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Is Naypyidaw setting the agenda in US–China–Burma relations?

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Analysts looking at Myanmar's relations with China tended to fall into three groups. These were broadly defined as the domination school, the partnership school and the rejectionist school. In considering the range of views offered, it was important to bear in mind that Myanmar was not simply a pawn in a game between the major powers, but an actor in its own right, possibly even setting the agenda and pace of developments.

Since 1988, when Burma appeared to abandon its strictly neutral foreign policy and drew closer to China, contacts between the two countries have been watched closely. Bilateral ties have developed and matured, as has analysis of them, which has begun to include consideration of the US's interests and possible role.

Questions as to how Burma's relations with China have changed over the past 25 years, and what factors may have played a role in this process, were highlighted at a conference staged last week by The Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre.¹

1 'Southeast Asian Strategies Towards the Great Powers', Conference Launching the Graduate Research and Development Network on Asian Security (GRADNAS), Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, 7 September 2015, www.gradnas.com/gradnas-launch.

Before the advent of President Thein Sein's reformist government in 2011, Western studies of Burma–China relations fell into three broad schools of thought. There were many areas of agreement, but they were distinguished by some key differences of view. For the sake of argument, they can be called the domination school, the partnership school and the rejectionist school.

The domination school harked back to the great power politics and strategic balances of the Cold War and argued that small, weak and isolated Burma would inevitably succumb to the pressures of its larger neighbour, becoming a pawn in China's bid to achieve world-power status. In the mid 1990s, this school was confidently predicting that, by the turn of the century, Burma would be a 'satellite' or 'client state' of an expansionist China.

To support this view, it cited China's 'stranglehold' over Burma, as exercised through loans, arms sales, trade and political influence, including along their shared border. In these circumstances, it was felt, Burma would have little choice but to conform to China's wishes. As evidence of this trend, the school claimed that Burma was the site of several Chinese military bases.²

The second, or partnership, school broadly accepted the main arguments of the domination school but was much more cautious in its predictions of how and when China would draw Burma into its sphere of influence. This school rejected the idea that China would simply impose its wishes on a weak and reluctant Burma, suggesting instead that the process would be more gradual and develop along the lines of a more even-handed strategic alliance.

The partnership school argued that the bilateral relationship was part of a pattern of expanding Chinese activity around the Indian Ocean, which included Sri Lanka and Pakistan—the 'string of pearls' theory.³ While its members doubted that there were any Chinese bases in Burma, they believed that Beijing wished eventually to establish a permanent military presence there.

2 Andrew Selth, *Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.10 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2007), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/18225/regional-outlook-andrew-selth.pdf [page discontinued].

3 Billy Tea, 'Unstringing China's Strategic Pearls', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 11 March 2011, www.atimes.com/atimes/China/MC11Ad02.html [page discontinued].

The third, or rejectionist, school consisted mainly of scholars with a specialised knowledge of Burma and Sinologists sceptical of China's purportedly expansionist designs. Its arguments consisted of three main points.

1. Its members pointed out that Burma had always been very suspicious of China and only turned to Beijing in 1989 out of dire necessity after it was ostracised by the West and placed under a range of sanctions. This change of policy was adopted reluctantly and by no means represented a permanent shift in Burma's focus or allegiance.
2. The rejectionist school pointed out that China was not as successful in winning Burma's confidence and support as was often reported. Despite their new closeness, Beijing did not always get its own way with Burma's notoriously prickly government.⁴ This school argued that Burma would never agree to host Chinese military bases.
3. While it suited Burma to develop the bilateral relationship, it always had the option of drawing back from Beijing's embrace. China carried such enormous strategic weight that the thought of Naypyidaw being able to resist its advances or reduce its level of engagement seemed far-fetched. Yet, Burma has made a concerted effort to balance its ties to China with links to other states and international organisations.⁵

Despite their differences, most of these early studies were informative and stimulating. However, their authors encountered a range of obstacles that sometimes made balanced and accurate analyses difficult. Since 2011, anyone examining Burma's foreign relations and their implications for the strategic environment has enjoyed certain advantages, of which four stand out.

First, while Burma before 1988 was sadly neglected by scholars and officials, it has since been the focus of close and sustained attention in many countries and routinely attracts the attention of journalists and

4 Fan Hongwei, 'China's "Look South": China–Myanmar Transport Corridor', *Ritsumeikan International Affairs*, Vol.10, 2011, pp.43–66, www.ritsumei.ac.jp/acd/re/k-rsc/ras/04_publications/ria_en/10_04.pdf China's [page discontinued] [now at www.oilseedcrops.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Chinas-Look-South-to-the-Myanmar-China-Transport-Corridor.pdf].

5 Stephen McCarthy, *The Black Sheep of the Family: How Burma Defines its Foreign Relations with ASEAN*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.7 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2006), www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/18234/regional-outlook-volume-7.pdf [page discontinued].

other commentators.⁶ This has generated a more wideranging, rigorous and nuanced public debate about Burma and its security, including its relations with China and the US.⁷

Second, many issues are still poorly understood, but Burma's opening up since 2011 has permitted much greater access to local politicians, analysts and members of the public, most of whom can now speak openly.⁸ Also, more statistics⁹ and documentary sources—both Burmese and Chinese—are available, leading to better-informed and more detailed analyses.¹⁰

Third, it is now possible to discuss Burma more freely than was sometimes the case before 2011, when the activist community was very influential and debates over contentious subjects were dominated by political and moral issues.¹¹ There is still an ideological element to discussions about Burma's relations with China and the US, but strategic analyses tend to be more objective and evidence-based.

Last, this greater awareness and understanding of, and even sympathy for, Burma's fiendishly complex problems has permitted—perhaps even encouraged—Western analysts and commentators to give greater weight to Burma's own concerns and to consider the points of view of all Burmese institutions and actors across the entire political spectrum.

For example, greater weight is being given to Burma's intense nationalism, its historical reluctance to become aligned with other states and Naypyidaw's strong commitment to principles such as national

6 Andrew Selth, 'Burma/Myanmar: Bibliographic Trends', *New Mandala*, 16 February 2015, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/02/16/burmamyanmar-bibliographic-trends/.

7 Jürgen Haacke, *Myanmar: Now a Site for Sino-US Geopolitical Competition?*, IDEAS Reports: Special Reports, edited by Nicholas Kitchen, LSE IDEAS SR015 (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012), eprints.lse.ac.uk/47504/.

8 Nicholas Farrelly and Stephanie Olinga-Shannon, *Establishing Contemporary Chinese Life in Myanmar*, ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia No.15 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2015), sealinguist.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/chinese-life-myanmar.pdf.

9 Andrew Selth, 'Surveying Public Opinion in Burma', *The Interpreter*, 18 December 2014, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/12/18/Surveying-public-opinion-in-Burma.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/surveying-public-opinion-burma].

10 David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern Myanmar-China Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012), www.niaspress.dk/books/modern-china-myanmar-relations.

11 David I. Steinberg, 'Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy Toward Burma/Myanmar', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.29, No.3, 2010, doi.org/10.1177/186810341002900302.

independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹² These factors have been underestimated in quite a few analyses of Burma's foreign relations and place in the region.

Increasingly, Burma is accorded independent agency in debates about the regional strategic environment. Instead of being seen simply as a minor player, or the victim of larger powers, it is being recognised as an important actor in its own right, with specific attitudes, policies, capabilities and resources that influence wider developments.

Indeed, it can be argued that, in some respects, in the evolving three-way relationship between Burma, China and the US, it is not Beijing or Washington that is currently setting the agenda and the pace of developments, but Naypyidaw.

12 Chenyang Li and James Char, *China–Myanmar Relations Since Naypyidaw's Political Transition: How Beijing Can Balance Short-Term Interests and Long-Term Values*, RSIS Working Paper No.288 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 16 March 2015), www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/WP288_150316_China-Myanmar-Relations.pdf.

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