



## China and Myanmar's 2015 Elections: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?*

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Myanmar's decision to conduct its first general elections under military rule and for its military to willingly start giving up some of its influence and authority in the country's political and economic life – though still only in a limited fashion – has a number of implications for China. With Myanmar's second general elections now due in late 2015, it is important to examine what impact Myanmar's transition to electoral 'democracy' has for China and how China itself might seek to act in response to that transition. This paper argues that while there are some changes that are evident in Myanmar's external opportunities because of its political transition, China continues to maintain a fair degree of influence in the country both through traditional methods as well as innovation in its own foreign policy.

### **Myanmar's elections and their impact on China: Of learning and ideology**

The Communist Party of China (CPC) is a great learner. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the CPC undertook a serious self-examination. It sought to understand both the reasons for the failure of the CPSU and the secret to why some political parties managed to stay in power for so long. Thus, it was that the CPC began bilateral exchanges with political parties from across the world. Of particular interest were the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) in Mexico and the Congress (I) in India both of which were among the longest-ruling political parties in the world and in power until quite recently. And these exchanges continue. The CPC also had frequent meetings not just with the Communist Part of India-Marxist (CPI-M) in India but also with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when it was in the opposition. Now that the BJP is in power, these linkages have also become more intense and multifaceted.

To come to the case of Myanmar, there are at least three ways in which China is affected by developments in a Myanmar that goes to the polls in 2015. One, it will seek to learn from the Myanmar experience and adopt such measures as might be useful to itself, two, it might view certain developments as threatening its national interests and three, it will try to contextualize Myanmar's developments in terms of China's own political concepts and ideology.

#### ***China learns***

China calls itself a democracy and is technically also a multi-party system - the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which is one of the two national-level advisory bodies in the state, for instance, has in addition to the CPC, eight other political parties that constitute the United Front. It is also important to note that these are not mere labels in China but subjects and concepts of intense debate and discussion. True, the parameters are restricted, and the number of participants limited but with a literate, educated, technologically-savvy population, it is also the

case that Chinese leaders have to take into account the general mood of the people in their policymaking.<sup>1</sup>

Further, ‘rule of law’ was the major theme of the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CPC held in October 2014, though even here it might be better described as ‘rule by law’ or ‘rule according to law’ (*yi fa zhiguo*) than ‘rule of law’. China’s own lower house of parliament equivalent, the National People’s Congress (consisting only of members of the CPC) as well as the upper house equivalent, the CPPCC, have both been increasingly assertive in their dealings with the government and on creating and pushing legislation.

In other words, what Myanmar is experimenting with is also being studied and experimented with by the Chinese and there are, no doubt, lessons that are being drawn from Myanmar’s path and progress. Indeed, has over time displayed greater sophistication and nuance in its dealings by extending its contacts to the various political parties and civil society organizations in the country even as it maintains its ties with the Myanmar military and continues high-level political visits to the country.<sup>2</sup>

### *Dangerous ideas?*

There are however, certain elements of Myanmar’s transition that probably are a matter of concern for the CPC. Among these are the matters related to ‘federalism’ and the role of civil society organizations. There is today a greater openness to federalism within Myanmar, including within its army, as a way of resolving the country’s ethnic issues,<sup>3</sup> and there has of course, always been the Panglong Agreement in the background. For China, however, ‘federalism’ based along ethnic lines is a highly sensitive and problematic issue in the context of its restive ethnic minority-dominated provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia. Beijing has, in fact, expressed its reservations about another neighbour, Nepal seeking to address the concerns of its minorities groups by way of ethnicity-based federalism.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this sort of federalism reflects closely the Indian version of federalism and perhaps, forms or will form another facet of Sino-Indian political/ideological competition. And just as Beijing has tried in Nepal, so also it might in Myanmar to redirect political reconciliation efforts away from ethnicity federalism.

Of course, the level of sensitivity with respect to Nepal is considerably higher than it is with Myanmar. The former borders highly sensitive Tibet and the latter the relatively stable Yunnan. Further, given its long involvement and interactions with Myanmar’s various ethnic political organizations and armed groups, one might even argue that any ethnicity-based arrangement, even

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<sup>1</sup> As an aside, it might be added here that the Chinese government also takes very seriously the idea of ‘media management’ – freedom is not licence according to Beijing and the media serves the public good as defined by the government, not by the public or even so much by the Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> Yun Sun, ‘China adapts to new Myanmar reality’, *Asia Times Online*, 23 December 2013, <http://atimes.com/atimes/Southeast Asia/SEA-04-231213.html>; Xiong Liying, ‘Zhongguo dui Miandian waijiao zhuanbian de xiao mimi’ (The secret behind the transformation of China’s diplomacy towards Myanmar), *Ta Kung Pao*, 9 February 2015, <http://news.takungpao.com/world/exclusive/2015-02/2916191.html>

<sup>3</sup> Keynote Address by Amb. V. Sundararajan Seshadri, *Myanmar: Moving Towards Elections 2015*, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, 19 February 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Shishir Ghimire, ‘China and the Federalism Question in Nepal’, *ICS Analysis*, No. 11, June 2013, <http://www.icsin.org/publications/china-and-the-federalism-question-in-nepal>

federalism, might not materially change China's influence and could, in fact, even increase its influence.<sup>5</sup> It remains to be seen if true federalism will come to Myanmar and/or how decentralization operates in reality in the country.

Coming to the question of the operation of civil society organizations, the CPC has as of now, expressed no desire to ever give up its hold on power or to share it with other parties. Civil society organizations in China are seen as rivals or counters to the CPC, especially if they have a national or cross-regional identity. So Myanmar's opening up to civil society organizations and the impact it will have for the staying power of the Myanmar military will be a matter of some considerable interest in Beijing.

Finally, Chinese media has also been on record expressing concern about religion-inspired political activity and protests in Myanmar. Besides accusing Buddhist monks of xenophobia particularly with respect to the country's Muslim population, an article in the state-owned *Global Times*, referring specifically to the joint Sino-Myanmar Monywa copper mine project in Sagaing Region, argued that 'The political intervention of monks in Myanmar has significantly worsened the country's investment environment'.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Promoting the China Dream***

There is still a larger issue at stake for the CPC given the political transitions or the lack thereof, in its neighbourhood – consider the semi-stable democracy in Afghanistan, the somewhat handicapped democracy in Pakistan with the Pakistan Army as a significant political player, floundering republicanism in Nepal amidst the inability of its political parties to come to any form of consensus on a constitution, the constitutional monarchy in Bhutan, the 'disciplined and flourishing democracy' in Myanmar, the Occupy Central protests in Hong Kong, and the record of democratic elections in Taiwan. This is the question of the attractiveness of the Chinese model of political development. Despite claims to non-interference and stepping back from the Maoist era's overt efforts to export revolution, culturally, China as a civilization-state and the CPC as a political party cannot but try to put forward a vision of what China wishes the world to look like.

It is in this context, that Chinese President Xi Jinping's China Dream concept comes into the picture. This is a concept/ideology that talks of Chinese national rejuvenation<sup>7</sup> but in an interconnected world, Myanmar's elections and the direction of its political transition will affect the China Dream and the content of China's 'national rejuvenation' and vice versa. For instance, given that the Myanmar President and Speaker have been exchanging letters publicly over their differences<sup>8</sup> would be unheard of in China. Further, the fact that it is the military in Myanmar that

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<sup>5</sup> A Chinese company, China Datang Corporation, for instance, paid US\$2.4 million to the Kachin Independence Army to resume operation of the Taping hydropower dam and even agreed to divert some power to areas under the control of the rebel group by the terms of the 1994 ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar authorities. Matthew Smith, 'How China Fuels Myanmar's Wars', *The New York Times*, 4 March 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/opinion/how-china-fuels-myanmars-wars.html>

<sup>6</sup> Ding Gang, 'Monk politics a potential risk for Myanmar', *Global Times*, 12 April 2013, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/829850.shtml>. See also, Jonathan Head, 'Spirit of defiance at Burma's Monywa mine', *BBC News*, 30 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-20537210>

<sup>7</sup> See section on 'The Chinese Dream', pp.35-70 in Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Khin Maung Win, 'Myanmar's Domestic Issues', Session I: *Myanmar: Moving Towards Elections 2015*, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, 19 February 2015.

has begun the process of political change from its position as rulers of the country might also make an impression on ordinary Chinese people and generate questions about the level of commitment of the CPC to political reform and change.

That said, China's position on Myanmar's elections, in particular, or on Myanmar's political transition, in general has to be seen in the light of China's own political transitions of various kinds – and there is political transition in China, even if it might not be visible. It would be a mistake to assume that China has a black-and-white approach of opposition to democratization in Myanmar.

Beijing will go for whatever works in ensuring Myanmar remains a stable, peaceful country that both provides opportunities for Chinese economic interests to flourish *and* does not simultaneously create room for non-Asian powers and values. When China supports democracy, it is actually supporting a system that preserves the right of each country to develop a political system suitable to its own 'national conditions'. Thus, when it supports democracy in Afghanistan, for example, it is supporting not specifically the current elected dispensation in Kabul but an 'Afghan people-led' political process that is, to say, there is scope for the Taliban to come back to power, even if not through elections.<sup>9</sup>

It might also be argued in this context that Beijing is not as worried about India's influence in Myanmar as it has been sensitive to the influence of external powers like the United States.

### **Chinese impact on Myanmar: Non-interference, really?**

Coming to how China might seek to influence Myanmar in its current phase of political transition, one might explain this in terms of the China's supposed principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. While mutual non-interference in internal affairs is a core principle of Chinese foreign policy, the expansion of Chinese enterprises outside its borders does not allow for its easy practice. Chinese interference hitherto has been subtle and difficult to detect because of the tendency for these moves to take place at the level of the political elites and thus away from the public eye. Whether the restarting of the Myitsone dam in Myanmar<sup>10</sup> is a case in point, will require further investigation. But it is perhaps, inevitable that despite claims to being a different sort of a world power than the United States is, structural conditions – the way the international system is organized, the need to defend the rights and profits of its SOEs and other private enterprises, security interests – will force China to seek to 'guide' outcomes in other countries, including its neighbours, and in increasingly overt ways.

There are, in effect, two kinds of interference that China practices in Myanmar. The traditional or historical methods that it has employed include support for various ethnic insurgencies and of frequent and high-level diplomatic exchanges to get its points of view across. The non-traditional or newer forms of potential 'interference' include the use of new political and economic initiatives

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<sup>9</sup> For more on this aspect see Jabin T. Jacob, 'India, China and the Coming US Drawdown in Afghanistan: A Choice of Dilemmas', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, No. 14, 5 April 2014, pp. 24-27.

<sup>10</sup> The work on the dam was first stopped in September 2011. See Rachel Harvey, 'Burma dam: work halted on divisive Myitsone project', *BBC*, 30 September 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15121801> but is now expected to restart in 2015. Mizzima, 'Myitsone Dam project expected to resume in 2015, says CPI', 24 January 2013, <http://archive.2.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/8784-myitsone-dam-project-expected-to-resume-in-2015-says-cpi.html>

such as the new Silk Roads initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and so on to get its points of view across and to convince countries of the advantages of meeting China's demands.

### *Traditional modes of interference*

When seven Myanmar soldiers were killed and 20 wounded in an attack by Kokang rebels in the northeastern frontier with China in early December 2014, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman was asked about the incident<sup>11</sup> indicating, at the very least, the belief that China continues to back the Kokang and other insurgent groups in Myanmar. The Kokang insurgents, also known as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), were formerly part of the Communist Party of Burma, a China-backed guerrilla alliance that battled the Myanmar government until it fell apart in 1989. The MNDAA signed a ceasefire agreement with the government that year, the first of about a dozen ethnic armed groups to do so but in 2009 had clashed with the Myanmar military that resulted in a serious refugee crisis in the region with tens of thousands of refugees streaming into Yunnan. This incident had also led to a war of words between the China and Myanmar at the time.

In March 2015, there were further tensions when as part of Myanmar action against the Kokang rebels a village on the Chinese side of the border in Yunnan province was bombed resulting in Chinese casualties.<sup>12</sup> Despite some strong statements within the country,<sup>13</sup> the Chinese side was acted with considerable restraint and eventually won an apology from the Myanmar side.<sup>14</sup> Earlier, the Myanmar Army had claimed that the Kokang rebels had received Chinese arms and even had Chinese mercenaries fighting with them.<sup>15</sup> Such charges have, of course, been denied by Beijing.<sup>16</sup>

High-level visits between are frequent between Myanmar and China and offer another opportunity for the Chinese to either state or sell to Nay Pyi Taw exactly what Chinese interests and demands are. Aside from stressing the need to maintain high-level exchanges, enhance strategic communications, in late 2014, for instance, Chinese Vice-President Li Yuanchao in talks with his Myanmar counterpart U Nyan Tun in the Myanmar capital of Nay Pyi Taw also said that both sides had to learn from each other's governing experience.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, this is an effort by China to suggest itself as a role model for Myanmar rather than the other way around. During Premier Li

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<sup>11</sup> *South China Morning Post*, '7 Myanmar soldiers killed, 20 wounded in rebel attack near Chinese border', 16 December 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1663088/7-myanmar-soldiers-killed-20-wounded-rebel-attack-near-chinese-border>

<sup>12</sup> Chris Buckley, 'Myanmar Warplane Kills Four Farmers in China', *The New York Times*, 13 March, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/world/asia/myanmar-warplane-kills-four-farmers-in-china.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/world/asia/myanmar-warplane-kills-four-farmers-in-china.html?_r=0)

<sup>13</sup> See for instance, *Sina.com.cn*, '媒体：成都军区空军部队足以摆平缅甸军几架破飞机' (Meidi: Chengdu junqu kongjun budui zuyi baiping Miandian jun ji jia po feiji) [Media: Chengdu Military Region air force troops are sufficient to knock out Myanmar's worn out aircraft], 16 March 2015, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2015-03-16/1136824543.html>

<sup>14</sup> Yang Danzhi, 'Action needed to stop cross-border incursions', *China Daily*, 18 March 2015, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-03/18/content\\_19840253.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-03/18/content_19840253.htm); Bai Tiantian, 'Myanmar govt apologizes for Yunnan bombing', *Global Times*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/915229.shtml>

<sup>15</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, 'Second Red Cross Convoy Attacked in Kokang', 22 February 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/second-red-cross-convoy-attacked-kokang.html>; Bernt Berger, 'Is Beijing supporting rebel groups in Myanmar?', *The Interpreter*, 24 February 2015, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/02/24/beijing-support-rebel-groups-myanmar-burma.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> *Xinhua*, 'China to play constructive role in Myanmar peace process', 16 February 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-02/16/c\\_134000949.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-02/16/c_134000949.htm)

<sup>17</sup> *Xinhua*, 'Chinese vice president holds talks with Myanmar counterpart in Nay Pyi Taw', 17 December 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/17/c\\_133862048.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/17/c_133862048.htm)



Keqiang's visit to Myanmar in November 2014, in a meeting with Myanmar's Speaker of the Union Parliament and the House of Representatives U Shwe Mann, alongside calls for 'joint efforts to propel pragmatic cooperation' and to 'enrich the content of China-Myanmar friendship' was also the hope that the two sides could 'consolidate the public opinion basis of bilateral relations'.<sup>18</sup> This is a less than subtle hint to Myanmar to manage its sometimes hostile public opinion on Chinese investment and infrastructure projects. The specific accusations against protesting Buddhist monks over the Monywa mine project referred to above, is a case in point.

### *Interference under conditions of 'win-win'*

China's new Silk Roads initiative, including a special Silk Roads Fund of some US\$40 billion and other big-ticket projects like the recently-formed AIIB – of which Myanmar is a member - and before that the Chinese-driven creation of the BRICS New Development Bank are all designed to parlay its influence across the region in an apparently non-threatening and seemingly non-hegemonic manner. These moves are particularly relevant to Myanmar's circumstances and have implications for Myanmar's political transition and other developments.

China's infrastructural links with Myanmar are already quite strong and well-developed, going beyond just road links from Yunnan and extending to hydroelectric and other projects. But this linkage has always been seen as one, a legacy of ties between two authoritarian states and two, the result of the unequal power relationship between the two countries. The latter aspect, in fact, has probably resulted in constant Myanmar unease around ties with China and about taking these too far. The decisive manner of Myanmar's opening up to the outside world, particularly, the West, is, no doubt, partly the result of this overhanging Chinese influence. Even over a decade of the BCIM Regional Cooperation Forum a multilateral programme – albeit a Yunnan-initiated one – did not really allay Myanmar's concerns because India remained unwilling to give the Chinese free play in its politically-sensitive Northeast, and moved rather too slowly on bilateral initiatives in Myanmar itself.

China's big-ticket new Silk Roads initiative – also known as the 'one belt, one road' (*yidai yilu*) project – however, is designed to put all past initiatives in the shade and perhaps also to address the problems associated with those initiatives. The 'one belt, one road' project is an ambitious multi-country exercise that Beijing claims seeks common development, and is portrayed as open and inclusive in nature without China seeking a hegemonic role. The BCIM Economic Corridor, proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during his visit to India in May 2013,<sup>19</sup> will now possibly be subsumed under the land-based part of the new Silk Roads. During his visit, Chinese Vice-President Li Yuanchao also sought to draw Myanmar into the maritime leg known as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road<sup>20</sup> which no doubt builds on the oil and gas pipelines built from the Myanmar coast to Yunnan. Together, these initiatives seek to strengthen China's position in

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<sup>18</sup> *Xinhua*, 'Chinese premier, Myanmar leaders vow to boost bilateral ties', 15 November 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/15/c\\_133790825.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/15/c_133790825.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Joint Statement on the State Visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India,' *Bilateral/Multilateral Documents*, 20 May 2013, <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/21723/Joint+Statement+on+the+State+Visit+of+Chinese++Li+Keqiang+to+India>

<sup>20</sup> *Xinhua*, 'Chinese vice president holds talks with Myanmar counterpart in Nay Pyi Taw', 17 December 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/17/c\\_133862048.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/17/c_133862048.htm)

Myanmar as not just a special case built on geographical proximity – though this also counts for much – but as a general case of Chinese involvement in that country as in all countries that is the result of Chinese global economic strength and political weight. At least according to Chinese sources, the ‘one belt, one road’ initiative has won support among Myanmar’s ruling authorities.<sup>21</sup>

And since such Chinese presence along the Silk Roads necessarily involves dealings with countries with different kinds of political systems, Myanmar’s transition to ‘democracy’, its political system, is not a limiting factor; China can work with whoever is in power in Myanmar. And if China is thus, flexible, so must other countries be when dealing with China. Indeed, for China, the terms ‘open’ and ‘inclusive’ are not only about willingness to include different countries in its new project but also about creating openness towards Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and other agencies involved in Silk Roads-related construction. And by constantly underlining the ‘win-win’ nature and ‘common development’ objectives of the Silk Roads, China wishes to consolidate both its diplomatic position and the economic advantages of its enterprises.

However, as the record shows in many countries, once Chinese enterprises have established a presence in a country, Chinese leaders and diplomats are not too far behind in calling for the fair treatment or safety of their enterprises and citizens among other things. This is nothing unusual, of course, and many, if not all countries do this but this also underlines the problems with China’s statements about being a country that does not exercise hegemony or interferes in the internal affairs of other countries. In many respects, thus, while China’s articulation and style might differ, it is not very different from the United States in the pursuit of its interests. Especially, given China’s fraught political ties in many instances such as with Vietnam or the Philippines, it is almost inevitable that Chinese enterprises and citizens will be targeted and this can then add to the basket of bilateral problems.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The foregoing examination of the China-Myanmar relations in the context of the latter’s ongoing political transition, and in particular, the impact of the 2015 elections suggests that from China’s perspective, there are certainly issues that hold considerable consequence for not just China’s external relations but also for its domestic affairs. It also suggests that China has been thinking of ‘managing’ or dealing with the consequences or spillover of the political changes in Myanmar. No matter what the results of Myanmar’s elections, China has its broad strategy chalked out which essentially, is one of working with whoever comes to power.

Structural conditions currently are such that China will continue to remain important both politically and economically for Myanmar for some time to come despite the latter’s opening up to the rest of the world. In part, this is because the Myanmar military appears unwilling to completely loosen its hold on political affairs in the country, and in part, due to the continuing inter-ethnic

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<sup>21</sup> *Xinhua*, ‘China’s “Belt and Road” initiatives offer Myanmar new opportunity: spokesman’, 10 April 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/10/c\\_134139607.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/10/c_134139607.htm); and *Xinhua*, ‘Myanmar’s ruling party voices support for China’s “Belt and Road” initiative’, 8 April 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/08/c\\_134132439.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/08/c_134132439.htm)

<sup>22</sup> See for example, *Xinhua*, ‘China urges Vietnam to implement remedies for riots’, 25 August 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-08/25/c\\_133582938.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-08/25/c_133582938.htm) and Mo Jingxi, ‘Philippines urged to protect Chinese companies’, *China Daily*, 26 February 2015, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-02/26/content\\_19663586.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-02/26/content_19663586.htm)



tensions including the lack of agreement on a federal structure or any similar arrangement that will address the concerns of the ethnic minorities. India has not quite stepped up to the plate as it were, if matching Chinese influence has been its intent and thus, the Myanmar government has had also to rely on distant powers or the ASEAN to try and offset Chinese influence. This is not an easy task and will only get harder still with the slew of new Chinese diplomatic initiatives in the region.

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