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The Vexing Strategic Tug-of-War over Naypyidaw: ASEAN's View of the Sino–Burmese Ties

Pavin Chachavalpongpun

Abstract: This article argues that ASEAN's policy toward Myanmar has been predominantly responsive, dictated by China's activism in the region. It posits three arguments: First, that the release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, may have been a tactical move to convince 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. The paper 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 I term it, forcing ASEAN to continually legitimise it through public statements.

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Keywords: PR China, Burma, ASEAN, community-building

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Introduction

Sino–Burmese relationship has always been closely monitored by their neighbours in the Southeast Asian region. Indeed, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) decided to admit Burma in 1997 despite strong criticism from the international community partly because of the group's apprehension that Burma was increasingly being pulled into China's orbit. Therefore, to a great extent, the ASEAN membership of Burma was granted due to the latter's intimate ties with China, rather than by considering the merit of how it might contribute to the strengthening of regional organisation. Jürgen Rüländ argued further that Burma's membership was a precautionary move by ASEAN as a whole against China's activism in the region (Rüländ 2001: 145). In other words, ASEAN's policy toward Burma, both during the pre-1997 period and after it has become a member, has been predominantly dictated by China's strategic vision vis-à-vis Burma and the region. Today, how ASEAN reacts to the political situation in Burma also depends on China's policy toward this Southeast Asian country. This underscores a key character of ASEAN's Burma policy: A responsive policy with a lack of a focused long-term goal. The flaw of ASEAN's Burma policy has permitted the Burmese junta to operate freely and without restrictions for decades. Besides, the one-sided analysis of China possessing overwhelming power over Burma effectively prevented ASEAN looking beyond the stereotypes Sino–Burmese ties. Misperception and miscalculation was responsible for ASEAN's inability to influence the Burmese regime to conform to certain regional norms and practices in the past.

Putting aside such misperception and miscalculation, ASEAN has continued to engage in a tug-of-war game with China in order to gain the stronger foothold in Burma. This is unsurprising because Burma has remained a liability as much as a source of natural resources for some ASEAN members. From a political perspective, ASEAN has competed with China in performing as a provider of legitimacy for the Burmese regime. Catherine E. Dalpino argues that ASEAN's apprehension over growing security ties with Beijing and Rangoon contributed to its decision to admit Burma into ASEAN in 1997, in the face of strong resistance from the United States.¹

1 Prepared statement by Catherine E. Dalpino (Dalpino is a Visiting Associate Professor and Director of Thai Studies in the Asian Studies Programme of the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University), in: *The Emergence of China Throughout Asia: Security and Economic Consequences for the United States*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Ninth Congress, First Session, 7 June 2005, p. 49.

Here, there appeared an attempt on ASEAN's part to pull Burma out of the orbit of the Chinese influence. In the past years, ASEAN initiated different approaches designed to bring about an influence over Burma, ranging from constructive to flexible engagements (see Pavin Chachavalpongpun 2010). While the global community criticised these approaches as futile, ASEAN sought to vindicate itself whenever there appeared to be what it believed was a positive change in Burma. China, too, has constructed its own "satellite system" to tower above Burma – the system in which Burma was assisting in China's rising process with the provision of its abundant natural resources in exchange for political protection from Beijing. The race to gain control over Burma has been intensified particularly following the country's general election in November 2010, the first in twenty years, which resulted in a new phase of civilianisation of the regime. In this short essay, it seeks to examine ASEAN's view of the intricate Sino–Burmese relations, with a special focus on the post-election period.

Recently, there was a series of important incidents, including the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition, the termination of a China-backed dam in Burma, and the emancipation of a large number of prisoners – among them political prisoners – in October 2011. Bearing in mind these new developments, the essay proposes three arguments. First, the release of Suu Kyi and the prisoners may indicate a tactical effort on the part of Burma to please ASEAN as it has requested to take the chairmanship of the organisation in 2014. A role as ASEAN chair would undoubtedly consolidate the legitimacy for the current regime of President Thein Sein. Second, the suspension of the China-sponsored dam project reconfirmed that the assumption of China having excessive control over Burma had proved misleading. The decision of the Burmese government to suspend the project indicated a strategic move adopted by the Thein Sein administration. It reflects the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the country, and at the same time a reinvention of the regime itself as a responsible government which listens more to the opposition, civil society organisations and environmentalists. Burma has apparently played the "China card" by painting an image of a threatening China. As Bertil Lintner asserted, "[i]nstead of democratising the country, Burma's new government seems to have chosen to play the China card, an attempt to win support of the West." An image of a Chinese threat will be well received by some ASEAN members which have been engaged in a myriad of conflicts with Beijing (Lintner 2011a). Third, the eagerness of Burma to chair ASEAN in 2014 will serve two purposes for this regional organisation. ASEAN has been longing to prove that it is serious about fulfilling the community-building process. The fact that Burma is willing to "clean its house" so as to take up the ASEAN chairmanship

will not only help justify the organisation's past approaches vis-à-vis Burma, but also expedite the process of community-building in 2015.

Sino–Burma Ties: An ASEAN Perspective

It is imperative to clarify at this point that there has never been a unified stance from ASEAN toward the Sino–Burmese relationship. Some ASEAN members might be more sceptical than others toward China's intimacy with the Burmese regime, and thus espousing Burma's admission into ASEAN in 1997, possibly Indonesia and Singapore. There have been no in-depth studies about the different views of ASEAN toward the Sino–Burmese relationship. Much of the earlier works concentrated mostly on China's relations with ASEAN and its individual members, and how the "Burma issue" has come to affect such relations. For example, the study of Mya Than delves into the role of China in economic development of the less developed states in ASEAN, including Burma (Mya Than 2007: 285). Other studies discuss a wide range of complex and challenging issues concerning ASEAN–China relations, but miss out on the question of how ASEAN perceives the nature of the Sino–Burmese friendship, such as those of Lai Hongyi and Lim Tin Seng (Lai and Lim 2007). In the work of Christopher Roberts, he acknowledges that Burma has posed many challenges for ASEAN and that ASEAN has reached out to external powers, such as China, India, Japan, the United States and the European Union, to help pressure the Burmese regime. But Richards, too, does not elaborate on how Sino–Burmese ties have caused a specific kind of dynamism within the region (Roberts 2010: 158). This section attempts to briefly identify some characters of the Sino–Burmese relations from a general ASEAN viewpoint so as to be able to understand certain behaviour and reactions of ASEAN vis-à-vis the ongoing changes in the interactions between China and Burma.

A typical view of ASEAN toward China's role in Burma is that of uneasiness or even suspicion. Officially, ASEAN and China have formed harmonious relations. Admittedly, the pace of development in this relationship has been impressive. Quite often, the two sides agree that they need to pull Burma out of isolation. Each has volunteered to act as a bridge that would connect the other with the Burmese regime. Unofficially however, it is undoubted that ASEAN has embarked on the process of constructing its own Southeast Asian community through which interstate relationships among ASEAN members were prioritised. To a large extent, ASEAN has used this process to manage China's close ties with Burma, since such process assigned steps for ASEAN's internal developments and its conduct of external relations. Thus, China's remaining influence in Burma has continued to be

regarded as a challenge to the organisation. In this context, the Sino–ASEAN competition has gone beyond a mere battle for influence and loyalty from Burma. Economic competition has also been ferocious. China and some ASEAN members have relied much upon oil and gas from Burma (Li 2010: 113). The fact that President Thein Sein decided to halt the China-backed USD 3.6 billion joint-venture Myitsone dam project in Burma's far north Kachin State, while it was viewed by ASEAN as a daring move on the part of the regime, was a major blow to Sino–Burmese relations. More essentially, Burma had long held ASEAN, as an organisation, hostage. This is exactly because each ASEAN members possess particular interests in Burma, thus preventing from producing a unified position (as an organisation) to deal with the Burma issue. The lack of Burma's democratic progress in the past years effectively obstructed ASEAN in its attempt to prove itself as a serious regional organisation that advocates human rights and democracy. ASEAN felt that it was part of its responsibility to take a leading role in Burma's democratisation. However, Burma often turned to China to alleviate the pressure from the outside world, including from ASEAN. This represented a friction in the relations between China and ASEAN over Burma.

But in the region, the perception of China as a challenge or a threat is not a new phenomenon, but has its deep roots in history. Southeast Asia has more often than not painted China to be a regional power constantly searching to engage, and dominate, smaller countries in the neighbourhood. Such a view is not unanticipated. Almost all of Southeast Asia states in the past were subservient to the centralised power of the Middle Kingdom; they participated in the tributary system in which they must demonstrate their subservience to the Chinese emperor by personally bearing him a tribute in exchange for the Chinese protection against intruders and for Chinese investment (see Wang 1999: 48–49). Several centuries later, the urge to revive such Chinese engagement, and supremacy, was adamant among the Chinese leadership, particularly at a time when China is on the rise. Evelyn Goh notes that China's approach to Southeast Asia during the last decade has been characterised by a conscious dampening of outstanding regional disputes, a willingness to engage in multilateral dialogue and institutions, and a rhetoric of good neighbourliness and mutual benefit. Beijing proposed a free trade agreement with the region. It negotiated a Declaration on the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. And it acceded formally to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).²

2 Goh 2006. Also see, *Policy Bulletin* 2003. The paper argues that China is deliberately creating a sphere of influence in its backyard in which it will be the dominant power.

While China has conducted active diplomacy designed to strengthen the friendly relationship with its neighbours in Southeast Asia recently through the use of its soft power, it has struggled to erase the image of threat. Why is it difficult for China to wipe out this image? First, ideological factors make China a “convenient” threat. For some of the pro-America ASEAN states, including Singapore, the Philippines and to a lesser extent Thailand, the mere fact that China still tightly upholds communism makes the country a natural threat. During the Cold War period, the response from Southeast Asia to the Chinese threat was a containment policy. Today, such response has become more subtle as reflected in the region’s call for the promotion of a peaceful transformation within China. Second, geopolitical and geo-economic factors entrench the threat perception of China. Ming Xia asserted that even China has shed its ideological straitjacket, as a great power in size (territory, population, and economy), China has to pursue its own interest and respect (Xia n.y.; also see, Sutter 2005; and Friedman and McCormick 2000). Nationalism may still drive China into a course that clashes with ASEAN, as seen in the case of the maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, ASEAN has taken notice of the mounting influence of China over some countries in mainland Southeast Asia, such as Laos, Cambodia as well as Burma. With such different considerations, ASEAN has oscillated from “low-key antagonism” to “open romanticisation” of China, from containment to engagement. On the surface, ASEAN–China relationship has been smooth. At a deeper level, China’s relationship with individual members has constantly shifted from cooperation to competition, sometime to confrontation and serious conflict. The special ties between China and Burma have the potential to deepen the projection of China as a threat. Such threat could be seen from the manner in which China, as an external rising power, has maintained its political and economic domination of Burma; this has naturally contested ASEAN’s own aspiration to exert its influence on Burma’s politics and economy.

In the pioneering work of Maung Aung Myoe on Sino–Burmese relations, he argues that although Burma has engaged with China based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and the *Pauk-Phaw* (kinsfolk) friendship, Burma has skilfully played the “China Card” and enjoyed considerable space in its conduct of foreign relations. In other words, Burma has constantly repositioned its relations with China to its best advantage (Maung Aung Myoe 2011: Chapter 5). The revelation in Myoe’s work is refreshing. It defies the traditional perception of China owning unrestrained power over Burma. It was this perception that strongly motivated ASEAN to admit Burma in 1997, and then incessantly defended its legitimacy over the past decades. The awkwardness that exists between ASEAN and the global

community in regards to the Burma issue was partly brought out by the way in which this regional organisation reacted to the intricate relations between China and Burma.

2014: The Year of Vindication

For many observers of Burmese politics, the release of Suu Kyi on 13 November 2010 and the release of around 200 political prisoners on 12 October 2011 were essentially unprecedented. It is true that Suu Kyi's house arrest would come to an end in November 2010, after an 18-month extension following her being charged for allowing the American citizen John Yettaw into her lakeside residence which violated the house arrest terms. Yet, in the past, the Burmese regime proved that keeping promises were indeed very alien to its nature. Retrospectively, the general election held on 7 November 2010 was initially heavily slammed as a charade and a plot in prolonging the military rule. But not long after the election, the Burmese military leaders surprised the international community, even ASEAN, by setting Suu Kyi free. She had been detained for 14 over the past 20 years under house arrest. Ever since, Burma's "civilianised" government under President Thein Sein came into being, it has continued to astonish critics by adopting a series of seemingly liberal policies. Bertil Lintner described this as the government's major decisions. He said,

[r]ecent developments in Burma, including talks between President Thein Sein and pro-democracy icon Suu Kyi, a relaxation of media censorship and the release of some political prisoners, have stunned many foreign observers and sparked speculation that the historically military-run country is on the verge of a new era of democracy and openness (Lintner 2011b).

However, it would be too optimistic to paint a too-rosy picture of Burma's supposedly thriving democracy, bearing in mind that the *tatmadaw*, or the military, still had a firm grip on the political power. Admittedly, the developments currently taking place in Burma are encouraging, even though they must be viewed with profound caution.

Burma is indeed moving into what is ambiguously called "disciplined democracy". While the definition of "disciplined democracy" is unclear, the new political system in Burma is closely analogous to that in other countries in the region in which the restricted opening up process is a part of legitimising, thus strengthening, the regime. In the Burmese context, the leaders demonstrated that they had fulfilled the seven-step roadmap to democracy, with the final phase witnessing the general election in 2010. ASEAN, long

implementing the policy of constructive engagement, was compelled to endorse the Burmese roadmap without seriously debating the contents and the implications on Burmese society as much as the region. In other words, ASEAN was grabbed by the throat and was forced to go along with Burma while finding itself unable to criticise the slow pace of the process. Thus, when the election took place and eventually a new elected government was installed, ASEAN felt vindicated by its policy and continued support for Burma's political plan. The grouping released at least two statements showing its appreciation of new developments in Burma. In the Joint Communiqué of the 44th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, held in Bali, Indonesia, on 19 July 2011, it says:

We welcome the positive developments in Myanmar and continue to render our full support to Myanmar on its efforts for national reconciliation and reconsolidation. We consider positively the willingness and readiness of Myanmar to take the Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014, based on its firm commitment to the principles of ASEAN, and to recommend to the ASEAN Leaders for their consideration. We also welcome Myanmar's invitation extended to the ASEAN Chair to visit Myanmar at the earliest convenient time.³

Similarly, in another statement released at the end of the 18th ASEAN Regional Forum, on 23 July 2011, it states:

The Ministers took note of the recent developments in Myanmar and encouraged Myanmar to fulfil its own commitment in achieving the Seven Step Roadmap to Democracy. The Ministers continue to render their support to Myanmar on its reform efforts, including in pursuing economic reforms, genuine national reconciliation, unity and reconsolidation, the release of all political prisoners as well as the transition to democracy in the country that will contribute to sound progress. In this regard, they emphasised the need for Myanmar to continue to work closely with ASEAN and the United Nations.⁴

But for Burma, this is not the end road to its self-legitimisation. Being put under extreme pressure due to the decades-long sanctions and rejection from the West, Burma is now seeking to have its civilianised regime ap-

3 The Joint Communiqué of the 44th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, held in Bali, Indonesia, on 19 July 2011, "ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations", p. 26 <www.asean.org/documents/44thAMM-PMC-18thARF/44thAMM-JC.pdf> (20 October 2011).

4 The 18th ASEAN Regional Forum, Indonesia, 23 July 2011, "ASEAN Community in a Global Community of Nations", p. 5 <www.asean.org/documents/44thAMM-PMC-18thARF/18thARF-CS.pdf> (20 October 2011).

proved by the international community. Why is it important for Burma to receive a “seal of approval” from the outside world? The fact that the Burmese junta were willing to jeopardise their power position by volunteering to call for an election, release Suu Kyi and some political prisoners, and undergo reforms implies that they expected some “political rewards” from their critics in the West. And one more step they are pushing hard for is to be granted the ASEAN chairmanship status in 2014. Previously, Burma decided to relinquish the ASEAN chair in 2006 owing to the worsening domestic political situation. Now that there is an elected government in Burma, the government, with its newfound confidence, is eager to take its long overdue role as the chair of ASEAN. It has therefore launched its bid for ASEAN chairmanship in 2014; this will be the year of vindication for Burma as much as ASEAN.

In looking closely at ASEAN's statements above, it is possible to assume that ASEAN has worked closely with Burma in preparing the latter to take up the challenge of playing host to the organisation in 2014. Clearly, there are mutual interests to be gained for the two sides. For Burma, the ASEAN chairmanship will send out a strong signal that the country is progressively becoming “normal”. For ASEAN, Burma as the organisation's chair will justify its old approaches toward Burma. Moreover, ASEAN needs Burma to be well accepted as this would reduce the pressure on its community-building process by the global community. But how is Burma's bid for the ASEAN chairmanship related to its relationship with China? Here, it reveals that, as political reforms have taken place in Naypyidaw, Burma is now reconsidering ASEAN to serve as its source of legitimacy once again. While under the strict military regime in the pre-2010 election period, the main source of legitimacy for Burma had been China. China provided political support for the junta, defended the government at international gatherings (with China serving as one of the permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations), and helped sustain the regime, financially, through large-scale investments. With China's political and economic backup, Burma could to a great extent withstand harsh international sanctions and at the same time remain un-isolated. The position of China was therefore immense; this explained why the international community often requested Beijing to help persuade the Burmese regime to undertake political reform. It is true that China had forged intimate ties with top leaders in the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the governing body of the military regime in the pre-2010 election period. But such increasingly overpowering role of China which had built up over the years was met by greater wariness by the Burmese regime. The necessity to depend on China for

political legitimacy was compensated by the subservient position of the military junta toward the leadership in Beijing.

A number of analysts argued that there has been a rising anti-Chinese sentiment, not only among the Burmese, but also in the armed forces (Linter 2011b; also see, Kyi Wai 2011). The suspension of the dam project because of concerns of environmental impact which could have stirred up a sense of resentment among those residing in the areas of the planned construction has been used as a pretext for the Thein Sein regime to move a little away from the Chinese orbit into the embracing warm arms of ASEAN. The decision on the dam suspension could further justify Burma's quest for the ASEAN chairmanship: Burma is now caring more about human security, human rights and environmental degradation. From a strategic point of view, a less intimate relationship between China and Burma is likely to positively affect the Burmese–ASEAN relations, even when it may not contribute positively to the overall regional balance of power. A bigger and more crucial question is whether a new Burma, with its new supposed fondness of accountability and responsibility, is just pretending to behave according to international norms so as to get the ASEAN chairmanship in 2014. The international community is anxious to see if Burma will continue to open up the country once it steps down as Chair of ASEAN.

The China Card

On the occasion of the celebration of the 62th anniversary of the founding of the “People’s Republic of China”, the Chinese Embassy in Rangoon published a special feature in *The Myanmar Times* emphasising the deep, amicable friendship between the two countries. In one prominent headline, it says “mutual support and mutual trust”. In another page, it stresses,

China and Myanmar are friendly neighbours linked by common mountains and rivers. The two peoples have made amicable contact since very ancient times. These friendly relations are known well as *Pauk-Phaw* (meaning full brothers) Friendship (*Myanmar Times* 2011).

But how much these descriptions remain true as one looks at the present state of Sino–Burmese relations is highly questionable. As alluded to earlier, there has emerged a sense of antipathy in Burma against the Chinese (government, investors and migrants, for example). The perception of China as a threat has not just prevailed in other parts of Southeast Asia; it has been palpable in Burma too. China’s growing assertiveness has been watched closely by the Southeast Asians. For Burma, an immediate neighbour of China, its leaders have monitored the developments inside China very atten-

tively. In this context, Burma's postponement of the Chinese hydroelectric dam project raised a crucial question: Was it a result of the need to reduce Burma's dependency on China, especially now that the country has opened itself more to the outside world? Certainly, such a decision has significantly reshaped the Sino–Burmese ties.

What instigated the anti-Chinese sentiment? At the people level, the tremendous presence of China in the country brought about a feeling of uneasiness, or even suspicion, among local residents of the possibility that China could “take over” their lives. As one of examples, China has involved itself in numerous dam projects which have been strongly objected to by environmentalists because of the potential side effects on the livelihoods of the people. For sometime now, Suu Kyi has played a role as an advocate for environmental preservation. Her role, and the move by local environmentalists, put great pressure on the Burmese regime to act more responsibly. “The position of the Chinese government is a threat to culture and traditions of our country”, said U Ohn, leading environmentalists in Yangon. He added, “[w]e will never abandon Myitson, even in exchange for all the wealth in China” (*Asia News* 2011). But certainly, Suu Kyi and the activists were not able to protest openly even in the less repressive Burma. Despite being wary about the increasing anti-Chinese attitude, it has somewhat downplayed its discontent vis-à-vis the Chinese government, particularly at the state-to-state level. It is therefore imperative to pinpoint that the Burmese decision was not only shaped by concerns about China's rising influence, but also by Burma's domestic politics. The government did not want the Burmese to stage another mass protest, like that in the 2007 monks' movement, as it would definitely jeopardise the power position of the leadership. From another perspective, an Indian analyst argues that dissatisfaction within the armed forces over China's growing influence in Burma could be the reason behind the dam project postponement (see, Hariharan 2011).

Historically, the *tatmadaw* did not always have the best relationship with China. Beijing was ready to support the insurgent Communist Party of Burma. And it did so overtly following the assumption of power of General Ne Win in 1962. But over a decade later, changes took place in China. Under the pragmatist Deng Xiaoping, China, in 1976, was more interested in cash rather than ideology. It therefore paid more attention to economic growth rather than supporting revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia. Ever since, China began to look southwards to search for sources of energy, raw materials and markets. Relations improved with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forging amicable ties with its counterpart in Burma. Bilateral trade boomed, especially that along the common border of the two countries. China flooded Burma with investments, generous financial and

technical assistance, as well as a large number of Chinese immigrants. Northern cities like Mandalay have served as new promised lands for Chinese expatriates; they went on to control the local economy and reshape local culture. The Chinese Yuan is widely circulated in this part of Burma. Ironically, the Burmese leadership, being so proud of rescuing Burma from the clutches of socialism, is now seeing the country's economy falling into the hands of the Chinese instead.

Possibly, the strategy now for the new Burmese regime in Naypyidaw, especially at this crucial period in which it has put itself up to host the ASEAN Summit in 2014, is to play the China card in order to win support from fellow ASEAN members and the international community. Improved relations with ASEAN and its critics in the West could be achieved through playing up the Chinese threat. For the Western governments, the move initiated by Burma is likely to be favourably responded to as they have regarded China as a key obstacle standing in the way of any serious reforms in Burma. Gareth Price asserted

[i]n recent years, Burma has been seen as a client state of China. May be they feel after this political process that they have gone through that there is a need to distance themselves from China (Price 2011).

In the meantime, Maung Zarni observed,

[t]he halt is a significant signal that the government in Naypyidaw intends to send to multiple audiences: Beijing, Washington, the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) and the local public (note that the KIA has resisted the construction of dam which was planned in the Kachin state) (Price 2011).

Immediately, the United States praised Burma's decision, describing it as a significant and positive step (Price 2011). As for ASEAN, Burma's strategy to exploit the dam issue so as to drift away from China appears to also be in the grouping's interest. After all, the seemingly original purpose of admitting Burma in 1997, as claimed by a number of ASEAN figures, was to alleviate China's influence in the country. The portrayal of Chinese investors as greedy and unethical has reaffirmed the general image of China as a threat. It has been employed to justify Burma's suspension of the dam project. Painting China this way is congruent with ASEAN's own projection of the Chinese threat. Saw Swee-Hock, Sheng Lijun and Chin Kin Wah note that ASEAN members have differing views on the extent to which China could become a potential "threat". The unease over China's aspirations in South-east Asia, though more muted now than it was a decade ago, remains (Saw, Sheng, and Chin 2005: 5). The threat of China stems from two dimensions; military and economic. A series of conflicts involving China and some

members of ASEAN, particularly the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, have emerged as a fundamental factor behind the region's misgiving toward this giant neighbour. Simultaneously, the much celebrated concept of China's (economic) rise has been responded to differently by ASEAN members. Some are willing to ride on the Chinese economic success. Some look at it with sceptical eyes as China is fast becoming an economic competitor, rather than ally. Based on these mixed views in ASEAN, Burma's own ambivalent stance on China appears to go along perfectly with the regional trend.

A more vital question is whether the China card is merely about the threat of China, or a strategic ploy on the part of the Burmese regime to delay democratisation process at home and focus more on external threat to divert regional and international attention. Historian Thant Myint-U boldly stated, “[w]hat we are seeing today is Myanmar's best chance in half a century for a better future” (Than Myint-U 2011). He also said, “[t]here is no doubt the old Myanmar is disappearing. Those who deny the importance of what is happening are, quite frankly, making themselves irrelevant” (Ghosh 2011). Still, there is no clear indication, despite a myriad of positive changes in Naypyidaw, if the regime is truly sincere in pushing the democratic reforms further. Could it be that these changes were just cosmetic? Cynically, if the end game is to gain acceptance and legitimacy from the international community as well as to persuade the Western governments to lift sanctions imposed on the country, it is possible that Burma may choose to exploit a negative image of China in order to validate its shift in foreign policy which now seems to be, astoundingly, based on accountability. This represented the Burmese leaders' tactical decision to accomplish its objective without having to compromise their power interests. The deferral of the dam construction and the release of political prisoners were therefore seen by pro-democracy groups inside and outside Burma as just a small step forward toward greater democratisation (Ghosh 2011).

If the aim is for Burma to become more accepted and to be granted the ASEAN chairmanship of 2014, the fact that ASEAN came out to celebrate the Burmese government's courageous decision the democratic progress in that country. Countries in the West have long criticised ASEAN's stance on promoting democracy and human rights despite the recent establishment of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). From this perspective, Burma's commitment toward making a more open society could be seen as surreal as ASEAN's faith in the AICHR.

2015: The Shining Year

ASEAN is enthusiastic to witness changes in Burma, especially in the context of Sino–Burmese relations. While China has worked closely with ASEAN over the years, first to build its own alliance network against external powers like the United States and Japan, and second to re-establish its traditional sphere of influence over Southeast Asia, this relationship has not been rosy. And the Burma factor has a fair share in further complicating Sino–ASEAN relations. As a regional organisation consisting of different countries with different political and economic backgrounds, ASEAN has felt vulnerable and worried that it could be eclipsed by other powers. For decades, ASEAN has announced that it aspired to play a driving force in the region, being a focal point for other regional powers to interact among themselves. In order to propel an image of ASEAN as a serious organisation, ASEAN launched its first ever charter in 2007 and subsequently vowed to achieve its community-building in 2015. Therefore, the year 2015 will be an important milestone for ASEAN to attest to the world that it should be taken seriously. The circumstances thus forced ASEAN to deal with the Burma issue. And this has opened the door for ASEAN to become involved with China which has its solid presence in the country.

ASEAN is often very quick in legitimising the Burmese regime. In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan attempted frantically to convince the Burmese leadership to open the country for foreign aid. Soon after Burma agreed to receive foreign assistance, Surin declared his initiative as a success. Surin even said, “[w]e are being baptised by Cyclone Nargis” (Aung Zaw 2008). Today, following new moves in Burma, some ASEAN members spotted an opportunity to rationalise the grouping’s approach toward Burma. The state-sponsored *Straits Times* of Singapore wrote:

This time, however, the scope and depth of the reforms have been sweeping, and warrant a serious look. The release comes in the wake of the government’s increasing dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, growing tolerance of criticism and calls for peace with ethnic minority groups. In November, the country held historic (albeit stage-managed) elections and released Ms Suu Kyi. Even the government’s press censor has suggested that he put himself out of commission, given that censorship of the press is “not in harmony with democratic practices”. Such a stab at reform is bold indeed in the Myanmar context [...] This is where the West needs to play a role. For the longest time, the United States, Europe and Australia have said that the freeing of political prisoners is an essential step for the lifting of the sanctions on Myanmar. No doubt, only a fraction of Myanmar’s political prisoners

were released, but the move – issuing as it does from the broader context of political reform – is certainly a step in the right direction. Last month, Myanmar suspended the construction of a China-backed dam worth US\$3.6 billion – a move that could signal it wants the West to play a significant role in the country, no matter how useful China is as a strategic ally and investor [...] In January, ASEAN was right on the money when it called on the West to lift the sanctions on Myanmar. Nine months is a long time in politics, and Myanmar has already gone a long way to show its sincerity. It is time for the West to reconsider (*Straits Times* 2011).

It is observable in the above editorial that ASEAN did not hesitate to defend Burma once again and to plead with the Western governments to abolish their sanctions against the country. Indeed, during the visit to Burma of Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, in late October 2011, he apparently endorsed the current step taken by the Burmese regime in pushing for political reforms. He said, “I wish to believe and I get the sense that they (the reforms) are meant to be irreversible. I did not get any indication that the process will stop” (Adamrah 2011). Not only did he support the ongoing political development in Burma, Marty also put it on course to chair ASEAN in 2014, while urging the United States and the European Union to ease sanctions as the embargoes had done more harm than good in the country (Adamrah 2011). The fact that ASEAN has wanted to demonstrate its leadership in the Burma issue, something that it had failed in the past, and that it hoped that this could be used to complement its community-building in 2015, allows one to expect that the chairmanship of ASEAN will finally be handed to Burma. In this process, ASEAN has managed to gain benefit from Burma’s decisions to distance itself from China and to release some political prisoners. These benefits also reciprocate ASEAN’s own aspiration to be in control of its regional affairs in the face of rising China.

Conclusion

ASEAN’s view of Sino–Burmese ties is ambivalent. On the one hand, ASEAN has maintained its amicable relations with China, through the existing regional mechanisms. ASEAN has needed China to fulfil the grouping’s political and economic objectives, and vice versa. On the other hand, the traditional perception of China as a threat to the region has often come to the surface. It is evident that a cosy relationship between China and Myanmar was perceived with suspicion by some of ASEAN members. They feared that the growing influence of China in Burma could jeopardise their interests in that country. On this basis, the competition between China and

ASEAN in preserving its political and economic strongholds in Burma has been intense. But with a new Burma which has undertaken a series of political reforms in the past few years, the country has appeared to veer a little further away from China and move closer to ASEAN. This is possibly because, first, Burma itself wanted to diversify its foreign policy choices by not relying on China too intimately as it did so in the past. Long years of dependence allowed China to dominate political and economic spheres of Burma. A sense of frustration felt at both the people and state levels was palpable. The case of the Myitsone dam postponement exemplified how an anti-Chinese sentiment, in part, dictated the Burmese foreign policy toward China. Second, Burma has been in the process of reinventing itself to become more civilised. It sought a new legitimacy provider and decided to turn to ASEAN for this purpose. This explained why Burma desperately wanted to take up the position of ASEAN chair in 2014; it voluntarily gave up the rotating ASEAN chairmanship in 2004 due to the lack of readiness, and more importantly political legitimacy, on the part of the Burmese regime.

Thus, as this study has demonstrated, China has played an important role in the strengthening of working relationship between Burma and ASEAN. For Burma itself, the primary goal is just to gain legitimacy from ASEAN and the international community, but also to ensure that its commitments to political reforms would ultimately lead to the lifting of sanctions. As for ASEAN, the fact that Burma has changed so drastically in the past years seems to have vindicated its old approach toward this member which preferred engagement rather than sanction. An even bigger aspiration of ASEAN is to be able to compete with China and influence the Burmese regime in the way that would complement not only certain agendas of individual ASEAN members in their dealing with Burma, but also the community-building efforts of the grouping.

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