery pieces) the Chinese military has been training Myanmar's military both in China and Myanmar while, in all likelihood, providing facilities for production of mines, small arms and ammunition (see e.g. Selth 1997: 10-11).



It is believed that China has provided assistance in constructing military infrastructure and naval facilities but persistent claims that Chinese military personnel are involved in Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) activities or involved in operational tasks have never been substantiated.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Myanmar's modernisation drive to cater for operations that require higher capabilities rather than traditional counter-insurgency warfare was made possible by significant imports from China. With Chinese help, Myanmar has enhanced its military capability in line with the new orientation towards establishing a credible defence of the state against potential external aggression.

According to the Chinese foreign ministry website, “[s]table military ties are maintained between the armed forces of both countries and military leaders of both sides have kept a momentum of exchange of visits”.<sup>5</sup> Luminaries have included: Deputy Chief of General Staff He Qizong, Defence Minister Chi Haotan, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission Zhang Wannian, Chief of General Staff Headquarters, General Fu Quangyou, air force deputy commander as well as regional commanders of Chengdu, Lanzhou, and Yunnan have also visited Myanmar. Representing MAF, besides Commander-in-Chief Senior General Than Shwe, were Deputy Commander-in-Chief General Maung Aye, Chief of Joint Staff, General Thura Shwe Mann and chiefs of navy and air force as well as directors of armour, artillery, signals, medical corps and senior staff officers.

Under the military regime, bilateral cooperation in border security and non-traditional security issues such as narcotics trafficking have also been developed. In fact, the Chinese Minister of Public Security, Jia Chunwang, visited Yangon in January 2001 on a five-day

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<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., “Burma; A Dragon at the Gate”, *Asiaweek*, April 14, 1993: 36; Ashton, William. 1993. Chinese Naval Base: Many Rumors, Few Facts. *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, June-July: 25; Lintner, Bertil. 1994. Burma; Enter the Dragon. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, December 22 : 23 and Ball, Desmond. 1998. *Burma's Military Secrets: Signas Intelligents (SIGINT) from 1941 to Cyber Warfare*. Bangkok: White Lotus 113: 224. These rumours are probably precipitated by hints dropped by ‘hawks’ in the Indian military establishment (see, e.g., Selth, Andrew. 2007. Chinese Whispers: The Great Coco Island Mystery. *Irrawaddy* (online edition), January. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/aviewer.asp?a=6536&z=102>).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/4400/html>.

visit to strengthen cooperation between his ministry and Myanmar's home ministry and anti-narcotic agencies.<sup>6</sup>

### **Trade, aid and investment**

Myanmar's trade with China comprises 'conventional' trading through designated ports and airports, which are subject to normal trade rules and border trading under a more relaxed set of regulations. In fact, Myanmar-China border trade, which was previously illegal, was regularised in August 1988 by the BSPP regime. However, only in November 1988 did it become functional on the authorisation of the military government. Thereafter, "China became a major supplier of Myanmar's consumer products" mainly through border trade. The liberalisation of the economy with the junta's adoption of the "open door policy" was also a boon to both categories of external trade. However, official statistics on bilateral trade are not very reliable due to continued smuggling and under-reporting and official figures "may represent as little as 20 percent of its real value" (Steinberg 2001: 226).

The total value of bilateral trade quadrupled from around USD 314 million in 1989 to USD 1,209 million in 2005, with the annual trade balance in China's favour all along. In fact, the cumulative trade deficit for Myanmar between 1989 and 2005 came to a whopping USD 6.4 billion. It is believed that illegal export of timber, precious stones and other Myanmar commodities, Chinese development assistance and investments could make up the bulk of this shortfall (Myoe 2007).<sup>7</sup> As can be seen from Table 2, exports to China, at over 10 percent, comprised the third largest share of Myanmar's total exports in fiscal year 2005 according to Myanmar official data. Once China starts importing offshore gas from Myanmar towards the end of this decade, it could well become the largest buyer of Myanmar's exports.

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<sup>6</sup> "Myanmar Leader Meets Chinese Public Security Minister", Xinhua, January 17, 2001, Internet posting, *BurmaNet News* (dated January 18, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Data are from Chinese sources.

Table 2

Ranking of Top Five Countries among Major Destinations for Myanmar Exports  
Selected Fiscal Years

Country	2005/06*	2000/01	1990/91
Thailand	1 (38.1)	1 (14.4)	4 (13.1)
India	2 (13.8)	2 (13.4)	2 (17.7)
China	3 (10.3)	4 (9.0)	3 (13.4)
Singapore	4 (7.4)	5 (5.8)	1 (28.6)
Hong Kong	5 (7.2)	[7]	5 (8.4)
USA	negligible	3 (12.5)	negligible

Notes: \* Revised estimates. Figures in parentheses are corresponding shares as a percentage of total exports; and the figure in square brackets is the corresponding rank for a country falling outside the top five.

Sources: *Selected Monthly Economic Indicators (S MEI)*, March 2006; *Statistical Yearbook (SYB) 2004*.

Table 3 shows that imports from China constituted the second largest share of Myanmar's imports in fiscal year 2005 at nearly 24 percent.

Table 3

Ranking of Top Five Countries among Major Suppliers for Myanmar Imports  
Selected Fiscal Years

Country	2005/06*	2000/01	1990/91
Singapore	1 (28.1)	1 (24.2)	5 (9.6)
China	2 (23.6)	4 (12.3)	1 (21.8)
Thailand	3 (12.0)	2 (13.1)	4 (10.0)
Malaysia	4 ( 7.0)	[7]	[6]
Japan	5 (5.3)	5 ( 8.7)	2 (16.3)
Republic of Korea	[6]	3 (12.4)	[7]
USA	[7]	[10]	3 (12.3)

Notes: \* Revised estimates. Figures in parentheses are corresponding shares as a percentage of total imports; and figures in square brackets are corresponding ranks for countries outside of the top five.

Sources: *SMEI*, March 2006; *SYB 2004*.

These figures suggest that trade with China was a highly significant component of Myanmar's foreign trade in recent years. China's quest for secure energy supplies to fuel its relentless economic growth has given Myanmar an opportunity to forge a strategic partnership with China in the energy sector. To this effect, China signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in January 2006, to buy some 6.5 trillion cubic feet of offshore natural gas over 30 years, beginning from 2009. Myanmar also reportedly agreed in March 2007, to supply the entire output of the offshore Shwe gas field in the Bay of Bengal to China (Dutta 2007).

The border trade with Yunnan (China's border province three-fifth the size of Myanmar, with a population of over 42 million) forms the bulk of Myanmar-China trade. Border trade volume rapidly increased to over US\$ 100 million in fiscal year 1991/92 and over US\$ 420 million in 2004/05 from some US\$ 16 million in 1984 (Myint 2000: 121-122). In recent years China had maintained the highest share (over 60 per cent) among the four border-trading countries (others are Bangladesh, India and Thailand). Myanmar, with a trading volume comprising some 15 to 18 percent of Yunnan's total foreign trade, seems to have become an important hinterland for land-locked Yunnan (Myoe 2007: 10, 12).

Not only trade but also labour and services are involved in cross-border economic relations between Myanmar and Yunnan. In border towns like Muse and Lwaigyai, workers from both sides commute across the border to be employed on a daily or long term basis in construction, mining and service sectors. Yunnan has been supplying electricity to Myanmar's border towns like Muse and recently agreed to sell electricity to the Kokang region as well (see Living Color 2002: 19).

Apart from trade, China has been heavily involved in Myanmar's industrial and infrastructure development. With the moratorium on ODA imposed by Western states and Japan as well as Myanmar's traditional multilateral benefactors such as the World Bank and then Asian Development Bank, China apparently stepped into the vacuum to meet Myanmar's attempt to modernise its obsolete industries and rectify and expand its decaying infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> Between 1997 and 2006, China had offered a total of Yuan 200 million in grants, USD 400 million and Yuan 685 million in soft loans, and Yuan 10 million in debt relief to Myanmar and has also become the largest ODA donor country.

For both strategic and economic reasons, Myanmar's military junta had since the early 1990s, embarked upon an ambitious programme of building roads, bridges, dams, hydroelectric schemes, and import-substituting state-owned industries. Severe constraints on human and financial resources, especially technical expertise and scarce foreign

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<sup>8</sup> It was probably not due to pure coincidence that China signed a broad economic and trade cooperation agreement in May 1997 soon after the US imposed sanctions on investment in Myanmar.

exchange had led Myanmar to heavily rely on Chinese expertise and ODA-linked imports of machinery and equipment.<sup>9</sup> Seven out of eight ongoing large (more than 50 megawatts or MW) hydroelectric power projects have Chinese contractors, so have all five completed hydroelectric projects, which have capacities greater than ten MW (Myoe 2007: 25, 39). China has been involved in establishing state-owned enterprises such as sugar and textile factories, plywood plant, cement plant, rice mill, coal-fired power plant, pulp and paper mill, mobile liquefied petroleum gas plants, agriculture equipment plant and other light industrial factories. China has also provided coastal liners, irrigation pumps, construction materials, an auto telephone exchange, and a satellite ground station. Construction of the Yangon-Thanyin Bridge, Mandalay International Airport, and upgrading of roads near the Myanmar-Yunnan border were carried out with Chinese assistance.

Myanmar's private sector, facing technical and financial constraints, also turned to China as a cheaper alternative for machinery and equipment. Some of the ethnic cease-fire groups (officially 17 altogether) that invested heavily in business in the second half of the 1990s, also have ethnic, financial and logistic links with China, and have become important sources for cooperation and partnership with Chinese companies.

China's investment in Myanmar is difficult to assess as much of it has been local or indirect ventures that do not go through the rigorous procedures stipulated by the Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC). According to the MIC figures, only USD 194 million (some USD 163 million in oil and gas) worth of 26 projects from China were approved up to November 2005 (out of a total approval of more than USD 7.5 billion and USD 2.6 billion in the oil and gas sector), ranking only 13<sup>th</sup> among foreign countries. Major investments are in mining (mainly copper and nickel), oil and gas (14 offshore and onshore blocks) and industrial estates (in Thanyin across Yangon and another planned for Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State). The most significant energy project envisaged by

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in August 1998, China announced that it would supply equipment worth USD 250 million for Myanmar's largest hydroelectric power project. In September 2000 an agreement extending USD 120 million credit by the Bank of China for the same project was revealed (<http://www.irrawaddy.org/res/china.html>).

China is the overland pipeline from Kyaukphyu (a port near the Shwe gas field) to Yunnan carrying oil and gas from the Bay of Bengal thereby bypassing the congested Malacca Straits (Myoe 2007: 15-17, 37).

Myanmar has been pushing for the rapid development of its nascent tourist industry with limited success. In that context, China's proximity and its huge and rapidly prospering population is a potential source of tourism growth. Thus far, the economic impact of Chinese tourism has been insignificant.

### **Socio-cultural aspects of relationship**

The close bilateral relationship between Myanmar and China has led to an expanded movement of people between the two countries. Cross-border visits and migration appeared to have risen over the last few years of friendly relations. This has affected the socio-cultural fabric of Myanmar. Border towns exhibit Chinese influence in architecture, *lingua franca*, fashion, music, leisure, entertainment, and currency usage. The Chinese New Year celebrations that had been a low-key family-centred affair for nearly three decades has been accorded public prominence in recent years and Chinese customs and rituals have been openly carried out in social gatherings and wedding celebrations. Chinese newsletters and serial publications have appeared in border towns and the government allowed the publication of two local Chinese newspapers in 1998. Problems of gambling, narcotics abuse, and prostitution with its corollaries such as HIV/AIDS and criminal activities are not unexpected but still strain the social fabric and stretch the resources of government agencies on both sides of the border.<sup>10</sup>

The more controversial issue is the implication of alleged massive Chinese migration following the opening up of Myanmar's economy and its borders by the military junta in

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<sup>10</sup> Personal observations and communications. See also Wain, Barry. 1999. What Recession? Border Town in Myanmar Finds Muse in Commerce. *Asian Wall Street Journal*, June 15 and Porter, Doug J. 1994. *Wheeling and Dealing, HIV/AIDS and Development on the Shan State Borders*. Unpublished research report, October. Canberra, Australian National University.

1989. Since the last national census in 1983, which showed that only 0.7 percent of the population claimed to be Chinese, there had been indications of substantial Chinese influx into Myanmar across the border from Yunnan. There was some evidence that the population of towns near the Myanmar-China border had disproportionately escalated. For example, it was estimated that though the entire population of the Shan State (bordering both China and Thailand) increased by some 16 percent between 1983 and 1993 (just below the national average of 1.9 percent annually), those of (part of) Hopang, Wa region (excluding Hopang) and Muse town had increased by 52, 39, and 164 percentage points respectively during the same period (Porter 1994: 22). Although internal migration due to the ‘pull factor’ of these areas with high economic activities must have been a significant contributing factor, Chinese migration as a demographic factor is also highly plausible and cannot be ruled out.<sup>11</sup> Unverified estimates of the total number of illegal Chinese immigrants over the last two decades suggest that it could be as high as two million (Steinberg 2007).

It has been suggested that “there has been an influx of Chinese from southwest China who do not need visas for border crossing but manage to stay in the country and permeate urban areas”. As a result, “much of the economy has moved into Chinese hands with dire consequences for social unrest”. It was also pointed out that “Mandalay, the seat of Burman [Bamar] culture is said to have 200,000 recently [1990s] arrived Yunnanese Chinese out of a population of one million”. Moreover, the estimate for Chinese migrants into “Northern Burma” ranged from “several hundred thousands to over one million” (Steinberg 2007: 227-228). Again, the extent of unhappiness among the locals over the apparent ‘overbearing’ presence of migrant Chinese in urban and rural Myanmar is unknown but given the highly visible display of wealth and alien culture by migrant Chinese in places like Mandalay and in parts of Shan and Kachin states, there is no doubt that the migrants are a cause for concern on Myanmar’s part.

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, 46 percent (over 2,900) of the population of Lwajjai (a Kachin border town officially established in 1999) was found to be Chinese (Kyaw Yin Myint. 2002. Lwaigyai, Tayoke Myanmar Neigyar Winbuak Myo [Lwaigyai: Entry-point Town at the China Myanmar Border]. *Dhana magazine*, January. Table 1: 39).



China had also contributed to a highly symbolic affirmation of the junta's sponsorship of Buddha Susana in recent years by facilitating the visits of Buddha's Tooth Relic from Beijing (China) in 1994 (20 April – 4 July) and 1996/96 (6 December – 5 March). These two visits engendered much goodwill and amity within the polity towards China, the junta and all the authorities concerned while the military regime exploited its legitimating potential to the fullest (Tekkatho 1996).

On the other hand, Taoism has regained popularity and some of its rituals and beliefs are apparently finding their way into Myanmar spiritual culture; especially among Sino-Myanmars and in business circles, which may give rise to resentment among the puritanical and conservative elements of the native Buddhists.

### **China's impact**

Historically, Myanmar has been the younger sibling in the *paukphaw* relationship with China. Under the present military junta, this 'special' relationship has further developed into the closest ever in history, driven by a convergence of interests under taxing circumstances in their relations with the West.

Myanmar has gained substantially from this relationship both materially and diplomatically. Myanmar's quest for modernising its armed forces would not have been realised without China's help. Myanmar's economy, devoid of Western assistance and hobbled by sanctions, has become rather dependent upon China (Yunnan in particular) and China's moral and symbolic support has not only shielded the Myanmar regime from Western opprobrium and reinforced the military's attempts to legitimize itself with the domestic polity, but also enhanced Myanmar's diplomatic bargaining power in relations with regional states.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The successful use of the "China card" in acquiring favourable treatment by Japan, India and ASEAN states have been the subject of speculation by Myanmar watchers. See e.g., Ang Cheng Guan. 2001. Myanmar: Time for a Unified Approach. *Security Dialogue* 32:4: 467-80 and Malik, Mohan. 2000. Burma's Role in Regional Security. In *Burma Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State*, ed. Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland and Ronald J. May. Adelaide: Crawford House: 241-77.

Many observers of strategic affairs in the Asia-Pacific point out that there have been regional concerns over China's potential strategic reach to the Bay of Bengal and Malacca Straits through its participation in building and maintaining Myanmar's military and transport infrastructure; especially the alleged intelligence sharing and envisaged road, rail and river network connecting Yunnan with northern and western Myanmar (Tasker and Lintner 2000: 26-27; Ball 1998: 219-224; Steinberg 2007: 229-230, 233-234).

Myanmar's closeness to China is seen by some as deviating from its long-standing policy of non-alignment or as a manifestation of Beijing's attempt to draw Myanmar "tightly into its sphere of influence" to "satisfy its own 'great power' ambitions" (Malik 2000: 271). Myanmar has been described as a "de facto Chinese client state", "a virtual Chinese satellite", and "a critical nexus in the China-Indian connection [regional rivalry]" (Myint 2002: 127; Davis 1999a; Steinberg 2007: 226). However, Myanmar authorities have consistently denied any Chinese military presence in Myanmar or establishing a strategic alliance in China's favour. Instead, there are signs that Myanmar is diversifying in weapons purchases, and has been slow in realising the Irrawaddy transport infrastructure network project, supposedly agreed upon as far back as 1997 (e.g. Davis 1999a; Davis 1999b). Moreover, given Myanmar's high regard for self-reliance, independent action and ethnic pride underpinning its "strategic culture", it is unlikely that Myanmar would allow itself to be drawn into China's orbit to the extent that it may be regarded as a "satellite" or "client".<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Myanmar's growing energy sector and the state's industrialisation effort seem to be increasingly dependent upon Chinese assistance and technology. Overall, one must observe that China is regarded by Myanmar as an important and reliable ally in strategic, political and economic terms.

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<sup>13</sup> For an elaboration of Myanmar's strategic culture, see Davis. 1999c. Myanmar: Myanmar-ness and Realism in Historical Perspective. In *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Ken Booth and Russell Trood. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan: 165-81.

## The Indian Connection

Compared to China, India has been rather late in engaging the military regime. This is despite the fact that the leadership of India and Myanmar were quite close in the first few years of the latter's independence and Myanmar was host to a fairly large Indian community that dated back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century under colonial rule (by Britain). The two countries became estranged soon after the military coup of 1962. Myanmar's nationalistic and socialist economic policies measures hit Myanmar's Indian community really hard, as many had no alternative means of livelihood or support. For example, it was reported that over 12,000 Indian business concerns (mainly small retail shops) were nationalised in March 1964 and that over 100,000 Indians were disenfranchised by the nationalisation drive. Reeling from economic disenfranchisement and the abrupt termination of jobs, the migrants left for India and Pakistan in such large numbers that special arrangements had to be made to transport them by air and sea (during the three years from 1964 to 1966, over 117,000 left by sea). Indian sources estimated that around 300,000 left the country during the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> Thereafter, democratic India remained at arms length from its Eastern socialist neighbour ruled by the military elite.<sup>15</sup>

In the aftermath of the 1988 popular uprising and the junta's refusal to hand over power to the National League for Democracy (NLD), the winner of the 1990 elections, India's political leadership aligned itself with the democratic opposition led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose late mother happened to be a former Ambassador to New Delhi. Political refugees fleeing the military regime were also accommodated by New Delhi and India refrained from exploiting Myanmar's economic opening for nearly a decade.

All this changed in the mid 1990s when India discarded the moralistic approach drive by "Nehruvian idealism" towards Myanmar and assumed a pragmatic stance, yielding to the imperatives of geopolitics, economic liberalization and national security interests (Lall

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<sup>14</sup> For details on the Indian community, see e.g. Tin Maung Maung Than. 2006. Myanmar In *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Brij V. Lal. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet: 168-75.

<sup>15</sup> For a summary of the bilateral relationship since the 1950s, see Devare, Sudhir. 2006. *India and Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, chapter 6.

2006: 425). Prompted by the “Look East” policy of the United Front Government, Indian overtures towards Myanmar opened with a border trade agreement that went operational in April 1995. The BJP-led government that followed further pursued the “Eastern Strategy” by engaging Myanmar not only on trade issues but also on border issues, security, infrastructure development and military matters. When the Congress party came to power in 2004, the imperatives of energy security came to the fore with “pipeline diplomacy” assuming centre stage in India’s foreign policy towards Myanmar (Lall 2006: 431-432, 437-439; Devare 2006: 193-199).

Three factors may be broadly identified as reasons for India’s shift in policy towards giving Myanmar the cold shoulder to a warm embrace. They are: 1) the need for secure borders to foster north-eastern regional development, 2) the imperative of regional economic relations with Southeast Asia, 3) countering China’s influence in Myanmar in the regional context (see e.g. Lall 2006: 432-435).

India, like China, pursued personal diplomacy to forge government-to-government and military-to-military relations with Myanmar since 1994 involving ministers of external affairs, home affairs, commerce and energy from both sides and all the three military chiefs (army, navy, and air force). The high points in the diplomatic game were the visit of the junta chair, Senior General Than Shwe, to New Delhi in October 2004 and Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam’s visit in March 2006 to Yangon.

On the other hand, increased bilateral and sub-regional economic interaction<sup>16</sup> and cooperation with Myanmar through trade, aid and investment seems to play an important part in addressing those concerns both as a confidence building measure and an economic sweetener for the Myanmar junta. This will be elaborated further in the following section.

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<sup>16</sup> Sub-regional cooperation is through BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and MGC (Mekong Ganga Cooperation) initiatives (Lall 2006: 433).

## Trade, aid and investment

The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries grew substantially from USD 87 million in fiscal year 1990/91 to USD 323 million in 2001/02, USD 577 million in 2004/05 with India targeting for USD 1 billion in 2006/07.<sup>17</sup> As seen from Table 2 and 3 earlier, India accounted for 13.8 percent of Myanmar's total exports in 2005/06 and ranked second surpassing China (at third place) but did not make the top five in terms of Myanmar's imports. Moreover, according to Myanmar government statistics, India persistently registered a large annual trade deficit with Myanmar throughout the last few years.

Like China, India has also contributed to Myanmar's infrastructure development by providing over USD 100 million worth of credit and some USD 27 million in grants, mainly for transport infrastructure (building and upgrading of roads and railways connecting the adjacent border regions). Indian credit has also been utilized in factories manufacturing electrical equipment and producing industrial gases. India also signed a MOU in October 2004, to develop a 1,200 MW hydroelectric plant at Tamanthi in north-western Myanmar, not far from the Indian border (Devare 2006: 197; Myoe 2007: 28, 36).

The amount of Indian investment in Myanmar approved by the MIC up to September 2006 was only USD 35 million. Though, like the China case (see above), a large amount of investment could have been channelled through the resident Indian business community. Recently, India announced that it would invest some USD 130 million to develop Myanmar's Sittway port in Rakhine State to serve as gateway for India's trade with Southeast Asia.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Lall 2006: 434; and Boot, William. 2007. India aims for \$1 billion trade target with Burma. *Irrawaddy*, February 23, reproduced in *BurmaNet News*, February 23, 2007. However, there are many obstacles in the form of trade restrictions and security concerns as well as in transport, banking and infrastructure and Subhaschandra M. 2007. India traders meet Burmese Ambassador to expedite trade, *Mizzima News*, April 12, reproduced in *BurmaNet News*, April 12, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See India to invest in Myanmar poor", *AFP*, 2 February 2007, reproduced in *BurmaNet News*, 2 February 2007.

## **Military contacts and assistance**

The visit of India's Chief of Army Staff to Myanmar in March 1997 also initiated top level military-to-military relations between India and Myanmar. This was followed by two visits of India's Chief of General Staff in 2000. Myanmar's Army Chief cum Deputy Commander-in-Chief reciprocated these visits in November 2000, and the Chief of Joint Staff followed suit in December 2006. The visits paved the way for Myanmar to mount several operations over the next six years against selected Northeast Indian insurgents groups seeking refuge inside Myanmar (Devare 2006: 193; Myint 2007).

In an apparent return of favour for Myanmar's interdiction of Indian rebel groups and in view of strategic interests, India has recently started to provide military equipment and weapons with promises of further military aid in the future. These reportedly included Russian-designed tanks, artillery pieces and surveillance aircraft, while sales of combat helicopters, naval equipment, radar and electronic equipment, servicing of fighter jets as well as more technical and staff training are on the cards (Oo 2007; Varadarajan 2007; Paung 2007).

## **India's scorecard**

After many years of increasing economic and military engagement, India's original premise for reforging close ties with Myanmar remains relevant except that securing gas supplies from Myanmar has become the foremost economic imperative. The scorecard for progress in those three factors appears mixed. Not much has been achieved in terms of military and security cooperation from Myanmar in securing the border against insurgent groups, drug trafficking and gun running. This is perhaps due to difficult terrain and the Myanmar military's reluctance to launch sustained operations that could incur heavy human and material costs with little direct benefits for the junta. This has inhibited Delhi's plans to build infrastructure and foster trade and investment in the landlocked

northeastern states. Although bilateral trade did grow substantially, the perennial lopsided deficit suffered by India has been far from ideal. The failure to secure long-term gas supplies is a cause for concern and especially so when India lost out to China to secure gas from the Shwe gas field, in which India has a 30 percent stake (ONGC Videsh, a subsidiary of Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, 20 percent; and Gail or Gas authority of India Ltd., 10 percent). As for countering China, India cannot hope to match a rising superpower that has a head start of almost a decade and a large strategic footprint befitting a permanent member of the UNSC (Ramachandran 2007; Fullbrock 2007; Myint 2000; Hindustan Times 2007).

### **Regional Powers and Change in Myanmar: Little Inclination and Limited Influence**

Despite the junta's promise to institute political and economic reforms leading to a democratic regime and a market economy, Myanmar appears to have undergone little change towards those two goals. Politically, there has been a stalemate between the junta and the oppositional democratic movement led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the student activists that were the vanguard of the 1988 uprising. The NLD leader and Nobel Peace laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been under house arrest since mid 2003, and even the junta's seven-step road map, announced in August 2003, remains stuck in the constitution-drafting first stage without any deadline. The economy also shows little sign of structural change and remains shackled by administrative rigidities, burdened by excessive state control, and hobbled by poor governance.

India seems to have no inclination to press for political change and remains committed to the maintenance of the status quo, despite occasional rhetoric about releasing Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, establishing national reconciliation, fostering democracy and offering electoral support in the eventual elections predicated on the conclusion of the junta's road map (Devare 2006: 199, 201; Win 2006). Even if Indian leaders wish to nudge Myanmar towards a liberal pluralistic regime, there is little leverage on their part as India seems to be more dependent on Myanmar for its insatiable energy needs and northeastern border

security than the other way round. Its trade, aid and even military supplies are probably deemed not significant for resource rich Myanmar, and the junta has become increasingly adept at exploiting competitive market demand for scarce commodities in energy, food, agriculture and investment.

On the other hand, China, with its preference for order, stability and continuity, also seems reluctant to push for a drastic change in Myanmar (Xunhua 2007). It is in China's interest to have an authoritarian, rather than a liberal democratic regime as its neighbour. However, its leaders being cognisant of the imperatives of globalisation and conscious of prevailing international trends, probably prefer a predictable gradual change towards constitutional rule in Myanmar rather than the present glacial pace and retrograde motion. Though it is noteworthy that China's Ambassador to Myanmar, Wang Guangya, speaking at the UNSC on 12 January 2007, called upon the Myanmar government "to listen to the call of its own people, learn from the good practice of others and speed up the process of dialogue and reform". A seasoned observer (retired diplomat) noted that the defeated UNSC motion had "been a blessing in disguise (...) allowing the Chinese to give vent in public to their own frustrations about their recalcitrant neighbour" (Tonkin 2007; Smith 2007). If this reading is correct, there is some hope that the Chinese will impress upon the junta to at least speed up on plotting its own road map. China seems to have more leverage than India and has probably been quietly encouraging Myanmar's leaders to undertake wide-ranging economic reforms and speed up the road map process. Recently, the lenient treatment of protestors, former student leaders and frustrated citizens, as well as crackdowns by the Myanmar authorities on corruption and tax evasion, could have been prompted by China's concerns over the overly harsh and repressive political governance and sorry state of economic governance. If that is true, one can assume that there is a distinct possibility that the regional powers may yet transform themselves from the current role of providing lifelines for the junta besieged by Western pressures and public discontent, into agents for incremental change.



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