



Myanmar-China Relations: A Matter of Mutual Interest

Speaker: Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen

Chair: Prof. Patricia Uberoi, Chairperson, ICS

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The presentation of Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen started with a discussion on the politics behind the naming of 'Myanmar vs. Burma'. Kipgen mentioned about the ongoing debate in the international community on whether the country should be referred to as Myanmar or Burma. According to him, the issue has both historical and political underpinnings. It all began in 1989 when the State Law and Order Restoration Council of the military government renamed the country from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar. The same body went on to change the name of the capital city from Rangoon to Yangon. The two basic arguments for using 'Myanmar' as the new name were: firstly, the name Burma was given by the colonial British rulers and secondly, it tended to represent only a certain section of the country's population. Contrarily, the name Myanmar was seen as being inclusive of the ethnic diversity of the country. However, supporters of the name Burma argue that it was an undemocratic government that changed the country's name without the consent or the mandate of the people. Closing discussion on this subject, the speaker pointed out the necessity to understand that irrespective of the name, both represent the same group of people.

The main part of the presentation dwelled on important aspects of Myanmar-China relations, namely, politics, economy and military. The speaker relied on historical approach. At the outset, he noted that the relationship between Myanmar and China is best characterized as 'marriage of convenience'.

Political Relations

The political relation of Myanmar and China are based on the treaty of friendship and mutual non-aggression signed between both the countries in June 1954. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Myanmar during 1954 further enhanced the friendly relations between both the countries. However, Myanmar had followed a neutral stand on foreign policy during the Cold War. The incursion of Guomindang troops across the Myanmar border had deteriorated Myanmar's

relations with China during the 1960's. The Communist Party of China (CPC)'s support towards the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) made the civil war of Myanmar even more volatile. This led to anti-Chinese riots in 1967, which eventually led to the evacuation of the Chinese community from Myanmar. The relationship between the two sides started to normalise after Deng Xiaoping became the premier of China in 1978. Cordial relationship was established between the two countries in 2007 only. However, the ethnic conflict in the border region of Myanmar has a deep impact on the relationship between Myanmar and China. On 27 May 2011, both the countries upgraded their relationship by establishing a 'comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership' expressed in a joint statement issued on the occasion of the state visit of president Thein Sein to China from 26-28 May 2011.

Economic Relations

Against the backdrop of closer diplomatic, political and security ties between Myanmar and China after 1988, their economic relations have become stronger. Bilateral trade has been beneficial for both countries and escalated rapidly since the 1990s. The speaker mentioned that despite the sanctions posed by United Nations due to the civil war in Myanmar, China chose the policy of involvement with Myanmar in the economic front. Chinese president Jiang Zemin's visit in 2001 to Myanmar opened a new phase of bilateral economic relations. China and Chinese enterprises have been involved in Myanmar's industrial, infrastructure and energy development through economic cooperation. By late 2002, Chinese companies had officially launched more than 800 projects with a total value of US\$ 2.1 billion. In 2003, China also offered a US\$ 200 million preferential loan to finance the construction of Myanmar's largest planned hydropower projects. In 2010-11, the volume of bilateral trade of Myanmar-China reached US\$ 5.3 billion and China replaced Thailand as Myanmar's largest trading partner. Imports from China were US\$ 2.786 billion and exports to China were US\$2.786 billion. China is also increasing its investment in Myanmar.

In 2010-2011, China's investment in Myanmar was nearly US\$ 8 billion. The investment mainly included Myitsone dam project, Myanmar-China oil and gas pipeline and copper mine projects. The speaker highlighted that 54 percent of China's total investment are focused on the energy area. In 2014, China and Myanmar signed an agreement on economic and technical cooperation to bolster the economic and trade cooperation. Further, the two sides agreed to jointly work out three cooperation master plans on timber, mining and agriculture, emphasizing their significance in boosting the level of economic relations, trade cooperation and bilateral ties. The speaker noted that the United State's sanctions turned out to be advantageous for China as most of the countries, including India decided not to engage with Myanmar on the economic front.

Military Co-operation

China has been the major supplier of military hardware to Myanmar since the former junta regime crushed a pro-democracy uprising in 1988. It is estimated that about 90 per cent of the Myanmar's military transportation is supplied by China alone. In the recent years, the cooperation between Myanmar's military force and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been growing. The process of cooperation started with the visit of a Chinese military delegation to Myanmar in 1989 to negotiate the purchase of arms including jet fighters, armored vehicles and naval vessels. China exported military equipments worth US\$ 1.4 billion to Myanmar in 1993. This included light and medium tanks, armoured personnel carriers (APC), F-7 jet fighters, Hainan class patrol vessels, and arms and ammunition. China has also trained the Myanmar army and its air force personnel. In 2005, it sold 400 military trucks to Myanmar.

Military cooperation between the two countries is also marked by high level delegation visits and joint military exercises. In October 2008, Myanmar and China enhanced military cooperation after Myanmar's top three generals met Gen Zhang Li, the vice chief-of-staff of China's PLA, in Naypyidaw. In August 2010, the Chinese PLAN (PLA-Navy) conducted a joint exercise with the Myanmar's navy. In 2013, Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited Beijing, where he met Chinese President Xi Jinping. During Ming's visit, Xi said China was willing to work with Myanmar to further improve military ties so as to contribute to the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two nations.

The final part of the presentation dealt with the issue of ethnic conflict in the border area of Myanmar and China. The conflict between ethnic minorities and the Myanmar Army has been a complex areain Myanmar-China relations as one of the rebel groups, Kokang, are ethnically, Chinese. China has been accused of supplying the Kokang rebels with weapons and supplies. However, the Kokang rebels have denied receiving any weapons from China. The speaker mentioned that China has been following a policy of non- interference with regard to the ethnic conflict in Myanmar. The speaker also opined that any Chinese interference in Myanmar would only be for the safety of its citizens of Yunnan Province.

Discussion

The discussion session included the issue of the upcoming election in Myanmar and the possibility of China's influence in it. Countering the speaker's argument during the presentation, one participant mentioned about the possibility of Chinese influence in the internal politics of Myanmar. With regard to the conflict in border areas, the speaker stressed that the primary concern of China lies in the stability in the border. The issue of escalating migration of Yunnanese people to Myanmar and increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in Northern Myanmar were also brought into light by the participants.

Report prepared by Jayshree Borah, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen is a political scientist whose general research interests include democratization, democratic transition, human rights, ethnic conflict, identity politics, and foreign policy. His academic research focuses on the politics of South and Southeast Asia, with specialization on Burma/Myanmar. He has published peer-reviewed academic articles in a number of journals. His forthcoming book titled ‘Myanmar’s History of Political Transition’ by Oxford University Press will be published this year. He has also made contributions in various international newspapers and magazines, all over the world.

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