



China- Myanmar Relations: New Challenges Unfolding

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The Sino-Myanmar relationship is one that was forged many years ago. The relationship is most commonly described as 'Pauk- Phaw' referring to the brotherly relations the two states have with each other. Myanmar regarded China as its most trusted friend and their relationship evolved positively over the years, in all aspects, including defence and security. It was stated that 'Pauk-Phaw' would be carried forward irrespective of the government that wields power in Myanmar. The spirit of 'Pauk-Phaw' is also reflected in the Sino-Myanmar economic ties as the majority of Burmese foreign trade takes place with China (21% of total exports and 39% of total imports). However, the relationship has come across some bumps in the road.

The speaker brought our attention to the current position of the political and diplomatic fronts of the two countries which, over the past five years, has taken a turn for the worse. Thus, the extent of the importance of the Burmese role in Chinese foreign policy was questioned.

According to the speaker, Myanmar factors into Chinese foreign policy due to two reasons. Firstly, the geographic location of Myanmar serves as a bridge between China and the Indian Ocean allowing China direct access to the region. Secondly, Myanmar is believed to be the solution to the 'Malacca problem'. The One Belt, One Road initiative, whereby China is building ports in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives and Pakistan, will enable it to safeguard its shipments in the region. Majority of China's resource and energy requirements pass through the Straits of Malacca in the Indian Ocean. The rising tensions in the region instigate China to find alternative routes to meet its energy requirements. Consequently, China is pursuing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) vigorously with the intension of forging a shorter land route. Therefore, maintenance of good relations with Myanmar plays a significant role in China's strategic interests.

In order to remain in the good books of the Burmese government, China adopts the policy of non-interference in regard to Myanmar's domestic matters. Despite international pressure, the Chinese did not condemn the military junta government of Myanmar, for instances like the Depayin massacre where pro-democracy supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi were attacked by a regime sponsored mob. The abrupt and uncalled for transfer of capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw was seen as a move by the Burmese regime to isolate itself from the outside world as pressures regarding their human rights violations increased. China again refused to criticise the junta. In 2006, the UNSC failed to adopt a resolution on the rampant human rights violations in Myanmar as it was vetoed by China and the Russian federation. China stated that the council will be exceeding its mandate if said resolution is passed, as discussions on domestic issues of nations is a threat to their sovereignty. Meanwhile, China concluded 21 agreements with Myanmar and backed its membership in regional bodies like ASEAN, ASEAN+3 and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). China emphasised that unless Myanmar is extended support from the international community and encouraged to participate in regional forums they will be unable to complete the democratization process. Thus, the unswerving support extended to Myanmar confirms that the size of Myanmar should not cloud the onlooker's judgement regarding its importance to China.

According to the speaker, the challenges faced by the Sino-Myanmar relationship are many. Off late, one sees cracks in the forged bond between China and Myanmar. The most palpable problem is 'ethno-nationalism' which breeds anti-China sentiments amongst the people. On the issue of cross-border ethnic conflicts, China adopts a conflicting approach. On the one hand, they offer the state help in mitigating the ethnic problem by offering to transform the rebel groups into border security forces on the other they assist the rebel groups. Moreover, non-traditional security threats in the form of insurgencies and trafficking are rife along the border.

The relationship is further impaired by the politics of economy. The speaker explained it using three cases, the Letpadaung copper mine, Myitsone dam and Kyaukphyu gas pipeline. The Letpadaung copper mine project is a joint venture between Wanbao Mining Copper Ltd. company, in cooperation with the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (UMEHL). The project faced opposition from the locals as 26 villages were displaced and the compensation given was unsatisfactory. The masses took to the streets after the destruction of a monastery but the protests were quashed by the government as it coincided with Barack Obama's visit to Myanmar. Due to mounting indigenous displeasure, the Letpadaung Taung Investigation Commission was set up. Chaired by Aung San Suu Kyi, the committee expressed the environmental and human rights violations but did not suggest that the project be scrapped as it would have adverse effects on potential foreign investments in Myanmar. Post the Amnesty International report and the farmer protests in 2017, the project has been stalled.

The Myitsone dam project on the Irrawaddy River, undertaken by a joint venture between the China Power Investment Corporation (CPI), the Burmese Government's Ministry of Electric Power and the Asia World Company is facing hurdles. 90 per cent of the power generated was to be directed to the Yunnan province in China. The relocation of the

residents, not consulting the KIO, unfair distribution of resources and the state centric approach adopted by the authorities involved has aggravated anti-Chinese sentiments leading to mass protests bringing the project to a standstill.

The Kyaukphyu gas pipeline is operational, transporting Methane to China but the project is faced with resentment from the locals as they are discontented with the disregard towards the environment and the compensation given. Moreover, most of the profits and oil was heading to China. The disgruntled population was pacified by increased royalties but has not assuaged the anti-Chinese sentiment.

The road blocks faced by economic collaborations between the two countries are manifesting in the political and cultural ties that were built over the years.

In conclusion, the speaker observed that Sino-Myanmar relations though conflicting is a win-win situation for Myanmar. Myanmar is conflicted because it needs Chinese investments to develop but wants to avoid complete dependence which may result in their transformation into a pawn state. Thus, Myanmar has played its China card carefully. Complete access to Myanmar's resources will facilitate China's dominance in the region causing other neighbours like India to take interest in Myanmar, thus preventing complete transition into the strategic circle of China. It was observed that though China is stronger, it will not arm twist Myanmar into submission. They recognise that change has occurred in Myanmar and will accommodate it to suit their strategic interests thus maintaining the multidimensional relationship. Thus, ethnic strife notwithstanding, Myanmar is able to enjoy the best of both worlds.

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About the Speaker

Dr. Sampa Kundu works as a researcher at the Southeast Asia and Oceania Centre, IDSA, New Delhi. Her research interests include geo-politics of Southeast Asia, India-Myanmar bilateral relations, India's Act East Policy, and regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. She has completed her PhD from the Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi on India and Myanmar in BIMSTEC: Implications for Northeast India in 2015. In the last few years, she has published several papers in peer-reviewed journals including India Quarterly and chapters in edited volumes including the Asian Strategic Review, an annual publication of IDSA. She has also contributed several articles to online gateways and magazines including The Diplomat, East Asia Forum, The Diplomatist and so on. Her profile can be visited here:

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