



Neutralism in China's Shadow: Sino-Burmese Relations during the Cold War

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The main focus of the presentation was to examine the Sino-Burmese Relation during the Cold War. While doing so, the speaker also shed lights on the context on which Burma decided to become a nonaligned nation. Situated between China and India, Burma exercised a considerable influence on the general developments in the South Asian region and in the context of China's overall policies toward its southern neighbors. Sino-Burmese relations also to some extent influenced policies of India. Although Sino-Burmese border problem was a kind of repetition for Sino-Indian border conflict, but the speaker pointed out that it has some larger connotation with regard to Burma's internal policies. The presentation captured the relationship between Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and how Burma became a battleground between CPC and KMT. The United State also wanted to use this country as a corridor for its subversive activities against China. In this background, the then Burmese Prime Minister U Nu and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai played a very important role.

Burma, India and China supported nonalignment not only because they have the desire to remain away from Super Power blocs. In fact all these countries were trying to project their own interest through the nonalignment movement. In case of Burma, internal problems such as civil war in Rangoon, and the connection of ethnic groups with foreign powers such as Thailand and China, influence Burmese leadership to choose neutralism and nonalignment as a policy for Burma after Independence. Burma's fear of and distrust against China was also one of the important factors behind Burmese Policy of neutrality. In this regard, speaker draws a theoretical framework that smaller nations always distrust bigger nations and Burma is not an exception. Because of this reason, in 1949 it was China, who acted as catalyst for Sino-Burmese bilateral relation. Burma was the first country to establish diplomatic relation with Beijing, but in that period CPC maintained a close relationship with CPB, an anti-governmental force in Burma. Interestingly to maintain good relationship with China Burmese Prime Minister U Nu always denied the fact that CPB used to receive support from CPC. Nonetheless, the fear of Chinese involvement in Burmese internal policies did not disappear even after the establishment of diplomatic relations. The speaker mentioned that in 1950's Burma did not want to alienate China because of economic reason.

In the political level, speaker noticed that in the period of 1950-1953 ideological difference still had impact on Sino-Burmese relation. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Premier publically claimed Burma to be a "reactionary kid of imperialism". It was the period when Burma was constantly used by both China and USA as an "intermediary zone" to fulfill each other's interests. In 1950s Burma was a battleground for its wider regional forces, which led to ethnic conflict. The Kuomintang incursions across the Burmese border into the People's Republic of China (PRC) further worsen the situation. KMT gradually extended its control over a large number of Burmese tribal populations especially in Shan state of Burma. KMT troops have been supported by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and CPC provided substantial military and ideological support for CPB, which was open military rebellion against the Central Government of Burma, while the Thai military supported ethnic anti-Rangoon forces. The presence of these foreign actors added fuel to Burma's burning ethnic violence, because of which, finally Burmese Government decided to appeal to the United Nations. This was referred to as the period of detachment between China and Burma.

In the year 1954, changing mentality of Chinese leaders and their policy shifts had affected Sino-Burmese relations. In order to establish a stable international environment and a buffer zone of peace, Mao Zedong showed interest in pursuing a policy of collective peace. Zhou Enlai also publically expressed that CPC will not intervene in CPB's affair. It was also the year of signing Peace Agreement with India over Tibet issue. Speaker mentioned about Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's specific interest in China's good relation with Burma. It was a proof of Nehru's commitment to the principle of peaceful co-existence. As a result of this changing scenario, Burma was a vocal supporter of china's participation in international conference. China also committed not to encourage extra governmental activities in Burma's internal condition.

However, speaker says that Burmese leadership in that period was in search of a realistic approach, which will provide some importance to their country in international arena. U Nu's visit to Soviet Union in 1955 and USA in 1956 shows how Burmese leadership was intended to make a policy of rapprochement with not only nonaligned nations but also with the USSR and the USA. It has had negative impact on Sino-Burmese relations as Liu Shaoqi termed U nu a "bourgeoisie" and "opportunist". In early 1956, border dispute was the main concern between China and Burma. In July 1956, the last border dispute culminated when People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has invaded northern Burma, which led Burma to sever its relationship with China. The Prime Minister Ba Swe (who succeed U Nu in 1956) and U Nu had clearly different approaches to Sino-Burmese relations. Ba Swe was in favor of developing more intimate relations with the west, where as U Nu wanted to remain in close proximity with Beijing. U Nu even did not hesitate to say Burma's position as wrong in negotiation with Beijing. As a result of U Nu's negotiation, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai visited Burma in December 1956 and special commissions were set up between the two countries.

In 1957, when U Nu again became the Prime Minister he tried not to have direct contact with India and Yugoslavia only because China had ideological confrontation with Yugoslavia and border dispute with India. The year 1958 was marked by Burma's internal conflict between two factions, one is by U Nu and Tin and the other is by Ba Swe and Kyaw Nyein. Sino Burmese relations took a back seat in that year. However, in 1960, with U Nu's coming to power negotiation again took place. The speaker argues that this time China was interested in good relation with Burma for getting Burma's support in Sino-Indian border issue. On first of October 1960, a boundary treaty signed between China and Burma. The period between 1960-1964 Burma's internal situation was again became volatile with the coup d'état of Ne Win. In 1962, Ne Win had taken a policy of complete isolation in order to transform Burma into a socialist state (Burmese way to socialism). There was radical shift in foreign policy of China's position on Burma and its status as a buffer state gradually disappeared in 1970.

A Participant referred to an M Phil dissertation submitted in the Delhi University by an Indian student, who argued in his thesis that in order to settle its border problem the Burmese government completely gave away whatever China demanded. The speaker countered this argument by

saying that the Indian study must be based on only one archival resource and if somebody digs into Myanmar's archival resources one will come to know that the reality that Burma also made resistance to China.

Another Participant asked about what was the main reason behind Burma's policy of nonalignment, domestic situation or international factor? The speaker answered that at the beginning of Burmese nonalignment, it was Burma's internal situations, which mattered most, but later the influence of international factors also shaped its nonalignment policy. On the other hand it was external factor that influenced China to support the nonalignment movement. Discussion ended with whether India has lost chance to settle border dispute with China. The speaker maintained that in that period India's main concern was internal problem rather than border dispute.

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