



# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

---

FAN, Hongwei (2012), China–Burma Geopolitical Relations in the Cold War, in:  
*Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31, 1, 7-27.  
ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

---

Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is an Open Access publication.  
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <[ias@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:ias@giga-hamburg.de)>

For an e-mail alert please register at: <[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which  
includes: Africa Spectrum ● Journal of Current Chinese Affairs ● Journal of Current  
Southeast Asian Affairs ● Journal of Politics in Latin America ●  
<[www.giga-journal-family.org](http://www.giga-journal-family.org)>



# China–Burma Geopolitical Relations in the Cold War

FAN Hongwei

**Abstract:** This paper 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 in the 1970s. It describes Burma’s fear and distrust of China throughout the Cold War, during which it maintained a policy of neutrality and non-alignment. Burma’s geographic location, sandwiched between its giant neighbours India and China, led it to adopt a realist paradigm and pursue an independent foreign policy. Characterizing China’s threat to Burmese national security as “grave” during its period of revolutionary export, the article notes that Burma was cowed into deference and that it deliberately avoided antagonizing China. It also looks at the history of China’s attempts to break out of U.S. encirclement after the Korean War and its successful establishment of 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 closed-door policy of isolation further lessened its strategic importance 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.

■ Manuscript received 12 January 2012; accepted 15 April 2012

**Keywords:** PR China, Burma, cold war, foreign policy, geography

**Prof. Dr. FAN Hongwei** is an associate professor at the Research School of Southeast Asian Studies (Nanyang Yanjiu Yuan), Xiamen University (PR China). His research focuses on Burma/Myanmar issues; Overseas Chinese issues; China-Southeast Asian relations.

E-mail: <fhw@xmu.edu.cn>

## Introduction

Burma sits at an important geostrategic location that connects the Indian subcontinent with China and the Indochina Peninsula. The land has witnessed many military invasions since antiquity, such as by the Indian, Chinese, Thai, British, and Japanese. At critical times, Burma has been a cockpit for rivalry between the colonial powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the superpowers contested there for influence. In the fluid strategic environment of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the rise of China and India, together with the reengagement of the U.S. in the region, its important position is once again attracting attention from analysts and officials (Selth 2001: 5). This paper<sup>1</sup> will explore the role of geographical variables in the Chinese and Burmese foreign policy-shaping each other, and the interaction between geographical settings and perspectives, and Sino–Burmese political relations in the Cold War. It will find the links and causal relationships between political power and geographic space in two different contexts of strong antagonism between China and the United States in 1950–60s and Chinese–American detente and rapprochement in 1970–80s. The two periods before and after 1970 created two geopolitical systems that defined China’s different perceptions on Burma’s geostrategic significance.

## Burma’s China Policy and its Apprehension of China

The impacts of the victory of the Chinese communists over the nationalists in 1949 on the world, notably East Asia were nothing less than those of China’s rising today. Burma was one of the earliest counties exposed to such impacts. On December 16, Burmese Foreign Minister E Maung gave a note to Zhou Enlai that Rangoon “[d]ecided to recognize the People’s Republic of China, and hopes to establish diplomatic relations and exchange diplomatic envoys.” Two days later, Zhou Enlai replied that Beijing agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Rangoon and exchange diplomatic envoys on the premise of Burma breaking relations with the KMT (Kuomintang – Guomindang) government. Burma became the first non-communist country to recognize the PR China (PRC).

According to the memoir of the Indian Ambassador to China (1948 to 1952),

---

1 The author wishes to acknowledge the support of a grant from the Ministry of Education, China, 10YJC770022 and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, 0240-ZK1003.

Indian government recognition of the new Government of China should be conveyed to Peking by the end of the year [1949]. For some reason Burma was anxious that it should be the first State outside the Soviet bloc to recognize the New China and we were approached with a request to wait for a few days in order to give Burma the start. In due course, Burma announced its recognition and we followed in a few days (Panikkar 1981: 68).

Actually, that “some reason” was that Burmese hoped to avert communist Chinese hostility (British Documents 2003: 46) and pleased Beijing. A declassified document of the British Foreign Ministry revealed that the Burmese overestimated the seriousness of Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) threat then. They firmly believed in 1949 that

the Chinese would not hesitate to attack Burma. They would probably advance 150 miles into Burmese territory and occupy almost the entire Kachin state, a very valuable part of Burma where the Burmese Corporation now operates (British Documents 2003: 38).

Burma’s fear and distrust of China, reflected around 1949, didn’t disappear after the establishment of diplomatic relations; it continued throughout the Cold War, although the degree differed at various stages in the two country’s relations. China’s former Ambassador to Myanmar articulated,

when we discussing Burmese foreign policy decision and pursuance, two elements call for special attention: 1. as a small country, Burma’s fear and distrust of the big powers; 2. the geographic location of the country sandwiched in between two powers, India and China.<sup>2</sup>

This viewpoint actually revealed the small country’s mentality in geopolitics.

Throughout the Cold War, Burma adopted a neutralist and non-alignment foreign policy. Burma’s Prime Minister U Nu explained that this policy meant Burma

shall not ally herself with any bloc of countries, shall develop friendly relations with all countries and eliminate estrangement between the two blocs in order to promote world peace.<sup>3</sup>

Many reasons inclined Burma to neutralism in the Cold War, including history, tradition, culture, geographic location and faction politics (Thomson 1957a: 268-270). Burmese perception on its national strength and sensitive

---

2 Interview Chen Baoliu, Beijing, July 14, 2009.

3 “Abstract of Burmese Statesman U Nu’s Speech (10 a.m., October 13, 1955)”, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, File No. 105-00446-04.

geographic location in these factors were primarily responsible for its policy making of neutralism. During the World War II, Burma was a major theatre of operations because of its important geostrategic location. It “suffered more from the war than any other Asiatic country save possibly Japan herself” (Hall 1956: 172). Burmese painful experience during the War that twice brought devastation to the country convinced her of the significance of the nation’s strategic location. Burma believed that it had no capability to defend itself by force but alliance with others would offer it as a possible battlefield. The new independent foreign policy seemed to have been the outcome of geography (Chang 1960: 121). Consequently, U Nu explained that the reason for Burmese neutralism: Burma was located in the sphere of influence of two rival camps; Burma’s military and economic powers were weak; it needed to defend itself (U Nu 1955: 1).

At the end of 1949, U Nu elucidated in a speech:

Our circumstances demand that we follow an independent course and not ally ourselves with any power bloc [...] we must not lay down a Communist programme merely because Chinese Communists are overrunning China and therefore we must adopt a pattern acceptable to them [...] The only political programme which we should pursue is the one which we believe to be the most suitable for our Union whatever course the British, the Americans, the Russians and the Chinese Communists might follow (Thakin Nu 1951: 51-52).

U Nu explained that Burma must “be friendly with all foreign countries. Our tiny nation cannot have effrontery to quarrel with any power” (Thakin Nu 1951: 53);

[a] small, weak nation like ours, howsoever we strengthen our defences, can never successfully defend ourselves alone [...] The explanation is that we are a nation of only 17 million people [...] Take a glance at our geographical position – Thailand in the East, China in the North, India in the West, and stretching southward, Malaya, Singapore and so on. We are hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cactus. We cannot move in an inch (Thakin Nu 1951: 98-102).

U Nu vividly illuminated Burmese perceptions of world politics and its position. Burmese worldview was shaped by a realist paradigm:

states must be self-reliant for survival, while diplomacy and deterrence are the primary instruments for state foreign policy. A balance of power or threat is the basis of stability in world politics (Maung Aung Myoe 2006: 3).

“The special geographical problem which makes neutralism particularly desirable for Burma is the 1,500-mile Sino-Burmese border” (Thomson 1957a: 269). In 1954, Burma’s population and size were 3.2 per cent and 7 per cent of China’s. Burmese apprehension of China was self-evident. In 1954, Sao Shwe Thaik, the head of the upper house of Burmese parliament, said to Zhou Enlai, the visiting Chinese Premier, “Burma is a small country and has to maintain friendly relations with its neighbors.”<sup>4</sup> In December, 1957, during Burmese Vice Prime Ministers U Kyaw Nyein, and U Ba Swe’s visit to Beijing, they said to Mao Tsetung (Mao Zedong), “Burma was, indeed, afraid of China, because Burma is a small country while China is a big one.”<sup>5</sup> Zhou Enlai, when visiting Burma in 1956, publicly expressed his understanding of Rangoon’s apprehension, and stated, “[a] newly founded big country is easy to cause other countries suspicion.”<sup>6</sup>

Burmese historical memory intensified Rangoon’s distrust and worry about China as well. China had invaded Burma in the Chinese Yuan and Qing dynasties. During Prime Minister U Nu’s first trip to China in 1954, he intentionally mentioned this history at the state banquet hosting him. Although he ascribed Chinese invasions not to the Han (ethnic Chinese) nationality but to the expansion of Mongols and Manchus, the foreign warlords (*Xinhua Monthly* 1955), U Nu used history to express Burma’s present anxiety about China. Yet Burma’s first Ambassador to the PRC, U Myint Thein, said that “Han, Manchu, Nationalist, Communist, it makes no difference to the Burmese. A Chinese is a Chinese and to be feared.” U Nu fully accepted this view (Butwell 1963: 177). In 1957, while Burma’s Vice-Prime Minister U Ba Swe visited China, he also told the Chinese, “[o]ur fear is very natural because in history big countries always were buckoes. Burma lies between big powers.”<sup>7</sup>

More critically, the Burmese viewed the relations between the CCP and Burma Communist Party (BCP), Sino–Burma border issue, KMT troops,

---

4 Burmese Government Officials and the Media Responses to Premier Zhou Enlai’s Visit to Burma, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, File No. 105-00259-03.

5 Account of Chairman Mao Tsetung’s Talk with Visiting Burmese Vice Prime Ministers, U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, File No. 105-00339-01(1).

6 All Previous Address Manuscript of Zhou Enlai Visiting Burma (Chinese, English, and Burmese), Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, File No. 203-00085-01(1).

7 Account of Chairman Mao Tsetung’s Talk with Visiting Burmese Vice Prime Ministers, U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, File No. 105-00339-01(1).

and the problem of the overseas Chinese as potential sources of Chinese invasion and subversion. Just as the ICG report said,

Burmese leaders have always watched their giant neighbour [China] with some trepidation. They have been particularly concerned about Chinese intervention in support of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), as well as the more diffuse threat from the country's huge population (*ICG Asia Report 2001*: 19).

The CCP's attitude toward national revolution in other Asian countries caused Burmese acute anxiety and worry. In the meeting of labor unions in Asia and Australia in November, 1949, Liu Shaoqi, China's Vice-President declared that, "[w]e should give all kinds of moral and physical aid to proletariat and labor needing help in the countries reigned by capitalism and imperialism." China should, thus, shoulder the international responsibility to aid them in all capitalist countries, particularly in Asia (*Works of Liu Shaoqi 2005*: 177). Continuing in this vein, in 1950 Liu stated in a CCP document that,

[i]t's the CCP and Chinese people's duty-bound international responsibility, and one of the most important means of consolidating China's revolutionary victory in international circumstances, to use all possible measures to aid the Communist parties and people in the oppressed Asian nations, and struggle for their liberations (*Chronicle of Liu Shaoqi 1996*: 245).

Burma's turbulent situation immediately after its independence due to various insurrections including the BCP aggravated Burmese concern over Chinese "Export of Revolution" and subversion. In 1957, U Nu spoke in Burma's parliament that "[n]ew China's relations with the insurrectional BCP are not clear, but expressed some fraternal care."<sup>8</sup>

1967 witnessed Burmese worry about the BCP problem became a reality. The anti-Chinese riot occurred in Rangoon on June 26, 1967 caused the deterioration of Sino-Burmese relations, which arose from the Chinese students' defiance of the Burmese government ban to wear Mao badges in school. In response, Beijing apparently used the BCP as a lever or counter-measure against the anti-China activities in Burma. After the anti-Chinese riot in 1967, China began to support the BCP openly and provided it with weapons, training, advisers, logistics, etc. According to the CIA's declassified document,

---

8 Burmese Prime Minister U Nu's Speech in the Parliament (abstract), Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, File No. 105-00814-01(1).

the [assistance] the Chinese are providing the insurgents – as of April 1971 – includes, in addition to the weapons mentioned above, ammunition, explosives, tools, clothing and uniforms, medicines, food grains, printed propaganda (including Mao badges) and extra funds (in Burmese currency) (*CLA Intelligence Report* 1971: 78).

In addition, the BCP established hospitals, broadcasting station, and training bases in China. Beijing even permitted the BCP to recruit Chinese ethnic minority peoples living on the Chinese side of the border to serve with the insurgents in Burma. So the BCP with support of China posed a serious threat to Burma’s national security. At the Opening Session of the Fourth Party Seminar on November 6, 1969, Ne Win stated that

[t]he list of insurgents that I have given is far from complete. The most serious situation prevails in the regions which share the border with China [...] Let it suffice to say that from January 1<sup>st</sup> to the end of August this year, there were eight major engagements in that area, and ten which might be classed as minor or medium. It is not our way of doing things to raise a hue and cry every time something serious happened. [But] we have no strength to retaliate.<sup>9</sup>

Rangoon did not shift its neutralism foreign policy and tilted towards U.S. or the Soviet Union because of the worsened bilateral diplomatic relations. Just as Ne Win declared then,

[w]e in Burma are therefore pledged to peace, and more, we shall undertake never to allow any piece of our territory to be used by any force, indigenous, or coming from abroad, as a base or foothold from which aggression may be committed or any trouble made against any of our neighbors. Even though our relations with a neighbor are at [this] juncture embarrassed, we should not restore the short-sighted policy of looking elsewhere for aid in the solving of our problem (ibid.).

Accordingly, despite the grave threat to Burmese national security imposed by China, the Burmese “kept their cool and did not make any provocative attempts to highlight the apparent breach of the five principles of peaceful coexistence” (Tin Maung Maung Than 2003: 192), and still wished to ease the tension between the two countries to protect its sovereignty and national security. For this, a Taiwan scholar analysed that “Burmese government realized this was the unalterable law of nature in geopolitics,” and “Burmese

---

9 Address delivered by General Ne Win, Chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, at the Opening Session of the Fourth Party Seminar on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1969, Burma Socialist Programme Party, 1969, 33-37.



neutrality was based on its national interest. In other words, Burma's national interest rested with the non-antagonism towards China" (Qiao 1996: 83).

During the Cold War, the populous overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia were regarded as a potential "fifth column." Although the population of the overseas Chinese in Burma was not large compared with their counterparts in other Southeast Asian states, Rangoon still worried about Beijing would subvert it or at least interfere in Burma's internal affairs in virtue of them.

At the beginning of 1950, some KMT troops retreated into the North-east Burma. Soon after, these troops united to found the "Yunnan Anti-Communist Salvation Army." In the early 1950s, it launched many attacks and raids on Yunnan Province. In the first half of 1952 alone, KMT troops attacked Tengchong, Longling, and Zhenkang, three counties neighbouring Burma, over sixty times, and killed over one hundred CCP cadres and inhabitants (*Development of Contemporary China's Military* 1989: 373). Furthermore, they attempted to enkindle border conflict, and enflame both countries' military. According to a "top secret" document of the Burma KMT troops captured by Burma's Ministry of Information,

[f]rom now on you and your men must make all attempts to attack the weak outpost of the Burmese troops in the disguise that you are Mao's Communist bandits and also propagate that Mao's Communist bandits have invaded Burma [...] Therefore to make our plans successful, we must create trouble between these two governments (*Kuomintang Aggression against Burma* 1953: 159).

As a result, Burma feared China would invade Burma and occupy the unsettled border areas under the guise of the elimination of the KMT troops. They also feared that China would misunderstand that the Burmese were intentionally providing shelter to the KMT army and supporting Taiwan and the U.S. anti-communist policy, so that Beijing would resort to a strong hostile policy toward Burma.

The British historian D. G. E. Hall argued that "[i]ndependence is a word that has a very special meaning to them; it represents the supreme end of their policy, domestic as well as foreign" (Hall 1964: 231). In the midst of the Cold War, Burma was more cautious and prudent in maintaining its independence and national security compared with many other countries. China's reaction after the Rangoon events further strengthened the Burmese conviction of the need for amicability with China. "Burma's non-alignment is primarily to assure China of non-aggression from Burmese soil and to avoid destruction of Burma in another war" (Chang 1960: 122; for other similar arguments, see Thomson 1957b: 336; Rose 1963: 24; Johnstone 1963: 164; Trager 1964: 61). "Fear of antagonizing China has also been at least partially responsible for Burma's policy of neutralism" (Thomson 1957b:

336. For other similar arguments, see Rose 1963: 24; Johnstone 1963: 164; Trager 1964: 61). In the Cold War, the tone of Burma's China policy was to keep on good terms with China out of consideration of national security.

## Burma: The Gap in the Encirclement Campaigns against China

One of Beijing's fundamental foreign policy objectives towards its periphery, prior to China's foreign policy shift to radicalism in the mid-1960s Cultural Revolution, was to construct "collective peace and security," expand "peaceful regions" in Asia, and recruit Burma into its united front as a buffer in confrontation with the West – and even open a gap in American containment and isolation of China.

Before the formation of PRC, its foreign policies and principles had been established by the leaders of CCP based on Chinese revolutionary theory, experience in the civil war, and the obvious antagonisms between the two world camps. The CCP designed its relations with Asian countries and the world from its revolutionary viewpoint, classifying different countries by their ideological leanings. All countries beyond the socialist camp were imperialist or controlled by imperialist or anti-revolutionary forces (Niu 1999). On June 16, 1950, Zhou Enlai articulated in his report for the second session of the first National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that "the antagonism between two blocs is as plain as a pikestaff now, and there is absolutely no space for neutralism between them" (*Works of Zhou Enlai* 2008: 489). As a result, Burmese neutralism and non-alignment foreign policy could not win the trust of Beijing. Beijing believed, "[w]hether in economic, military, or political dimensions, Burma's nature has not been changed; it still is a typical colonial country" even after its independence. The President of Burma, Sao Shwe Thaik, was "a big feudal lord," and Prime Minister, U Nu was "an extremely vicious, and a notorious Burmese traitor." Burma's government was "the representative of big landlords and big bourgeoisie," and "the loyal lackey of imperialism–Burma's reactionary circles of big landlords and big compradors" (*People's Daily* 1948). On September 3, 1952, when Zhou Enlai visited Moscow and talked with Stalin, he stated that the "Burmese government concealed its real position on China, but it actually pursued the policy of anti-China following the UK and U.S.' lead."<sup>10</sup>

---

10 Minutes of Conversation between I. V. Stalin and Zhou Enlai, APRF, f. 45, op. 1, d. 329, ll. 75-87.

However, both domestic needs and the international environment in the early 1950s impelled Beijing to alter its black and white, with us or against us, conception of world politics, and to begin to stress national interests in its foreign policy.

In the development of foreign relations Chinese policy shifted gradually away from attempting to drive Western influence out of Asia by direct confrontation or unequivocal support for revolutionary wars, and toward efforts to win Asian neighbors away from alliances with the West through offers of peaceful coexistence (Van Ness 1970: 12).

In the early 1950s, U.S. established military bases in East Asia, increased U.S. troops numbers in the countries around China, signing a series of military treaties with China's neighbouring countries, and forming what was perceived in China as military encirclement against that country. These instruments included the Thailand–U.S. Military Assistance Agreement (October 17, 1950), the Philippines–U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty (August 30, 1951), the Korea–U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty (October 1, 1953), the U.S.–Taiwan Mutual Defense Treaty (December 2, 1954), the U.S.–Japan Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement (March 8, 1954), and the Manila Pact (September 8, 1954). Zhou Enlai delivered the “Report on the Work of the Government at the First Session of the First National People’s Congress” on September 23, 1954, in which he stated:

[i]n order to build a prosperous socialist industrialized country, we need a peaceful environment and a peaceful world. Therefore, we should strengthen and develop unity and collaboration with the Soviet Union as well as other socialist countries, and attach importance to the peaceful collaboration and the promotion of economic and cultural ties with all countries, particularly Southeast Asian and other neighboring countries (Song and Li 1997: 159).

Beijing accordingly changed its attitude towards neutral countries and made efforts to break out of U.S. encirclement around 1954. These efforts became the main mission of China's diplomacy after the Korean War ceasefire.

In 1954, China's new foreign policy was formed, focusing on breaking through U.S.'s containment and encirclement, uniting all countries that wished to maintain peace with China, and creating a peaceful, stable regional environment for its domestic economic development and recovery. The new policy was characterized by building “collective peace and security” and expanding a “peaceful area” in order to form a safe buffer zone between China and the West.

This new course in Beijing's foreign policy was apparently directed by three major considerations: first, the enhancement of China's national secu-

rity; second, the need for diplomatic flexibility; and third, Beijing’s quest for major power status (Show 1972: 37).

“To achieve these ends Beijing would respect the concept of non-alignment as a legitimate approach to Cold War issues” (Shao 1979: 324). On July 8, 1954, Mao Tsetung gave 11 instructions on China’s diplomacy which included: “[b]egin to establish a Southeast Asian peace zone, effect and develop cooperation in the zone, and sign non-aggression pacts or collective peace treaties”; “unite all peaceful forces (including government), isolate and split up U.S. [interests]”; “International Peace and United Front”, etc. (*Biography: Mao Tsetung* 2003: 562-563). In August, 1954, Zhou Enlai spoke at the 33<sup>rd</sup> session of the central government that it was necessary to insist on and carry out the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”.

We believe [...] to establish more and broader peace zone in Asia so that these areas won’t become the hothouse where the U.S. invader group wages war and organizes military groups. This central government will strive for Asian collective peace in the light of this guideline (PRC Foreign Ministry Bureau of Archives 2006: 495).

Against the above-mentioned backdrop, Zhou and U Nu visited each other for the first time in 1954, jointly advocated the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, and took them as the “rudder of China–Burma relations” (*Xinbua Monthly* 1954) Thereafter, the frequent exchange of visits and contacts occurred to the two leaderships and both gradually maintained cordial ties until 1967. Given the situation of China–Burma relations prior to 1967, China’s Burma policy proved successful. Beijing not only established Burma as an important buffer state between China and the West and the later the Soviet Union, but also partly broke out of U.S. encirclement by means of Burmese geographic location. With the encirclement of China by the West, Burma was the only friendly non-Communist territory through which the Chinese Communists physically could go abroad, and through which delegations and official missions from Africa, Latin America and the rest of Asia to China could travel with ease (Johnstone 1963: 199). Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill remarked that Burma was a gap in the encirclement campaigns against China.<sup>11</sup>

In Burma’s China policy, Rangoon was quite conscious of the implication and significance of its geographic location for Beijing. During U Nu’s first visit to Beijing in 1954, he made it clear to the Chinese that

---

11 “Talk Record of Chairman Mao Tsetung Met Burmese Deputy Premier U Ba Swe and U Kywa Nyein”, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, No. 105-00339-01(1).

although Burma has no ability to interfere in China's internal affairs by itself, it is able to get China into a mess if it allows itself to be an underling of China's enemies [...] We could provide some vital loci which could be used as navy and air force strategic bases to launch attacks on PRC. We could also facilitate Chinese enemy's espionage and subversion in China (*Xinhua Monthly* 1955: 97).

Nevertheless, U Nu gave Beijing his promises regarding those possibilities that

through fair and foul, we by no means will become the underling of any country [...] We in no case will do anything to jeopardize peace. [Burma] at no time accepts unilateral aid which [might] lead any party's suspicion of the two countries, and even never had thoughts of accepting such aid. We won't adopt any demarche causing China's apprehension at the instigation of other some county (*Xinhua Monthly* 1955: 97-98).

Consequently, Beijing, on its part, "had to consider the possibility that Burma could be used by extra-regional powers as a base from which to launch an attack on its territory" (*ICG Asia Report* 2001: 19). In 1956, Zhou Enlai told Burmese Ambassador to China, U Hla Maung that "if Burma joins Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, if China has the intention of invading Burma, our two countries won't remain friendly relations with each other."<sup>12</sup>

In December, 1957, Burmese Vice Prime Minister U Kyaw Nyein gave Mao Tsetung his pledge that "China would not worry about them at all [...] Burma should by no means join any military bloc and at no time should become the base of any imperialist power."<sup>13</sup> In 1960, Ne Win, the Chief of the General Staff of the Tatmadaw, made similar promises to the Chinese in Beijing.<sup>14</sup> Burma had been adhering to this position in the Cold War, even if after the rupture of bilateral relations in 1967. Although Burmese friendly policy and attitudes towards China was grounded largely on its national security and interests, Chinese efforts to assuage Rangoon's fears and suspicion were also helpful to shape Burma's China policy.

---

12 Summary Talk of Premier Zhou Enlai and Burmese Ambassador to China U Hla Maung (August 25, 1956), Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, File No. 105-00307-03(1).

13 Account of Chairman Mao Tsetung's Talk with Visiting Burmese Vice Prime Ministers, U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nyein, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, File No. 105-00339-01(1).

14 Reception to State Guests (Ne Win and His Wife's Actions and Responses), Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, File No. 204-00119-28(1).

As mentioned above, some major problems faced Sino–Burmese relations, which caused Burmese suspicions on whether the Chinese would adhere to the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”. In this regard, Beijing made some efforts to allay Rangoon’s doubts and fears. In 1954, Zhou Enlai claimed in Rangoon that “[r]evolution cannot be exported. If so, there is no chance of success. Communist parties of various countries win out only by themselves” (*Chronicle of Zhou Enlai* 1997: 393). At the same time, this position was specially stressed in the joint statement issued by the two countries’ premiers during Zhou’s first visit to Rangoon. Soon after Zhou’s declaration, Beijing made a more explicit commitment not to subvert Burma. Mao Tsetung told U Nu in Beijing in December that China would not interfere in Burmese internal affairs and invade Burma (*Works of Mao Tsetung* 1999: 374–376). Mao and Zhou’s discourses were not hollow. The BCP rebels were lacking ammunition and supplies notwithstanding they were accomplished in bushfighting, and they obviously had not received massive aid from the CCP, according to the CIA’s report (Shen and Yang 2009: 299). China’s material supports to the BCP rebellions were not significant before the rift in Burma–China relations in 1967 (Shen and Yang 2009: 529). FG, the Vice Chairman of BCP also verified that the massive material supports from the CCP started after the break of relations in 1967.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding the overseas Chinese issue, China declared not to use the overseas Chinese to interfere in Burmese internal affairs and subvert Burmese state power; not recognize dual citizenship and encourage the overseas Chinese who were born in Burma and were willing to stay there to obtain Burmese nationality; order them to abide by Burmese law and not engage in local political activities.

Beijing adopted a restrained attitude toward the problem of the KMT, which the Burmese appreciated. In 1957, U Nu spoke out in parliament:

I have to appreciate the PRC’s attitude and sincerity. When KMT troops allegedly attacked Yunnan, China could have made troubles for us if it had wanted to do so. On the contrary, China took a sincere and patient attitude towards us, so I give my thanks to the PRC.<sup>16</sup>

The two countries succeeded in solving boundary dispute in 1960–61 and thus pushed bilateral relations to a new high. Both signed Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression in 1960, which stipulated that two parties

---

15 Interview Vice Chairman of BCP, FG, February 17, 2005, Xiamen.

16 The Summary of Burmese Premier U Nu’s Address before the Congress. Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, File No. 105-00814-01(1).

should not invade each other and take part in any military alliance directed against the other party.<sup>17</sup>

After Ne Win came to power in 1962, he advocated and carried out the Burmese Way to Socialism. Although Beijing regarded it as bureaucratic capitalism with outward appearances of socialism,<sup>18</sup> and a large number of overseas Chinese schools, newspapers and stores were nationalized, it still supported Ne Win's regime and maintained good relations with Rangoon.

The economic concept of marginal utility applied to the geopolitics.

When one country is friendly and bring benefits to the other, the benefits will multiply due to their adjacency; likewise, when one country is hostile to the other and jeopardizes its interests, the harm will redouble because of the proximity (Ye 1998: 16).

The marginal utility of China–Burma geopolitical relations was obvious. Beijing not only ensured the security of Southwest China frontier but also made Burma serve as the physical avenue to the outside world by means of the latter's geographic location.

During the 1950s and 1960s, China considered itself strategically encircled by the West. Although China and the Soviet Union launched air service between Beijing and Irkutsk in 1955, the Beijing–Moscow course flight plan failed because of the lack of airline capacity in China. The launch of the Beijing–Kunming–Rangoon route in 1956 partly improved the situation. In 1950s, “China communicated with the outside largely through the two routes of Beijing–Irkutsk and Kunming–Rangoon” (Yao 1998: 324). In Burma, China “found a new outlet to the world and a potential position of strength for activity elsewhere in Asia” (Johnstone 1963: 199). Behind the Chinese frequent visits to Rangoon between 1954 and 1966, in addition to warm bilateral ties, the function of Rangoon corridor objectively facilitated and helped to bring about Chinese leaders' additional arrival in Burma. For example, Burma invited Chinese leaders to drop in on Rangoon when they visited other countries. On November 26, 1964, Burmese foreign ministry informed China's embassy in Rangoon that Chinese special planes often had a stopover in Rangoon late at night and this brought about inconvenience to Burmese side so the Burmese hoped China to adjust the schedule of its

---

17 Account of Our National Leadership's Talk with the Visiting Burmese Prime Minister, Ne Win and Joint Communiqué of the Two Governments, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, File No. 204-00113-03(1).

18 Perspectives of Chinese Embassy to Burma on Burmese Political Situation. Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, File No. 105-01225-01.



transit in the capital.<sup>19</sup> Actually, the Burmese also was bothered by the same situation when foreign leaders visited Beijing via Rangoon. The example indicated that Rangoon corridor functioned effectively.

## Decline of Burmese Geo-strategic Status in Chinese Diplomacy

The broken relations between China and Burma due to the anti-Chinese riots in 1967 were renormalized in 1971. Compared with the bilateral relations before 1967, their ties in 1970s and 1980s were characterized by China's new perception on Burmese geographic location. During this period, the significance of Burmese geographic location for Beijing and its status in Chinese diplomacy declined. In 1950s and 1960s, whether as the outlet to the world or as the buffer state between China and the western camp, Burma could not occupy a central position in Chinese diplomacy without two preconditions: the importance of Burma increased because of the confrontation between China and the West, led by the United States, and the U.S.'s policy of containment threatening China's security. At the same time, Burma in that period had adopted a neutralist and non-alignment policy and possessed geopolitical significance to China.

Both Beijing and Washington attached strategic importance to Burma in their respective diplomacy towards Southeast Asia. For example, when Beijing still decided to “firmly support Ne Win” in 1962 although China ideologically disfavoured Burmese Socialism, it explained the reason was that “Burma's geostrategic position is of great importance and the changes of Burmese domestic situation have significant influence on us.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Burma occupied an important position in American Southeast Asia policy. Washington believed that

[i]f Burma and Indochina can be held against communism, we can probably hold all of Southeast Asia. If either Burma or Indochina falls, Siam would probably follow; and Southeast Asia would be practically defenseless against the onrush of Communism.<sup>21</sup>

- 
- 19 Burmese Foreign Ministry Asked Our Special Planes Not to Transit in Rangoon Late at Night, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, File No. 117-01417-06.
- 20 Foreign Ministry's Reply to Chinese Embassy to Burma on 1963 Burmese Politics Review and 1964 Work Programming, Archive of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, File No. 105-01864-01.
- 21 “Policy Statement Prepared in the Department of State”, June 16, 1950, *FRUS*, Vol. VI, East Asia and the Pacific, 244.



Strategically a non-communist Burma is of utmost importance to the security of the Southeast Asian region as a whole and especially to our SEATO allies-Pakistan and Thailand, which flank Burma.<sup>22</sup>

The first precondition disappeared after the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations in 1970s and the value of Burma therefore declined. The 1972 U.S.-China rapprochement caused great changes in Asian geopolitics. The U.S. stopped the encirclement of China and in succession American Asian allies established relations with China. During 1972 and 1975, one after another, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand established diplomatic relations with China. Compared with the 1950s and 1960s, the security environment of China's southern and eastern border was greatly improved and Burma's strategic value as a buffer state for China was thereby lessened. The radical changes of the international situation and Asian geopolitics deprived the Rangoon route of special significance for China. Of course, it was impossible for China to ignore Burma in this period because of Soviet and Vietnamese expansions in Indochina, but the threat caused by the expansion was less serious than that of the western camp.

In addition, China's adjusted foreign policy and the structure of its foreign relations heavily influenced the decline of Burmese importance. Starting from the late 1960s and early 1970s, Beijing gradually rectified its radical foreign policy and returned to a realist policy, although China had not completely deserted its belief of world revolution at that time. The reorientation of China's foreign policy and Sino-U.S. rapprochement greatly decreased Beijing's isolation. Between 1970 and 1972 alone, China renormalized or improved diplomatic relations with Korea, Yugoslavia, Kenya, Tunisia, Burundi, Ceylon, and Ghana, and established diplomatic relations with 23 countries. In 1975, China formally recognized ASEAN as a regional organization and favoured the ASEAN-proposed establishment of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia. China

progressively disassociated itself from the communist-led insurgencies in Southeast Asia because of a perceived need to secure ASEAN support on the Indochina question, thus alleviating the suspicion and apprehension of Southeast Asian countries caused by Chinese ties with insurgent communist parties. Beijing hoped to reassure these countries that China had no covert expansionist ambitions towards them and that its intentions with respect to Kampuchea are similarly benign (Heaton 1982: 781).

---

22 "Outline Plan by the Operations Coordinating Board", 2.27, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955-1957, Vol. XXII, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989, 90.

After the third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of CCP in 1978, China changed its perception that an imminent world war was unavoidable, and turned to take an optimistic view about the international situation. Beijing defined “peace” and “development” as the two major themes of the contemporary world, which were the foundation stone for China’s domestic and foreign policies (*People’s Daily* 1984). China also abandoned the ideal of world revolution and focused on economic modernization.

Of major importance now are China’s economic needs and the political changes that will ensure order and security in the world, overcome the backwardness of the country, and fulfil its plans for modernization. The necessity to create favourable external conditions in order to realize its program of economic growth made the Chinese leadership change its view of Soviet–American relations (Deliusin 1991: 58–59).

China abandoned the policy of the international united front against the Soviets framed in the 1970s and pursued nonalignment with all great powers. The 12<sup>th</sup> CCP National Congress attempted to outline a new policy agenda for the 1980s. In September 1982, Deng Xiaoping proposed at the opening ceremony of the Congress that China faced three major tasks in the 1980s: national reunification, anti-hegemonism, and maintenance of world peace. “Economic construction is at the core of the three tasks as it is the basis for solution of China’s external and domestic problems” (*Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* 1993: 3). The core task determined that China’s foreign affairs centred on raising foreign resources to suit the needs of modernization, and China’s diplomacy towards developed countries weighed heavily. China hungered for greater capital and advanced technologies.

When China increasingly de-ideologised foreign policy and didn’t perceive the outside world through some ideological lens in the 1980s, Burma, by contrast, still pursued a policy of autarky-economic isolation from the world. The catastrophic Burmese Way to Socialism had turned Burma into one of the world’s most impoverished countries. Consequently, the isolated and economically backward Burma, which had adopted a closed door policy, was not important to China and failed to arouse Beijing’s special attention and interests like in 1950–60s.

## Conclusion

The Cold War featured periods of relative calm confrontation and some real wars, sometimes called “proxy wars” between two blocs led by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The evaluation of the U.S.–USSR relationship during the post-1945 years is configured by two slogans: the Cold War and Yalta. The Cold War symbolized total antagonism. Yalta, to the contrary, symbolized

mutual accommodation (or for some a “sell-out” by the U.S. to the USSR) (Wallerstein 1996: 216).

The Cold War was “cold” in Europe, but it was quite “hot” in Asia. It was “cold” in that neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union used its military in combat against the other at any time. The Yalta agreement was an agreement that there would be no violence, and that neither side would attempt to change the frontiers, primarily in Europe, that were established in 1945 (Wallerstein 2010: 19-20). Some major hot wars in Asia broke out around China, such as Korea peninsula, Taiwan and Indochina. These hot wars meant the implication of Cold War for China primarily was national security. In the Cold War, Beijing’s diplomacy centred on U.S. and the Soviet Union. The China–U.S.–Soviet Union triangular ties dominated the relations between China and its peripheral countries.

Sino–Burmese relations were one of the highlights in Beijing’s peripheral diplomacy before 1967 because Rangoon played an important role in China’s pursuit of national security. “Both geographical settings and political processes are dynamic, and each influences and is influenced by the other” (Cohen 2009: 12). For China, Burma gradually lost the function of buffer state and the physical avenue to the region beyond after 1972. The strategic significance of Burma to China was accordingly reduced with the changes in the international situation and Asian geopolitics.

The 1988 nation-wide uprising against the Ne Win regime, the military coup and the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 caused upheavals of domestic politics and foreign relations in the two countries. Both also suffered attendant international sanctions. These great changes occurring to two countries lifted the curtain on new China–Myanmar relations in the post-Cold War.

The history of China–Burma geopolitical relations in the Cold War revealed that the fluctuation of Burma’s strategic value and status in Chinese diplomacy was largely dominated by China’s domestic interests and Asia geopolitical environment. The post-Cold War Sino–Myanmar relations are renewing such a principle. With China’s domestic rapid economic development and economic structure adjustment particularly after 1990s as well as western sanction on Myanmar, Beijing’s perception on Burmese geo-strategic value changed once again. This new change was based on non-traditional strategic interests as well as longer-range traditional concerns over China’s regional potential. These new concerns related particularly to its energy security, and expansion of trade and exports, and “Two Ocean Strategy”. As a result, Myanmar has new and enhanced relevance to China due to its rich natural resources and geographic location of landbridge to the Indian Ocean. Now China is building China–Myanmar oil and gas pipelines and has

planned to construct a railroad and a highway from Kyaukpyu, the Andaman Sea port in Myanmar's western Rakhine state to Ruili, the Yunnan's border town (which will extend to Kunming). Myanmar is becoming the gateway of China's access to the Indian Ocean. Given the change that Naypyidaw has begun to restore its traditional neutralism foreign policy since the new government came into power in 2011, Myanmar will make full use of its geostrategic location as a bargaining chip to seek more national interests in China–Myanmar relations in the new Asia geopolitical environment.

## References

- Biography: Mao Tsetung 1949-1976, Vol. 1* (2003), Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- British Documents see *British Documents of Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*
- British Documents of Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, Part IV from 1946 through 1950* (2003), Series E Asia 1949, Vol. 9, Bethesda: University Publications of America.
- Butwell, Richard (1963), *U Nu of Burma*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chang, David Wen-wei (1960), *A Comparative Study of Neutralism of India, Burma and Indonesia*, University of Illinois, Ph.D., dissertation.
- Chronicle of Liu Shaoqi: 1898 -1969, Vol. 2* (1996), Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- Chronicle of Zhou Enlai: 1949-1976, Vol. 1* (1997), Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- CLA Intelligence Report* (1971), Peking and the Burmese Communists: the Perils and Profits of Insurgency, RSS No. 0052/71, July, 78.
- Cohen, Saul Bernard (2009), *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Deliusin, Lev (1991), The Influence of China's Domestic Policy on Its Foreign Policy, in: *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 38, 2, 53-62.
- Development of Contemporary China's Military, Vol. 1* (1989), Beijing: China Social Science Press.
- Hall, D. G. E. (1964), Review on "Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism", in: *Pacific Affairs*, XXXVII, 2, Summer, 230-232.
- Hall, D. G. E. (1956), *Burma*, London : Hutchinson's university library.
- Heaton, William R. (1982), China and Southeast Asian Communist Movements: The Decline of Dual Track Diplomacy, in: *Asian Survey*, 22, 8, August, 779-800.

- ICG *Asia Report* (2001), Myanmar: The Military Regime's View of The World, 7 December, 28.
- Johnstone, William C. (1963), *Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kuomintang Aggression against Burma* (1959), Ministry of Information, Government of The Union of Burma.
- Maung Aung Myoe (2006), *Regionalism in Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future*, Asia Research Institute Working Paper, No. 73, National University of Singapore, September.
- Niu, Jun (1999), The Formation of Diplomatic Policy in New China and its Main Characteristics, in: *Historical Research*, 5, 23-42.
- Panikkar, K. M. (1981), *In Two Chinas: Memoirs of a Diplomat*, Westport: Hyperion Press.
- People's Daily* (1984), Wu Xueqian's Speech at the 39<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of UN General Assemble, 27 September.
- People's Daily* (1948), Burmese People's Struggle, 10 May.
- PRC Foreign Ministry Bureau of Archives (ed.) (2006), *Selected Diplomatic Documents of PRC: The Geneva Conference in 1954, Vol. 1*, Beijing: World Knowledge Press, "Zhou Enlai's Report on Diplomacy at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Session of Central People's Government Committee (August 11, 1954)", File No. 206-Y0037, 495.
- Qiao, Yiming (1996), Communist China-Burma Political and Economic Relations, in: *Mainland China Studies*, 1, 80-89.
- Rose, Jerry (1963), Burma and the Balance of Neutralism, in: *The Reporter*, XXVIII, 1, 3 January, 24.
- Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (1993), Vol. III, Beijing: People's Press.
- Selth, Andrew (2001), *Burma: A Strategic Perspective*, The Asia Foundation Working Paper #13, May.
- Shao, Kuo-kang (1979), Chou Enlai's Diplomatic Approach to Non-Aligned States in Asia: 1953-60, in: *The China Quarterly*, 78, June, 324-338.
- Shen, Zhihua, and Yang Kuisong (eds.) (2009), *The Declassified Record of U.S. Intelligence on China: 1948-1976, Vol. V & VI*, Beijing: Oriental Press.
- Show, Kuo-kong (1972), *Communist China's Foreign Policy toward the Non-aligned States with Special Reference to India and Burma, 1949-1962*, University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D. dissertation.
- Song, Enfan, and Li Jiasong (eds.) (1997), *The Chronology of PRC's Foreign Affairs, Vol. I*, Beijing: World Affairs Press.
- Thakin Nu (1951), *From Peace to Stability*, The Ministry of Information, Government of the Union of Burma.
- Thomson, John Seabury (1957a), Burmese Neutralism, in: *Political Science Quarterly*, 72, 2, June, 261-283.

- Thomson, John Seabury (1957b), Burma: A Neutral in China's Shadow, in: *Review of Politics*, 19, 330-350.
- Tin Maung Maung Than (2003), Myanmar and China: A Special Relationship?, in: *Southeast Asian Affairs*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 189-210.
- Trager, Frank (1964), Burma and China, in: *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 5, 1, March, 29-61.
- U Nu (1955), Burma's Neutral Policy, in: *Burma*, January, V, 2, 1-15.
- Van Ness, Peter (1970), *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy*, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel (2010), What Cold War in Asia? An Interpretative Essay, in: Zheng Yangwen, Hong Liu, and Michael Szonyi (eds.), *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 15-24.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel (1996), The Global Picture, 1945-90, in: Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein (eds.), *The Age of Transition: Trajectory of the World System 1945-2025*, London: Zed Books, 209-225.
- Works of Liu Shaoqi since the Establishment of PRC, Vol. 1* (2005), Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- Works of Mao Tsetung, Vol. VI* (1999), Beijing: People's Press.
- Works of Zhou Enlai since the Establishment of PRC, Vol. 1* (2008), Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- Xinhua Monthly* (1955), Premier U Nu's Speech at Farewell Banquet, 1, 97-98.
- Xinhua Monthly* (1954), Joint Statement of China and Burma's Premiers, 7, 52-53.
- Yao, Jun (1998), *Aviation History of China*, Zhengzhou: Elephant Press.
- Ye, Zicheng (ed.) (1998), *Geopolitics and Chinese Diplomacy*, Beijing: Beijing Press.