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Myanmar-China-US: The Potential for Triangular Cooperation

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David I. Steinberg, Distinguished Professor of Asian Studies Emeritus, Georgetown University, explains that "Those in China, the United States, or Myanmar who view the Sino-US relationship in Myanmar as a zero-sum game are wrong."

Chinese policy toward Myanmar/Burma until 2011 had been focused on exploiting that country's natural resource base, its strategic location on the Bay of Bengal, and the market potential both for China nationally and Yunnan Province provincially. The peak in the Sino-Myanmar bilateral relationship may have been the signing of the "Strategic Economic Cooperative Partnership" between the two states when President Thein Sein visited Beijing in May 2011 shortly after his inauguration in March of that same year. That virtual partnership, however, came to an abrupt end later that year when Myanmar suspended—at least until 2015—Chinese construction of the \$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam in northern Myanmar not far from the Chinese border. Domestic public antipathy to the project was cited, and coincidentally it came at a time of increasing US influence in Myanmar. The Chinese link the two, believing the United States actively supported that stoppage through assistance to some Burmese civil society groups. They claim the US role in Myanmar is part of a regional, second "containment" policy against China's rising influence. China remembers historically the clear US attempt at containing the People's Republic of China after the formation of the PRC in 1949 in the context of the Cold War amidst fears of China exporting revolution across the Asia-Pacific region.

Chinese policy toward Myanmar is congruent with its policies toward all the peripheral states surrounding that country. It is composed of five elements: a peaceful frontier, no refugees fleeing into Chinese sovereign territory, opportunities for Chinese business and investment, assuring that neighboring countries vote with China—or not against China—at the United Nations and other international fora, and keeping US military forces and influence away from those frontier areas.

Many in China consider that the Obama administration's shift in policy and subsequent rapprochement with Myanmar—a US policy recalculation essentially away from the Clinton-Bush administrations' policies of regime change to one of regime modification—was predicated as anti-Chinese. The evidence, however, for that motivation is lacking. Rather, rapprochement was probably prompted by the clear failure of the isolation and sanctions policies of the previous US administrations, signals from the Burmese that improved relations were in their own interests, the possibility of a US foreign policy "success" in East Asia, and the necessity to work with Myanmar if the United States was to have any significant interaction and role in ASEAN. The United States had strenuously objected to Myanmar's admittance to ASEAN in 1997, and then effectively ignored the institution for a decade thereafter, in large part because of Myanmar's inclusion and role in it.

For China, Myanmar has a significant role in its policies toward Southeast Asia. Burmese oil and gas pipelines help alleviate the strategic bottleneck of the Malacca Straits, which would be a major impediment to energy needs if the US or any other power prevented Chinese passage. Access to Burmese ports assist Chinese shipping in

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the Indian Ocean and Burmese mineral resources and hydroelectric power potential are important to national and regional Chinese policies. In addition, Myanmar’s market is essential to Yunnan’s export economy.

On the downside, some two million Chinese are said to have illegally entered Myanmar, and whatever their personal successes, their economic presence is disquieting to many Burmese, resulting in increased anti-Chinese sentiment. Until the border settlement of 1960, all Chinese governments historically have considered northern Burma as Chinese territory. Historically, up until 1895 the Burmese dispatched a tributary mission every decade to Beijing. One Chinese referred to Myanmar as “Our tributary forever.” No wonder that the Chinese view the current “cooling” in the bilateral Sino-Myanmar relationship, amidst growing US-Myanmar ties, as somewhat disturbing.

One important element of those concerns is ethnic minority issues along the frontier. Non-Burmese and non-Chinese minority groups reside across the long littoral, which has been plagued by insurrections and discontent. As reforms under the Thein Sein administration in Myanmar have expanded, the United States has focused on ethnic discontent as a critical, remaining element within Myanmar that requires improvement if closer US-Myanmar relations are to further develop. The United States has tried to assist in the settlement of these disputes, some of which date back to then-Burma’s independence in 1948. The Burmese remember, however, that all neighboring countries—China included—and also the United States have at one time or other supported various insurgent and dissident groups. They are thus distrustful of any foreign involvement in minority affairs, an issue that has exacerbated Chinese-US relations in Myanmar.

Recent discussions by this author with Chinese officials and academics in Kunming have indicated that many Chinese, at least in informal settings, recognize the desirability for US-Chinese cooperation with the Burmese on issues related to both states’ peripheral regions. Some believe that the Burmese would welcome tripartite dialogue and action as long as it was not viewed as pressuring the Burmese—“ganging up” on them—to do anything that is not in their national interests. The initiatives for such actions would have to come from the Burmese themselves to be effective, and could be explored in Track Two (informal) meetings from which could come various projects that would be considered in the interests of all three countries.

Dialogue among all three states could result in collaborative medical projects for the northern Myanmar-Yunnan region, counter-trafficking collaboration and training, anti-drug training and cooperation, a program for emergency preparedness for earthquake relief to which the region is prone, discussions on multiculturalism and national unity in all three countries expanding to bilingual educational and other issues. Such discussions would not focus on the internal Burmese negotiations for a national ceasefire or ethnic constitutional issues, but simply begin tripartite confidence-building measures.

The reform process in Myanmar under President Thein Sein is in the interests of all three states. Not only does it offer promise to improve the lives of the Burmese peoples and bring stability to that country, it has diminished internal pressures that could easily have built up popular unrest, as in 1988, and thus threaten Chinese interests. It conforms to US interests in political pluralism and rights, and strengthens ASEAN. Those in China, the United States, or Myanmar who view the Sino-US relationship in Myanmar as a zero-sum game are wrong. It need not be thus if modest initiatives are taken. There might be lessons from the Myanmar experience applicable to improving Chinese-US relations elsewhere. To be effective, however, they should begin with the Burmese taking the lead.

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