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Editorial

On China–Myanmar Relations

David I. Steinberg

For two decades, the growing relationship between the People's Republic of China and the Myanmar-controlled junta was either ignored or avoided in the United States public discourse. It was not until September 2009 that public attention began to be focused on this issue, when Senator Jim Webb specifically included this question in a senatorial subcommittee meeting on Burma/ Myanmar. The academic literature, however, had been sprinkled with various and important analyses of these important bilateral links, but these did not seem to affect public dialogue. Georgetown University had also been involved in those considerations. In February 2001, it sponsored an international conference in Washington, D.C. on “Burma: Nexus on the Bay of Bengal,” the purpose of which was to demonstrate to the incoming Bush administration the importance of the subject. It seemed, however, to have caused little public administration interest, whatever effect it might have aroused in classified circles. In addition, a link was established between Georgetown University and Xiamen University in Fujian, China, on research on that subject. That association came to fruition with an international conference on China–Myanmar relations at Georgetown University on November 4, 2011, which was related to, but not a preview of, a new volume by professors David I. Steinberg and Fan Hongwei in the spring of 2012.¹

The purpose of the conference was to help clarify bilateral relations that are not only important for both countries, but for the region and beyond. It tried to dispel some popular but inaccurate assumptions and conclusions that simplify what is a complex liaison in which both states have diverse national interests, and which in turn influence regional relations. One hopes that the public dialogue begun in this conference and through this journal will contribute to better understanding of the complex issues that are so vital to the region and the well-being of its peoples.

It was a large, international and open gathering, attended by some 150 persons, and was conducted under Chatham House rules. Although the discussions were thus off the record, some of the participants prepared papers, six of which are included in this special issue of the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*; synopses appear below. The conference report, which

1 David I. Steinberg and Fan Hongwei (2012), *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

ties the papers together with the discussions, is included in this volume and was prepared by Mr. Max Harrington of Georgetown University.

Professor Fan Hongwei explores the historical role of geography in the Sino–Burmese relationship in the context of the Cold War, both before and after the Chinese–American *détente* and rapprochement. He describes Burma’s fear and distrust of China throughout the Cold War, during which it maintained a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, and pursuit of an independent foreign policy. Characterizing China’s threat to Burmese national security as “grave” during its period of exporting revolution, Fan notes that Burma was cowed into deference and that it deliberately avoided antagonising China. He also explores the history of China’s attempts to break out of U.S. encirclement after the Korean War and its successful relationship with Burma as an important buffer state. After the U.S.–China rapprochement in 1972, however, Burma’s geographical significance for Beijing declined. In this context, Burma’s policy of isolation further lessened its strategic relevance for China. Since 1988, however, Burma’s strategic importance to China has been on the rise once again, as it plays a greater role as China’s land bridge to the Indian Ocean and in its energy, security, and expansion of trade and exports.

Professor Robert Sutter posits that Myanmar–China relations have been generally successful from China’s perspective. In spite of growing interdependence, however, with Myanmar valuing the economic and military support as well as political protection provided by China, it has also hedged its bets. Sutter surveys China’s ‘steady gains’ in its relations with Southeast Asian states, but finds that China’s continuing difficulty in finding agreement over disputed territorial claims represents a continuing limitation to China’s goal of advancing its influence in the region. Chinese efforts to assert territorial claims have instead strengthened U.S. military and political cooperation with a number of Southeast Asian states. Meanwhile, Chinese efforts to exclude the U.S. and other outside powers from the East Asia Summit (EAS) grouping floundered. Myanmar’s suspicions of China, stemming from historical experience and noteworthy differences are unlikely to fade soon. Just as China’s Asian neighbours have engaged in active contingency planning, so has Myanmar.

Professor Li Chenyang analyses the China–Myanmar “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” in the framework of China’s diplomacy in the post-Cold War era, concluding that the partnership has no ‘significant negative impact’ on regional relations. China pursues such partnerships with Myanmar and other states to create a “stable” and “harmonious” surrounding environment, itself a “major” prerequisite for China’s peaceful development. Li argues that China has not focused its diplomacy on Myanmar at the

expense of other states; rather, he notes that in fact China established a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” with three other ASEAN states (Vietnam in 2008, Laos in 2009, and Cambodia in 2010) before it did so with Myanmar in May 2011. He argues that the scope and depth of China’s partnerships with these states transcend that of its partnership with Myanmar. He addresses Chinese–Myanmar military cooperation but argues that it is rather un-noteworthy considering that China participates in similar military cooperation with Thailand, that senior Chinese military officials regularly visit other ASEAN states, and that military and security cooperation between Myanmar and India are more extensive than that between Myanmar and China. He also argues that Myanmar’s strong nationalism will prevent China from building a base in Myanmar.

Ms. Yun Sun argues that 2011 has been a year of “great setbacks” for China in its bilateral relationship with Myanmar, an outcome rooted in several strategic post-election misjudgements. The rapid changes in Myanmar’s domestic politics have seriously challenged China’s existing interests in that country: border stability, energy transportation, and economic cooperation, as well as its strategic planning for the future. Following President Thein Sein’s inauguration in March 2011 and the establishment of a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership,” and China sought reciprocation for its long-time diplomatic support in the form of Myanmar’s endorsement of China’s positions on regional multilateral forums, especially in ASEAN on the issue of the South China Sea. A series of events since August have frustrated China’s aspirations, however, including Myanmar’s suspension of the Myitsone dam and the rapid improvement of its relationship with the West. Three strategic misjudgements are behind these frustrations. First, China’s Myanmar policy was rooted in the belief that the elections did not constitute a fundamental change to Myanmar’s politics; it underestimated the ensuing democratic momentum. Second, China mistakenly thought that the U.S. engagement policy begun under President Obama had ended following 2010 elections that Washington pronounced as “neither free nor fair.” Third, China underestimated the anti-Chinese sentiment of Myanmar’s people and overestimated its absolute political and economic influence, leading to a “blind” confidence in China’s Myanmar policy. China’s previous definition of Myanmar as one of China’s “few loyal friends” and the foundation of its strategic blueprint has been fundamentally shaken, and China is recalibrating its expectations regarding future policies.

Dr. Pavin Chachavalpongpun argues that ASEAN’s policy toward Myanmar has been predominantly responsive, dictated by China’s activism in the region. He posits three arguments: first, that the release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, may have been a tactical move to con-

vince ASEAN to award it the 2014 chairmanship and thereby consolidate the legitimacy of the current regime; second, that Thein Sein's suspension of the Myitsone Dam was a strategic move intended to please both domestic and ASEAN constituencies; and third, that Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014 will help justify the organisation's past approach to Burma as well as accelerate the process of community-building. He argues that in spite of the growing interconnectedness between ASEAN and China, ASEAN is locked in a strategic tug-of-war with China over Myanmar. Myanmar has, on multiple occasions, played upon ASEAN's suspicion of China by playing the "China card," as Chachavalpongpun terms it, forcing ASEAN to continually legitimize it through public statements.

Mr. Min Zin argues that since at least the mid 1980s, there has been an observable anti-Chinese attitude among the people of Burma. Such sentiment is not just a transient public opinion. He studies contemporary cultural and media works as found in legally published expressions, so as to exclude any material rejected by the regime's censors. The causes of such sentiment are various: massive Chinese migration and purchases of real estate (especially in Upper Myanmar), Chinese currency inflating costs, and cultural "intrusion." The sentiment extends to the military, as well: Min Zin examines a dozen memoirs of former military generals, and finds that Burma's generals do not trust the Chinese, a legacy of China's interference in Burma's civil war until the 1980s. The public outcry over the Myitsone dam issue, however, was the most significant expression of such sentiment since 1969, when anti-Chinese riots broke out in Burma. The relaxation of media restrictions under the new government has allowed this expression to expand and spread, especially in private weekly journals that are becoming more outspoken and daring in pushing the boundaries of the state's restrictions.

May 22, 2012

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