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**BURMA'S CHINA CONNECTION
AND THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION**

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Abstract

Since abandoning its neutral foreign policy in 1988, Burma's close relationship with China has caused considerable unease in the Asia-Pacific region. While some reporting on the defence and intelligence links between Rangoon and Beijing has been inaccurate and misleading, it has helped create the perception of an expansionist China and led in turn to significant policy changes on the part of regional countries, particularly India. The future of China's relationship with Burma has been interpreted in three ways. The 'domination school' sees Burma overwhelmed by China and becoming a client state. The 'partnership school' predicts a close and mutually supportive strategic relationship. The 'rejectionist school' believes that Burma can resist China's enormous strategic weight and remain independent. All three schools seem to agree, however, that the Rangoon regime will do whatever is necessary to survive in the face of increasing international pressure.

Burma's China Connection and the Indian Ocean Region

Andrew Selth

Ever since the Burmese armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) took back direct political power in 1988, and abandoned the country's neutral position in foreign affairs, there has been a lively debate among government officials, intelligence analysts, academics and journalists over the strategic implications of Burma's unprecedented ties with China. A number of dramatic claims have been made, and some strongly opposing views have been expressed. Yet in other respects it is quite a subtle debate, with many of the arguments put forward separated only by different emphases or shades of interpretation. There are many points of agreement. Even so, the debate is an important one. For, as is often the case in international security affairs, official decisions are based as much on perceptions as realities, and the policies of several regional countries have already been affected. This in turn has the potential to cause far-reaching changes to the strategic environment of the Indian Ocean, and indeed the wider Asia-Pacific region.

Strategic Developments Since 1988

Burma (now officially known as the Union of Myanmar) occupies a geo-strategic position of considerable importance. It lies between the nuclear-armed giants of India and China, at the crossroads of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. In Samuel Huntington's terms, Burma straddles the fault lines of the Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian civilisations. It separates China from the Indian Ocean. While Burma does not directly dominate any major sea lines of communication (SLOCs), it is close to some important Indian Ocean shipping lanes and is crossed by a number of busy east-west commercial air routes. As a result of this critical position, Burma has endured centuries of unwelcome attention from both its neighbours and foreign empires, including several invasions. During the Second World War it became a major theatre of operations. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Burma retreated into xenophobia and isolationism, and was largely ignored by the major powers. It re-emerged onto the world stage in 1988, however, when the *Tatmadaw* ruthlessly crushed a massive pro-democracy uprising, and took back direct control of the country. Immediately ostracised by a large segment of the international community, and faced with a range of economic sanctions, the new military government in Rangoon (dubbed the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC) abandoned decades of neutralism and started to develop strong bilateral ties with China.

The creation of the SLORC and its introduction of a range of new policies coincided with some dramatic shifts in the global power balance. The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe saw the emergence of the United States (US) as the world's sole superpower. Initially at least, the agenda of the United Nations (UN) became more aligned to US interests and values. The US itself has become more interventionist, even being prepared on occasion to act without UN sanction. These trends in turn have prompted a reaction by a diverse group of countries united by a desire to restrict, or at least balance, the US's paramount position in world affairs. Also, with the close of the Cold War came the end of the relative stability and predictability of the old power balance. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the means to deliver them, has greatly complicated management of the strategic environment. A number of new states and sub-state actors have appeared. New tensions have arisen, and new coalitions have been formed against common threats, such as international terrorism. There is now much greater fluidity, and thus greater uncertainty, in international affairs. In particular, the last 20 years has seen the rise of China, to the extent that it is now considered a serious competitor for the US's pre-eminent position in the Asia-Pacific region.

Perhaps more than any other factor, it is perceptions of China that are influencing the way in which regional states are responding to changes in the strategic environment. These perceptions may be based, as some analysts have suggested, on a selective reading of history and a number of enduring myths about China's world view but, in international relations, perceptions tend to become the reality.¹ Governments make national policy on what they believe to be the case, as much as on the objective truth. For example, China has not, since the 18th century, harboured expansionist ambitions towards, or engaged in open hostilities with, Burma, Thailand or Laos. Although China once included parts of these and other states in a list of 'lost territories', this list has been omitted from Chinese public statements since the 1967 Cultural Revolution. Yet regional perceptions of China's long term strategic ambitions are still coloured by the historical evidence of China's support for communist guerrilla movements during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, its border war with India in 1962, its (albeit unsuccessful) invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and by maps that still show China's claims to large tracts of Southeast Asia (including all of the South China Sea). China's economic growth and military development programs are being watched closely by analysts in the region, and any signs that China is looking to extend its strategic reach are considered causes for concern.

Burma and China

In this regard, Burma's close relationship with China since 1988, and in particular its burgeoning defence links, have attracted considerable attention and comment. Over the past 15 years there have been numerous reports in the international news media, professional journals and scholarly monographs to the effect that China has provided the Rangoon regime with a wide range of modern weapon systems, new military equipment, and arms production facilities.² These acquisitions have reportedly included more than 120 F-7 and A-5 fighters, Y-8 transport aircraft and K-8 trainers for the Burma Air Force. The Burma Navy has purchased 10 Hainan offshore patrol boats and six Houxin guided missile patrol boats. China has provided hulls for three locally produced corvettes and there are reports of other Chinese naval vessels on order. The Burma Army has taken delivery of a wide range of tanks, armoured cars, towed and self-propelled artillery pieces, multiple rocket launchers and transport vehicles. In addition, China has provided the Tatmadaw with ammunition, communications gear, and infantry equipment like night vision goggles and parachutes. Most of these acquisitions have reportedly been accompanied by technical training programs, both in China and in Burma itself. Beijing has also helped Rangoon to improve Burma's defence industries, by helping to build small arms factories and improving its naval ship building facilities.³

All these developments have been closely monitored by Burma's neighbours, including India. Of particular interest to New Delhi have been reports that China and Burma have negotiated a multi-faceted intelligence sharing arrangement, and that personnel from the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) are currently helping to operate some of the more specialised electronic surveillance equipment acquired (mostly from China) by the Burmese armed forces. This equipment has reportedly been installed along Burma's coastline and on some of its offshore islands. For example, according to one detailed academic study, signals intelligence collection stations have been established on Great Coco Island (just north of India's Andaman Islands), Ramree Island off the Arakan coast, Hainggyi Island at the mouth of the Irrawaddy Delta, at Monkey Point in Rangoon, and on Zadetkyi Kyun off the Kra Peninsula in Burma's far south.⁴ The functions of these facilities are said to include the monitoring of regional military activities, especially air and naval movements in the eastern parts of the Bay of Bengal, and surveillance of India's strategically important tri-service military facilities on the Andaman Islands. The stations are also believed by some to be

aimed at intercepting telemetry from Indian ballistic missile test launches over the Bay of Bengal. This is in addition to helping the Rangoon regime police Burma's own territorial seas and exclusive economic zone.

Also of interest to observers of strategic developments in the Indian Ocean region has been China's participation in a massive civil and military infrastructure development program in Burma, which has included new and improved harbours and airfields. For example, Chinese firms (some reputedly associated with the PLA) have been involved in the construction or upgrading of port facilities at Sittwe (Akyab) and Kyaukpyu on the Bay of Bengal, Bassein and Hainggyi Island in the Irrawaddy Delta, Mergui in southern Burma, and at Rangoon. As might be expected, several of these harbours are also home to elements of the Burma Navy. Some commentators have suggested that, with more modern wharf and cargo handling facilities, these ports may not only handle an increased flow of trade goods from southern China, should that eventuate, but they could also be used as forward operating bases for the PLA Navy (PLAN). Alternatively, they could become logistical depots for the replenishment of PLAN vessels operating in the Indian Ocean. As one analyst has written, in these circumstances, 'Chinese warships could sustain a far more intense and effective pace of operations in the Indian Ocean'.⁵ The new Chinese intelligence facility on Zadetkyi Kyun is reported to include an earth satellite station that Indian officials believe is capable of maintaining contact with Chinese submarines operating in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

In addition, Indian authorities have reportedly questioned Rangoon's motives for what has been described as a 'new wave' of airfield construction projects, that have been undertaken in north and north-western Burma in recent years, reportedly with Chinese assistance. These works have been at An, Bhamo, Hkamti, Homalin, Kale, Kyaukhtu, Monywa, Pakokku and Putao. All but one of these airfields (Bhamo, which is close to China's southern border) are said to be 'clustered in a zone running north to south adjacent to Burma's border with India'.⁶ Several of the new or improved runways are now reportedly capable of handling jets and large aircraft. According to one story published in the *Hindustan Times*, the construction of these airfields has 'unnerved the Indian security establishment', which has carefully noted China's involvement.⁷ In response to Indian queries, the military government in Rangoon (known since 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) has stated that these new airfields are simply part of a large scale program to upgrade Burma's outdated civil aviation infrastructure. They are also designed to open up areas of the country which were formerly very hard to administer. China's involvement

is explained away on purely commercial grounds. These explanations are plausible, but clearly Indian suspicions remain.

Over the past 15 years, some Indian commentators have not been content with drawing attention to China's arms sales to Burma, the apparent growth of intelligence links, and to these extensive port and airfield construction projects. They have gone even further and claimed that, by the early 1990s, China had already established a permanent military presence in the country, including a massive tri-service base in the Irrawaddy delta. The base, reportedly on Hainggyi Island, is said to have specialised maintenance facilities capable of undertaking second echelon repairs to combat aircraft. It is also said to be able to replenish Chinese naval vessels (including nuclear submarines) during regular deployments to the Indian Ocean. According to another report, the base is also home to at least a corps of PLA ground troops. One Indian estimate has put the cost of this base, purportedly called Base Number 013, at 'US\$2.50 billion at the very least'.⁸ Repeated Burmese denials of any Chinese military bases in the country have simply been dismissed as untrue. To help support such claims, some analysts have pointed to the Indian Coast Guard's capture, in 1994, of three Chinese trawlers in Indian waters. These vessels, which were flying Burmese flags, were reportedly equipped with sophisticated electronic surveillance equipment, capable of eavesdropping on official Indian communications. This incident has been cited as further evidence of the strategic links between China and Burma, and of China's aggressive designs in the Indian Ocean region.

While some reports about China's relationship with Burma since 1988 are clearly true, either in whole or in part, the accuracy of many others is highly suspect. Few can be verified from independent sources and a number are based on unsubstantiated rumours. Beyond the usual bland press releases, neither China nor Burma has made any real effort to inform the international community about important aspects of their developing relationship. For example, few details are available about China's frequent high level exchanges with Burma, the terms of their economic deals, or the exact nature of their defence links. In particular, little is known about the Rangoon regime's own strategic thinking. While a few Burma-watchers have managed to discover some useful information, these gaps in the public record have often been filled by speculation, guesswork and even pure invention. Claims that should have been dismissed out of hand, as plainly incorrect and at times even quite hysterical (such as those relating to a massive PLA base on Hainggyi Island), have been quoted by some commentators in support of particular arguments. Once in print, such

statements have been repeated by others, giving them a respectability that they do not deserve. Some of the more tendentious reports that have appeared over the past 15 years could have even been planted by self-interested parties.

Regional Reactions

All this publicity has clouded the picture and made clear, objective analysis of this issue more difficult. Yet, accurate or not, these and more considered reports have played on existing suspicions of China's long term strategic aims, and helped fuel a more immediate concern that Burma's relationship with China could threaten India, and possibly even regional stability. These perceptions have in turn prompted a number of specific policy decisions by regional governments.

India, at first an outspoken critic of the SLORC and a supporter of exiled Burmese opposition groups, soon reassessed the value of maintaining a hard line against Rangoon. Since 1989 New Delhi has watched anxiously as Chinese capital, aid and military equipment has flowed into Burma. Fears of China's intentions have been heightened by the repeated news reports of Chinese naval bases being constructed on the Burmese coast and intelligence collection stations being developed in and around the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. As one Indian analyst has put it;

While China professes a policy of peace and friendliness towards India, its deeds are clearly aimed at the strategic encirclement of India in order to marginalise India in Asia and tie it down to the Indian sub-continent.... Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have been assiduously and cleverly cultivated towards this end. Myanmar has been recently added to this list.⁹

These fears prompted a major policy review in the early 1990s, as India became concerned that its hostile attitude was pushing Burma further into China's embrace. Since that time, New Delhi has been engaged in a policy of establishing closer bilateral ties with Rangoon through increased political, economic and, more recently, even military ties. There have been a number of high level visits from both sides. At the same time, India is trying to develop its economic relations with Southeast Asian states such as Thailand, while offering itself to Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam as a strategic counter-weight to China.

While reluctant openly to say so, for fear of offending China, the Southeast Asian states have also been concerned about Rangoon's developing relationship with Beijing. In the early 1990s Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia all sought, and received, firm assurances from the SLORC

that Burma would not go too far down the China road. While there were clearly strong economic motives, part of the reluctance of Southeast Asian countries to join in the West's public condemnation of the Rangoon regime during the 1990s almost certainly stemmed from a fear of driving Burma further into the arms of China. In addition, there were a number of reasons why Burma was admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, against the wishes of its dialogue partners in the West, but a major factor seems to have been a desire on the part of member states to draw Rangoon away from Beijing and prevent it from becoming China's stalking horse in the region. In the light of ASEAN's recent criticisms of the SPDC, for its attack against (and subsequent imprisonment of) opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, it is interesting to speculate what has changed, to make the ASEAN members now more confident about openly expressing their views. It is possible that China's apparently more measured approach to regional issues, including its support for the global war against terrorism and US attempts to curb North Korea's nuclear program, have eased ASEAN's fears of the Rangoon-Beijing nexus.

Other countries in the Asia-Pacific region have also been feeling uneasy. For example, Japan has apparently been concerned about China's increasing influence in Burma, and the implications for regional stability of China's perceived rivalry with India. According to Henry Kissinger, this is one reason why the Japanese government has been prepared to provide aid to Burma, despite the opposition of the US and other Western democracies.¹⁰ Japan is also reported to be worried about the security of its SLOCs through the Malacca Strait and Indian Ocean, which are essential for Japan's Middle East oil imports. The possibility of increased Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean, and the reported construction of Chinese naval and intelligence facilities in the Mergui Archipelago (in southern Burma), have added a new factor to Japan's consideration of this issue. The Republic of Korea (ROK) shares some of Japan's concerns. It too is dependent on oil shipments from the Middle East, and needs to keep open the SLOCs through the Indian Ocean. The ROK also hopes to develop its 'textbook-complementary' trade with Burma, exchanging manufactured goods for Burmese raw materials.¹¹ While former President Kim Dae Jung was a consistent supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese democratic movement, the ROK too has been keen to see international friction avoided in the Indian Ocean region.

Surprisingly, Burma's radically new foreign policies, the extraordinary growth of its armed forces, and the wider strategic implications of these developments for regional countries, do not appear to have attracted a great

deal of interest on the part of Western analysts and officials. Yet this may soon change. For example, should the Bush Administration once again come to see its relationship with Beijing in terms of a 'strategic competition', rather than the kind of 'strategic partnership' that has effectively been developing on issues like international terrorism and North Korean weapons of mass destruction, then Burma's close relationship with China could assume much greater importance. Rather than being dismissed as a small, isolated and weak player in the region, Burma could be seen as an integral part of a much larger and more important security architecture. For example, the rapidly developing ties between the US and India, including shared interests in a ballistic missile shield, could be viewed by Beijing as part of a long term move to offset China's strong security relationships with countries like Burma and Pakistan. Similarly, US military aid to Thailand, aimed in the first instance at stemming the flow of narcotics across the Burmese border, could be interpreted as the beginnings of a proxy struggle between the US on the one hand and China on the other, through their Thai and Burmese allies.

For its part, China has much to gain from a close relationship with Burma. China remains anxious about the security of its frontiers, including the long and sensitive border it shares with Burma. A friendly and politically compatible government in Rangoon, looking to China for support against the Western democracies, and dependent on Chinese economic assistance, is very much to Beijing's liking. This is particularly the case, given that the alternative to the current military regime may be opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, seen by Chinese leaders as being strongly sympathetic to the West. A democratic government in Rangoon would thus add to China's own long-standing fears of strategic encirclement by the US and its allies. Beijing is keen to develop the economy of southern China, by exporting goods through a new transport corridor stretching from Yunnan by road to the Irrawaddy River at Bhamo, and thence by barges and trucks to Kyaukpyu on the Bay of Bengal. Burma is already exporting timber, agricultural and marine products, and precious stones to China, and is receiving light industrial machinery and consumer goods in return. Also, while regular Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean are still a distant prospect, some analysts believe that access to Burmese ports could eventually permit the PLA Navy to 'control and dominate the Indian Ocean's SLOCs', including the Straits of Malacca.¹² In addition, as noted above, Burma's geostrategic position on the Bay of Bengal seems to have attracted the interest of China's intelligence services.

At a broader diplomatic level, the ASEAN countries are probably correct in judging that China sees Burma as a sympathetic voice in regional councils.

In this regard, Beijing would not have to dictate any terms to Rangoon, as the Burmese government already shares Beijing's views on such key issues as internal security, human rights and the entitlement of other governments and multilateral organisations to involve themselves in a country's domestic affairs. China no doubt welcomes the addition of Burma to that diverse collection of countries around the world which share a concern about the US's sole superpower status, and global economic influence. Many of these countries also distrust the UN's increased preparedness since 1990 to intervene in other countries, on the grounds of broad security concerns, humanitarian sentiment or the need for regional stability. China knows that its position on the UN Security Council has been seen by the Rangoon regime as an ultimate guarantee against a UN-sponsored military operation to restore democracy in Burma or to create autonomous ethnic states, along the lines of the multilateral intervention in East Timor. In return, it feels it can count on Burma's support in other UN debates, relating to subjects like national sovereignty and human rights. The relationship effectively serves the needs of both sides.

Different Interpretations

There are three broad schools of thought about China's future relationship with Burma, and its strategic implications for the Indian Ocean region. There are some key differences of view to distinguish them, but also many points of agreement. For the sake of argument, however, they can be called the domination school, the partnership school and the rejectionist school.¹³

The domination school harks back to the great power politics and strategic balances of the Cold War. Its members argue that small, isolated and poverty-stricken Burma must inevitably succumb to the pressures of its much larger neighbour, and effectively become a pawn in China's bid to achieve world power status. The members of this school cite China's apparent 'stranglehold' over Burma, as exercised through its loans, arms sales, trade and influence along Burma's troubled northern borders. In these circumstances, it is felt, Rangoon would have little choice but to conform to Beijing's wishes. This school discounts Burma's ability to manage its own affairs in the face of China's overwhelming strategic weight, and predicts that by the beginning of the next decade Burma will have become a 'satellite' or 'client state' of an expansionist China.¹⁴ Burma is thus seen as an ally in China's attempts to surround and contain India. To this school, Burma's new and improved ports are potential support bases for Chinese warships intent on dominating the Straits of Malacca, and controlling the sea lines of communication through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East.

Burma's new airfields are future bases for Chinese combat aircraft intent on threatening eastern India. The reported intelligence links between Rangoon and Beijing are an integral part of this wider Chinese design. Looking further afield, the Rangoon regime has been characterised as an agent of the Chinese government, able and willing to subvert regional councils on behalf of its larger patron.

The second, or partnership, school broadly accepts the main arguments of the domination school, but is much more cautious in its predictions of how and when China will come to draw Burma into its orbit. The members of this school argue, for example, that the China-Burma military relationship;

constitutes an important pattern of gradually expanding Chinese military activity in the Indian Ocean region. Taken together, this pattern suggests that China's leaders see that region as an area of substantial Chinese interests and that they aspire to *eventual* establishment of a permanent and effective military presence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵

This school rejects the idea that China will simply impose its views on Burma, and sees this process gradually developing along the lines of a more even-handed strategic alliance. Its members acknowledge Rangoon's strong sense of national identity, and the difficulties that have been experienced by the Chinese in developing their relationship with Burma over the past 15 years. Yet the members of the partnership school feel that, while Burma may not be prepared to agree to a significant Chinese military presence now, the Rangoon government will ultimately come to recognise the benefits of a deeper strategic partnership with Beijing, 'founded on mutual trust and common interests'.¹⁶ Burma is seen as having much to gain from an alliance of this kind. Under these circumstances, the Rangoon regime may well grant the PLA facilities in Burma, which Beijing can use to extend its strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region.

The third, or rejectionist, school seems to consist mainly of scholars with a specialised knowledge of Burma, and Sinologists sceptical of China's purportedly 'expansionist' designs.¹⁷ Their arguments consist of three main points.

Firstly, they argue that, throughout history, Burma has always been very suspicious of China, and only turned to Beijing in 1989 out of dire necessity after it was ostracised by the West and made to suffer a range of economic sanctions. This change of policy was adopted reluctantly and by no means represented a permanent shift in focus or allegiance. The members of this school recognise the diplomatic, military and economic benefits that China

currently offers Burma, and the pressure that China could exert on Rangoon if it chose to do so. They are much more confident than the members of the other two schools, however, that Burma will be able to manage the complexities of the bilateral relationship, and resist becoming a major player in the strategic competition between China and other powers, like India. To support their case, they cite Burma's fierce national pride and its preparedness over the years to bear enormous costs to maintain its independence and territorial sovereignty. They accept the military regime's repeated assurances that permanent Chinese military bases will never be permitted in Burma. Also, the members of this school believe that Burma is looking first to Southeast Asia for its models of government and economy, not to China.

Secondly, followers of the rejectionist school claim that China has not been as successful in winning Burma's confidence as is often reported. Despite their unprecedented closeness at present, Beijing has not always been able to get its own way with Rangoon, nor seems likely to win everything it wants. For example, the Irrawaddy transport corridor scheme, a high priority for the Chinese government, has struck numerous problems in recent years. First the SLORC, and since 1997 the SPDC, has been dragging its feet over the scheme, apparently troubled by the economic and political leverage it will give China. Also, there is considerable unhappiness in the Tatmadaw over the standard of workmanship and capabilities of the Chinese military materiel that has been acquired by Burma. To China's annoyance, the Tatmadaw is now turning to Russia and other countries (like the Ukraine and North Korea) for its latest arms acquisitions. Indeed, the Chinese embassy in Rangoon has told one Western analyst that it feels it is 'walking on egg shells' with the military government.¹⁸ Chinese officials have kept a low public profile, and learned to tread warily in contacts with their Burmese counterparts. This seems to be out of concern that they will upset the notoriously volatile and unpredictable military leadership, and lose the gains China has made since 1989. China may even fear a recurrence of the violent demonstrations that led to a break in diplomatic relations between Rangoon and Beijing in 1967.

Thirdly, while it suits Burma to develop its relationship with China now, it will always retain the option of drawing back from China's close embrace. China casts such a long shadow, that the very thought of a small, weak country like Burma being able to resist its advances or to reduce its level of engagement seems far fetched. Yet there are already a number of precedents for this to occur. Vietnam, for example, was able to detach itself from a very close relationship with China, and even went on to resist an invasion by Chinese military forces. Similarly, North Korea was once

beholden to China for its continued existence, but never surrendered its sovereignty. China now admits that it has very little control over its old ally, despite Pyongyang's almost total dependence on China for critical resources like fuel oil. Even Pakistan, which is often quoted in this context as another creature of China, has been able to decide its own fate and develop independent relations with countries like the United States. Should the Rangoon government wish to escape China's embrace, the rejectionist school argues, then there is little chance that the military regime in Rangoon would be left to manage the process alone. India would clearly be prepared to assist and other regional countries would doubtless see it in their interests to do so as well. If Burma could resolve its key differences with the Western democracies, even they would be prepared to offer the Rangoon regime a range of other options.

Indeed, it can be argued that, in many respects, it is not Beijing but Rangoon that has the whip hand in this relationship. The military government has been quick to recognise Burma's growing importance in the more fluid Asia-Pacific strategic environment. It knows the way in which its relationship with China is viewed by other countries. Over the past 15 years, the Rangoon regime has become adept at exploiting Burma's geostrategic position and manipulating the concerns of its regional neighbours. For example, it has been quite comfortable about using its close relationship with Beijing, and the possibility that it might become an ally of an expansionist China, to attract support from influential countries like India, and to gain attention in important councils like ASEAN. The military government would no doubt be prepared to do so again, if it felt the need. The developing relationship with India, its links with ASEAN and its arms deals with Russia and other suppliers, can all be seen as part of Rangoon's efforts to balance China's influence and to keep open other foreign policy options.

The Future

There are many uncertainties, and some genuine concerns, but in looking at the Burma-China relationship it is important not to over-react. As one noted Indian strategic analyst has written, a degree of caution is warranted, but not undue alarm.¹⁹ This view has been echoed by other regional specialists. It is always easy to develop dramatic and worrying scenarios for the future but, given the paucity of accurate information and the many different ways the current situation could develop in the future, these need to be treated with caution.

All analysts studying this question, however, seem to agree that the China-Burma relationship has developed a life of its own and, given other

strategic developments, may come to grow beyond the power of either country to control. This could have unpredictable results for the Indian Ocean region. For example, the recent strengthening of economic and other sanctions against the Rangoon regime by the Bush Administration, in response to the imprisonment in June of Aung San Suu Kyi, may have some unintended results. Faced with these measures (and unprecedented criticisms by other regional countries), the Rangoon regime may turn even more to China for diplomatic and economic support. The embattled military government may also feel that it has no alternative but to develop closer relations with fellow pariah states, like North Korea. For the primary consideration of the military regime in Rangoon is, and will remain, the retention of political power, and this will take precedence over any perceived impact on the wider strategic environment of the Indian Ocean region.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, R.O. Tilman, *The Enemy Beyond: External Threat Perceptions in the ASEAN Region* (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984).
- ² See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (EastBridge, Norwalk, 2002).
- ³ These developments have been examined in detail by Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (EastBridge, Norwalk, 2002).
- ⁴ Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1998), pp.219-30.
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In the Indian Ocean region, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea are important, on the coasts of which there are two extremely unstable states: Pakistan and Burma. Thus, in the event of the collapse of statehood and a change of regime in Pakistan or the intensification of the rivalry between China and India for the energy resources in Burma, changes in the entire region are inevitable. As mentioned above, India and China also pursue an active policy regarding influence in the Indian Ocean region, apart from the United States. It should be noted that not only is India successfully developing trade relations with the states of the Arab world, in addition to this, it is actively building up its naval forces. Already, it is one of the largest naval countries in the world, with 155 combat ships available. Sri Lanka's location in the Indian Ocean region as an island State has been of strategic geopolitical relevance to several major powers. Sri Lanka was colonised by Portuguese, Dutch and the British to be used as a transit hub for trading goods. These powers also used Sri Lankan ports for docking and refuelling their ships which were navigating their vast empires. Some examples that highlight Western interests in Sri Lanka's strategic location are the British Defence and External affairs Agreement of 1948, and the Maritime Agreement with USSR of 1962 during the Sirimao Bandaranaike administration.