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# The Nature and Management of Myanmar's Alignment with China: The SLORC/SPDC Years

Jürgen Haacke

**Abstract:** Recent research has focused increasingly on the strategies that Southeast Asian countries have adopted vis-à-vis a rising China. This article aims to contribute to the literature by discussing Myanmar's alignment posture towards China under the post-September 1988 military regime. In particular, the purpose is to specify and explain the nature and management of this alignment. The argument is as follows: first, during the two decades of SLORC/SPDC (State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council) rule, Myanmar sought only limited alignment with China, focused primarily on diplomatic support and protection, with only a moderate record of bilateral defence and security cooperation. Second, Myanmar's alignment with China after 1988 was shaped by at least three important factors: the core principles of the country's previous foreign policy after colonial rule, a deeply embedded sense of nationalism among the military elite, and Burma's Cold War interaction with China. Third, in managing its alignment with China over the last decade, the SPDC avoided compromises perceived as unpalatable in return for the promise of diplomatic protection and instead 'rewarded' Beijing by consenting to economic and infrastructure projects that were considered to advance the regime's interest in either generating state revenue or contributing to the consolidation and expansion of control over state territory. The SPDC also pushed Beijing into reconsidering its position on the sensitive issue of armed ethnic groups in the Sino-Myanmar border region. The Myanmar case thus shows that lesser powers can obtain security benefits from a major power without this necessarily requiring more than limited alignment or entailing a serious erosion of political autonomy, particularly when the former possesses valuable natural resources and enjoys considerable geo-strategic significance for the latter.

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**Keywords:** Myanmar, Burma, China, hedging, alignment

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## Introduction

A significant amount of research (e.g. Acharya 1999; Goh 2005; Khong 1999; Kang 2007; Leifer 1999) has now been dedicated to the alignment choices and broader national security strategies of the member states of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Of particular interest has been how these countries have positioned themselves vis-à-vis a rising China. Increasingly, the consensus is that ASEAN countries have been pursuing a so-called hedging strategy (e.g. Kuik 2008; Chung 2004), whereby China is engaged on several fronts, primarily by way of economic exchange and diplomacy, while the simultaneous pursuit of security and defence relations with the United States is intended to provide a safeguard for these countries should their relations with China turn sour. This strategy, as pursued by ASEAN states towards the major regional powers, has also been described as one of multidirectional ‘omni-enmeshment’ and ‘complex balancing’ (Goh 2007/8). While hedging is routinely seen as capturing the strategies pursued by Southeast Asia states generally and the original ASEAN countries in particular, scholars have yet to unambiguously conclude and demonstrate that Myanmar too is pursuing a hedging strategy of the kind mentioned above.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there is arguably no consensus within the literature on the SLORC/SPDC’s alignment choice vis-à-vis China. Some analysts have suggested that Myanmar has been bandwagoning with China in the post-1989 period (Roy 2005), and journalists and commentators regularly depict Myanmar as a present-day client state or vassal of the PRC (e.g. Aung Zaw 2011). Meanwhile, others have pointed to Myanmar’s seemingly consistent efforts to offset China’s influence and role in Myanmar through membership in regional frameworks such as ASEAN and by developing relations with India (e.g. Haacke 2006).

This paper<sup>2</sup> aims to explore and explain the nature and management of Myanmar’s alignment towards China. It is organized into five main sections: the first section outlines the conceptual parameters for this paper. The second section focuses on the nature of the alignment under the recent military regime. The third identifies several factors that can account for Myanmar’s distinct alignment posture vis-à-vis China from the late 1980s, while

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- 1 Drawing on its official designation, the article uses Myanmar for the period from 1989. No political statement is intended. Burma is the preferred designation for the period up to 1989. With the 2008 Constitution coming into effect, the country’s official designation is now Republic of the Union of Myanmar.
  - 2 An earlier version was presented at the Association of Asian Studies Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, 31 March–3 April 2011. I am grateful for the helpful comments by fellow panellists, especially Anne Booth, as well as Christopher R. Hughes.

the fourth section explores how the military government has managed this alignment in practice. The last section briefly examines whether Myanmar's new, nominally civilian administration is likely to deviate from the SLORC/SPDC pattern of alignment with China.

## Alignment and Hedging

Alignments are conventionally considered to constitute state responses to perceived security threats posed by other states.<sup>3</sup> Some alignments take the form of an alliance, but not all do. Snyder (1997: 6) has defined alignment as mutual expectations, and, more specifically, 'as expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions.' By comparison, an alliance goes further in that it entails 'a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states' (Wolfers 1968: 268).<sup>4</sup> Notably, as Snyder (1991: 125) maintains, alignment should be understood to cover both 'alignment against' as well as 'alignment with' someone. This view is reflected in the distinction between (external) balancing and bandwagoning. The former normally involves a range of steps to pool military strength against external power (capabilities) or a shared perceived threat.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, bandwagoning denotes alignment with the threatening state (Walt 1987: 21).<sup>6</sup> Generally, balancing is considered the norm. However, it may be assumed that the weaker a state is that finds itself to be threatened, the more likely it is to bandwagon, especially vis-à-vis proximate power or threats. Also, while the above definition of alignment perhaps suggested that alignments at heart consist of expectations or promises, the literature clearly holds that alignment should moreover be understood as a form of security practice, albeit one that may involve quite different commitments and arrangements (Duffield 2008: 293).

The growing reliance on 'hedging' to categorize the foreign policy and security strategies of Southeast Asian countries is linked to numerous scholars decrying the utility of relying on 'balancing' and 'bandwagoning' for

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3 According to Walt (1987), the level of threat is affected by four key factors: the distribution or asymmetry of power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions.

4 Having initially used a broad definition of alliances, Walt (1997: 157) later suggested that 'the defining feature of any alliance is a commitment for mutual military support against some external actor(s) in some specified set of circumstances.'

5 Also see works on soft balancing (e.g. Pape 2005), however.

6 Bandwagoning is also associated with opportunity for gain, i.e. as alignment that serves to obtain coveted values (see Schweller 1994).

analytical purposes.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, analysts covering the international relations of Southeast Asia tend to see both unadulterated forms of (external) balancing and bandwagoning as strategic choices that most decision-makers in Southeast Asia would seek to avoid rather than embrace. This was already apparent in the 1990s, when scholars identified a range of potentially complementary approaches among Southeast Asian states in response to China's rise, including engagement and domination-avoidance.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, recent work associates hedging with economic pragmatism, 'binding-engagement', limited bandwagoning, dominance denial and indirect balancing combined (Kuik 2008: 165-171). Hedging also captures the prevailing strategic flux and accompanying risks.

This article agrees that the complexity of strategies developing states will adopt vis-à-vis major powers may well not be adequately captured when conceiving alignment choices simply as balancing or bandwagoning. Likewise, however, it is not yet clear that the various facets of such strategies are necessarily better understood as hedging. First, alignment choices extend beyond balancing, bandwagoning and hedging. Such other choices may include nonalignment. While taking into account that declaratory policy may of course diverge from policy practice, it is noteworthy that several countries in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, purport to be nonaligned. When trying to ascertain and analyse the alignment choice of a country towards another, it thus makes sense to avoid unnecessary theoretical or conceptual constraints. Second, whether states can be said to hedge in practice will depend on whether their substantive foreign policy conforms with the suppositions associated with hedging. In this regard, there is the apparent difficulty that there would not appear to be a consensus definition of hedging. For some, hedging denotes a strategy against hegemonic domination in the context of strategic uncertainty (Roy 2005: 306; also see Medeiros 2005/6). For others, hedging involves

a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Not least for these reasons, the category can of course also be applied beyond Southeast Asia. See, for instance, Foot 2006.

8 See the contributions in Johnston and Ross 1999.

9 Goh 2005: 2. In her assessment (Goh 2007/8: 121, 132, 139) Southeast Asian countries are not simply 'hedging their bets', however, but committed to forging a regional balance of influence to bring about a preferred vision of regional order which 'blatantly favors U.S. preponderance.'

Identifying both risk-contingency options (e.g. indirect balancing) and return-maximising options (e.g. economic engagement) as elements of a hedging strategy, Kuik has suggested that hedging should be understood as

a behaviour in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes (Kuik 2008: 163).

John Ciorciari (2007: 11) has argued that hedging

refers more specifically to attempts by developing countries to avoid alignments that require their support for a great power's armed struggle, bind them to particular foreign policy positions, or grant the great power permanent basing facilities.

It would moreover appear that even in the case of what is arguably one of the most sophisticated attempts yet to think about hedging, ambiguity remains regarding the specific conditions that would apparently need to be met for hedging to occur. As noted, Kuik (2008: 163) has suggested that hedging will prevail only 'under the situation of high-uncertainties and high-stakes'. Kuik (2008: 165) has sought to clarify by adding that hedging is possible only if three conditions are met: a) the absence of an immediate threat, b) the absence of any ideological fault lines, and c) the absence of an all-out Great Power rivalry. Yet when these situations of high-uncertainties and high-stakes apply may not be entirely straightforward to ascertain. Whose perspective matters? Should high uncertainty necessarily be equated, as Kuik suggests, with situations in which states face no unambiguous threats or do not benefit from significant levels of amity in their bilateral relations with a particular power? Likewise, do high stakes only pertain when questions of state survival arise? While there is a benefit in delimiting hedging as an alignment choice, the variation in its meaning, albeit perhaps only slight in some cases, and the specific circumstances attached to the concept by some, raise questions about the value of making hedging an alternative starting point for the analysis of the alignment choices of states. In contrast, the alignment literature more generally is clearly not as significantly affected by definitional issues, nor bound by the specific conditions associated with hedging (see below).

Second, while hedging can be applied to describe the approach to a particular bilateral relationship, its invocation in studies relating to the foreign policy of Southeast Asian states confirms that it is mostly used and meant to cover the strategies adopted vis-à-vis the two key powers affecting stability and peace in the region: the US and China. Interestingly, the nature and scope of security and defence relations that ASEAN countries have

with the United States barely seem to matter though, raising the question whether at least some of those who posit that ASEAN states engage in hedging behaviour possibly pack too much into the category. As Ciorciari argued, the hedging literature

is not specific enough about the relationship between broad hedging strategies and security alignments [... so that the] the concept is not terribly useful in helping illuminate the nuances in alignment politics (Ciorciari 2010: 7).

As such, by focusing on hedging, analysts may lose sight of important other questions, especially regarding (1) the nature of particular alignments, and (2) the political dynamics underlying their management. These issues will form the focus of this paper on Myanmar's alignment with China.

Third, those arguing that hedging best encapsulates the strategies of Southeast Asian states have to date tended not to focus in much detail on the Myanmar case.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, scholars might still want to conclude that under the SLORC/SPDC Myanmar too was hedging, but it is important to recall that while ASEAN's strategies toward China are said to generally pinpoint a preference for a US led regional order, the reality for the SLORC/SPDC regime was that it had to deal with a rising China in the context of very difficult relations with Washington. Indeed, the post-1988 military leadership viewed the United States through the prism of regime and national security because Washington consistently demanded political change from SLORC/SPDC and offered unwavering support for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (Steinberg 2010). Myanmar's generals even considered possible until quite recently American military intervention (Selth 2008). Washington's approach toward Naypyidaw only recently shifted slightly when, following an extensive Burma policy review, the incoming Obama administration opted in September 2009 to also apply vis-à-vis Than Shwe's regime its generally preferred foreign policy approach of pragmatic engagement. Myanmar's ties with Washington during SLORC/SPDC rule thus were for the most part notably different from those enjoyed for long by all other ASEAN members. What role the US may have played in Myanmar's grand strategy under the last military regime (especially after 2008) should be the subject of a fuller assessment that will not be undertaken here. Notably, hedging might also not really capture Myanmar's specific relationship with China, especially given the standard notion that it assumes the economic and diplomatic engagement of the PRC but no substantial promises relating to security or defence. Here, the focus is only the nature and management of Myanmar's alignment vis-à-vis China.

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10 For an exception, see Ciorciari 2007 and 2010: 176-182.

Drawing on the alignment literature, the article's parameters are set by three basic points.

First, alignments differ. Ciorciari (2010), for instance, usefully distinguishes among three kinds of alignments: tight alignments, limited alignments, and nonalignment. As noted, alignments diverge concerning the extent to which states are expected and do provide support that will enhance the security of other states. Promises and expectations of support will often be mutual, but need not always be. Tight alignment is associated with military alliances. Less far reaching promises and support suggest that only limited alignment is in place. In contrast to limited alignment, genuine nonalignment may be associated with the deliberate absence of promises and expectations concerning various forms of support and related action. Developing countries, including those in Southeast Asia, are believed to prefer limited alignments (Ciorciari 2010). These may involve various forms of practical cooperation designed to strengthen their security, including the transfer of defence capabilities. Limited alignments may involve preferential arms sales, joint training exercises, or (possibly commercial) access to military facilities or logistical and technical assistance (Ciorciari 2010: 8). Limited alignments might also involve the routine exchange of military intelligence or industrial defence cooperation. Limited alignment can also be associated with expectations of crucial diplomatic support that will help protect the state (and the incumbent regime) against perceived threats. Those adopting a broad definition of alignment will probably also regard promises of economic support (e.g. financial aid, access to technology, possibilities for enrichment) and their delivery as suitable indicators of limited alignment.

Second, Snyder (1991) posits that alignments, which he suggests will ultimately be negotiated, are shaped by strength or power inequalities, past interaction between the states concerned, as well as conflicts and common interests among them. While these factors are bound to be relevant in analysing the nature of alignments, here I identify, in part drawing on other recent scholarship,<sup>11</sup> three to some extent related factors that seem particularly relevant when decision-makers in lesser states pass judgement on the preferred nature of their alignment with larger powers: the strength of elite and popular nationalism, the availability of other sources of protection and assistance, and previous patterns of enmity and amity. How would these factors effect the nature of said alignments? The general expectation would probably be that the more pervasive and strong the nationalist outlook and perhaps consequently also the deeper the political commitment to nona-

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11 For a discussion of the influences on alignments involving developing states, see Ciorciari 2010: Chapter 1.

lignment, the more likely it is that any actual alignment entered into will also be limited. Also, the more possibilities exist for the lesser state to address perceived security threats by potentially relying on support from third states, the more likely that the alignment will not be particularly close. Equally, one should expect the alignment to be limited if there is a substantial record of historical suspicion and conflict between the two states.

Third, concerning the management of alignments the literature has pointed in particular to the risks of abandonment and entrapment (Snyder 1997). While states bound together in close-knit alignments seem particularly exposed to these risks, less powerful states benefiting from limited alignment with major powers are also vulnerable, especially if the major power in question has to decide between its wider regional or global interests and support for a particular lesser state. A common notion concerning asymmetric tight alignments is also that to avoid the abandonment by the major power and to secure stable support, decision-makers of the lesser power are prepared to pay a political price that may involve sacrificing certain aspects of its political autonomy (e.g. Morrow 1991), i.e. the ability to determine and pursue their own respective policies towards both the domestic and external realms. In practice, this could take the form of greater support of specific objectives and policies pursued by the major power, or various other concessions pertaining to domestic policies. This trade off should to some extent also be expected in more limited alignments. It is also possible that the political price for non-abandonment in a limited alignment is the intensification of the bilateral relationship itself, including concerning practical security and defence cooperation. However, the risk of abandonment in a limited alignment is likely to be less severe if the minor power is also able to rely on support from other states, especially other major powers, in ways that do not undermine its security. Particularly without alternative sources of support, one would under most conditions not expect the lesser state to seriously challenge the major power with which it is aligned, even if the alignment is only limited. In so far as economic assistance is an important feature of an alignment relationship, the general rationalist expectation is that:

aid is most likely to create reliable proxies when the recipients are so vulnerable and dependent that they are forced to follow the patron's wishes even when those wishes conflict with their own (Walt 1987: 45).

However, Walt's finding concerning the Middle East, based in part on the very moderate Soviet influence over states such as Egypt or Syria during the Cold War, was that more aid made available by the major power to the minor power does not automatically translate into political leverage for the

former. This insight may be equally relevant for more limited alignments in other regions.

## The SLORC/SPDC Alignment with China

As seen by the military regime that came to power in September 1988, the army had that year come close to losing control of the state as leftist radicals and neo-imperialist foreign forces, apparently intent on breaking up Burma, had sought to exploit the unfolding political unrest (Taylor 2009: 395). The incoming military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, assumed control to defend the country's territorial integrity, sovereignty and unity. In foreign affairs, the SLORC abandoned the strong isolationist streak that characterized the Ne Win years. In particular, the regime was soon adjudged to have formed very close links with China. According to Johan Malik (1998: 109), the military junta after 1988 'abandoned the traditional policy of political equidistance between China and India', becoming 'a puppet of China as well as a base for future Chinese military operations, thus upsetting the regional balance of power.' He also argued that China and Myanmar had formed a 'de facto military alliance' (Malik 1998: 113). Writing several years later, Storey (2011: 84) also takes SPDC-run Myanmar to be 'a quasi-ally of the PRC.' Other analysts have similarly posited that bilateral rapprochement between Yangon and Beijing in the late 1980s yielded a 'Sino-Burmese military entente' (EgretEAU 2003: 97), or at least the 'closest ever' relationship between the two sides (Tin Maung Maung Than 2003). Scholars note varying reasons why the SLORC developed ties with China. As Ciorciari (2010: 179), for instance, put it: Myanmar's 'desperate need for aid was perhaps the decisive factor that propelled Myanmar into a much closer alignment with China.' Others emphasize the SLORC's fears of US military intervention after 1988 (e.g. Selth 2002: 40-41).

Assessment of Myanmar-China relations positing a de facto military alliance between Beijing and Yangon have to large extent built on two developments: first, the major SLORC arms purchases from China in the early 1990s, which allowed the Burmese military to improve both its conventional defence capability and its ability to conduct anti-insurgency operations; and, second, China's apparent role not only in modernizing or constructing military facilities, but also in winning access to physical infrastructure. More specifically, analysts for years focused on alleged Chinese bases and intelligence gathering activities aimed at India, especially on Hainggyi Island (in the Irrawaddy) and Great Coco Island in the Adaman Sea.

Retrospectively, the case for propounding a close-knit alignment by the early or mid 1990s, or indeed later, seems relatively weak. Explicit significant

defence commitments or security guarantees, both unilateral and mutual, are not on public record for the period of SLORC/SPDC rule and cannot be assumed to have existed. Instead, the two countries emphasize regularly the special nature of the so-called 'paukphaw' relationship, which is framed by a declaratory commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Of course, tight alignment might also rest on secret understandings, especially if these were flanked by substantial practical defence cooperation. However, actual Myanmar-China defence cooperation, even in the early 1990s, would appear to have been far less significant than is often assumed. Certainly, both governments consistently issued denials concerning suggestions that there were Chinese bases in Myanmar. Analysts too have concluded that Chinese bases in Myanmar amount to a myth, while also suggesting that even the level of presumed intelligence gathering and sharing between Myanmar and the PRC may for long have been grossly exaggerated (Selth 2007). This finding rests not least on the point that as Myanmar's relations with New Delhi improved from the mid-1990s, suspicions and allegations initially put forward over many years by various Indian sources regarding a Chinese military presence in Myanmar were voiced less frequently and ultimately retracted in 2005 by India's Chief of Naval Staff.

How far-reaching was Myanmar-China post-Cold War defence cooperation during the SLORC/SPRC years? While its full extent is possibly not captured by some of the literature, the latter does not yield significant evidence that would immediately point to more than limited alignment between the two countries during this time. Bilateral exchanges on defence matters of course took place on many occasions, but Beijing and Naypyidaw apparently did not initiate the kind of annual defence dialogue that the PRC started with Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Singapore between 2001 and 2006 (Storey 2011: 73). Similarly, China conducted military education and training for members of the Tatmadaw, much of which was tied to arms acquisitions, but more substantial practical cooperation, such as military exercises, as Beijing has recently organized with Thailand, for instance, was apparently not undertaken with Myanmar under Senior General Than Shwe's leadership. It was also not before August/September 2010 that what was said to be the first official port call by Chinese warships occurred, as two PLAN ships stopped for a five-day visit at Thilawa Port on their return from international operations off Somalia (*Xinhua* 2010). The two sides also did not engage in joint security operations that would be comparable to Myanmar's counter insurgency activities with India (Egretau 2008). That said, China and Myanmar did conclude a Frontier Defence Cooperation Agreement, and cooperated regarding some nontraditional security challenges, not least the flow of drugs from northern Myanmar into China (Chin

2009). Interestingly, compared with the quite substantial outlay for military equipment in the early 1990s, Myanmar's arms acquisitions from the PRC also declined quite significantly in the last decade. Myanmar accounted for 65 per cent of PRC arms sales to Southeast Asia in the 2000-2009 period, which amounted to only USD 316 million in total (Storey 2011: 74). The decision by SLORC/SPDC to acquire far fewer military platforms from China after the mid-1990s than before stemmed partly from concerns about the quality of earlier acquisitions, but seems to have also been influenced by political considerations. Overall, therefore, the extent of Sino-Myanmar military cooperation was almost certainly much more circumscribed than was generally assumed at the time, seemingly with no specific defence and security commitments beyond those linked to managing security in the frontier area.

While not having sought tight alignment with Beijing, the SLORC/SPDC regime relied on significant support from China. Most of this support took the forms of diplomatic backing, although economic assistance should not be overlooked. More specifically, facing widespread international criticisms for its poor record on human rights and governance, the SPDC benefited after 1989 from a measure of diplomatic protection offered by China in various international organizations. When the perceived need for such diplomatic protection became more urgent after political pressure on the military junta increased conspicuously after the SPDC again detained Aung San Suu Kyi in May 2003, China continued to stand behind Myanmar. Though Western countries were ultimately successful in placing Myanmar on the agenda of the UN Security Council, Beijing (and Moscow) decisively blocked a draft resolution on the situation in Myanmar in January 2007. Before the vote, Myanmar officials were confident they would be able to count on China (Interview, Yangon, November 2006). Myanmar's leadership has therefore gratefully referred to the relationship with China as its 'closest and most important diplomatic relationship' (*People's Daily Online* 2011). Notably, given that Myanmar remained cut off from the financial and technical assistance usually available from international financial institutions and could not rely for such assistance on other regional countries, the military government sought to advance economic cooperation with China, in part by drawing on the latter's concessionary loans and technical expertise to proceed with often large-scale industrial and infrastructure projects that the regime was unable to get off the ground itself (see Storey 2011: 145-164). In the 2000s, mining, hydropower and energy exploration thus became major sectors of bilateral cooperation. Indeed, recent official data indicated that

the PRC has emerged as Myanmar's largest foreign investor.<sup>12</sup> The economic interdependence between China and Myanmar was thus significantly strengthened during SLORC/SPDC rule. Significantly, however, strong economic links should not per se be equated with tight alignment between countries.

## Accounting for the Limits of Myanmar-China Alignment

Several factors can account for the limited or loose alignment that developed between Myanmar and China after 1988. One is the country's security environment at the time. Indeed, from the junta's perspective, Burma's broader external security environment deteriorated because of the military's bloody suppression of the 1988 protests. The presence of American navy vessels off the country's shores had led to fears about a possible direct intervention. Invasion by proxy was also a scenario in view of the apparent closing of ranks between domestic insurgents and foreign powers. As Maung Aung Myoe (2009: 33) argued:

The regime was also concerned that foreign powers might help insurgents on the Myanmar border to develop formidable armed forces that would challenge the new regime in Yangon. Moreover, the Tatmadaw leadership believed that various political organizations that proliferated in the post-1988 political upheaval and military takeover had actively sought foreign assistance, in the form of interference or intervention, to destabilize or overthrow the incumbent regime.

In the event, however, the military junta concluded that the insurgencies in the border regions with Thailand in particular constituted the primary security threat and as such the calculation was that in the de facto absence of support from other quarters the SLORC would want to foremost rely on China to build up its military capabilities. This assessment prevailed for some years, vindicated perhaps because the counter insurgency campaign in the early to mid-1990s largely depleted the military strength of those armed groups that were unwilling to agree to ceasefires. One could thus argue that tight alignment was probably not considered necessary given the particular security situation even if it had been available.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, external security

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12 According to official Chinese figures, bilateral trade has jumped to USD 4.4 billion in 2010.

13 China has abjured alliances. Its only remaining alliance dating back to the Cold War is the 1961 China-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.

pressures mounted over time, as Washington in particular sought to influence Myanmar's political processes and future, raising questions for the military junta about whether and how to adjust and manage its alignment with China (see below). Meanwhile, other factors also suggest that more than loose alignment was not deemed desirable.

## Foreign Policy Legacy

Burma's longstanding commitment to nonalignment also seems to have decisively affected the SLORC's preferences concerning the political boundaries within which to reorient the country's foreign policy. After all, upon Burma becoming independent, then Prime Minister U Nu had already pursued an independent foreign policy that was to be free from 'entangling military or political alignments or alliances with the cold war contestants' (Johnstone 1963: 286). Burma subscribed for years to a foreign policy that emphasized 'friendly relations with all nations' and a preparedness to accept economic assistance only if Burma's sovereignty was not infringed (see Johnstone 1963). Among others, two major rationales underpinned the preference for nonalignment: first, the pursuit of security from external aggression and intervention, and, second, the demands of state and nation-building.<sup>14</sup> With Burma having been a major theatre of war during the Second World War, U Nu and other leaders sought to forestall Burma again becoming the battle ground in a confrontation between the major opposing powers. The newly independent Burma also had to address serious ideological differences and ethnic conflict in order for state control to expand and nation-building to begin.

The value ascribed to an independent foreign policy by Burmese leaders until 1989 despite generally trying circumstances was consistent and resolute. Under U Nu the commitment to an independent foreign policy was second to no other foreign policy principle, although in practice it was soon paired with a special relationship with the People's Republic, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. This served to address Rangoon's fears that the unwanted KMT-presence in Shan State might lead to PRC intervention. As Michael Leifer (1974: 29) argued, in Burma's case 'a policy of firm adherence to the defence of independence was combined, where necessary, with an expedient accommodation to safeguard that independence.' The extent to which such accommodation with China was con-

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14 Johnstone (1963: 240-248) also identifies other reasons, including the influence of Buddhism, the ideological orientation of the ruling party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), anti-colonialism (see below), and Moscow's confrontational approach towards the incoming U Nu government.

sidered compatible with nonalignment became clear when Burma's 1960 border agreement with the PRC was followed by a bilateral Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression. At the time, some scholars interpreted this move as a sign of deference, while Tinker (1967: 378) even argued that 'the embrace of the Elder Brother has become almost suffocating.' From a Burmese perspective, however, the treaty did not imply any change to its nonaligned foreign policy. In 1961, the year in which U Thant was elected to the post of Secretary General of the United Nations, Burma's commitment to an independent foreign policy was manifestly demonstrated by the country joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a founding member. Significantly, Burma's nonaligned policy was also maintained when Ne Win's Revolutionary Council ended the country's initial democratic experience and assumed power by coup d'état in 1962. During the 1960s and 1970s, Rangoon's independent foreign policy in practice amounted to a high degree of self-imposed isolation. Still under Ne Win, Burma distinguished itself by withdrawing from NAM at the 1979 Summit in Havana (Misra 1981), as the then ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party remained committed to an 'independent and active foreign policy'.

Given four decades of strong commitment to nonalignment by the country's elite in both declaratory and practical terms even in challenging times, the incoming SLORC regime should not have been expected to abandon the country's core commitment to an independent foreign policy even if it did decide, in the context of strong Western criticism and pressure, to end the more isolationist aspects of the country's foreign policy in favour of some measure of regional integration. In the event, the SLORC outlined among its foreign policy principles the following:

maintaining friendly relations with all nations and good relations with neighbouring countries in particular; the pursuit of mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes; opposition to imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, interference, aggression and domination of one state by another; and the creation of equitable economic conditions (Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Notably, government publications clearly highlighted that Myanmar could be 'everyone's friend but still no one's ally' (Hla Min 2004: 44).

## Nationalistic Outlook of the Military Leadership

The continued pursuit of an independent foreign policy by the SLORC/SPDC has without question hinged not merely on the political legacy of previous governments, but also on the preferences of the military leadership. In the post-1988 period, military leaders propounded an official ideology

that focused foremost on national sovereignty, territorial integrity and 'national reconsolidation.' This was pursued under Senior General Than Shwe with steely determination in the face of numerous political challenges, including external security concerns as well as continued problematic relations with armed ethnic groups. Foreigners have generally been viewed with suspicion by the SLORC/SPDC leadership and the former period of colonial subjugation is understood as a historical aberration, whose reoccurrence is to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, Senior General Than Shwe, who assumed the reigns of power in 1992, has been portrayed as a 'psychological warrior' who is interested not only in the defence of Myanmar's independence but also has pretensions to be a modern-day emperor (Rogers 2010; Steinberg 2009). This worldview is naturally incompatible with tight alignment that might give outsiders undue influence over Myanmar's political affairs. Significantly, it was not only Than Shwe's personal worldview that underpinned Myanmar's commitment to an independent foreign policy in the 1990s and beyond. In the words of Pedersen (2008), '[t]he military leaders perceive it to be their national and professional duty to counter any form of external influence, not just politically, but also in the economic, social, and cultural spheres.' Or, in the words of Hla Min (2004: 151), '[a]s a sovereign independent country we do not like to be pushed around.' This attitude has probably been most conspicuous in the regime's reactions to Western criticisms as well as advice, but it applies more generally. As such, the keen nationalism of Burman post-independence leaders has been carried over into the more recent period, in part as a result of socialization of military officers.

## Post-independence Relationship with China

While taking advantage of the PRC's willingness to strengthen the military regime by way of arms sales and taking advantage of Beijing's diplomatic support, the SLORC/SPDC's preference for only limited alignment with China even when confronting a challenging external security environment associated with US pressure should not entirely surprise given Burma's complex and at times very difficult relationship with the People's Republic after independence. During the early years of independence the U Nu government faced Chinese communist subversion. Though the two countries soon nevertheless managed to maintain friendly relations, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the Rangoon government faced further security challenges from China, including serious incursions by Chinese troops in 1956 into Wa state in Burma's northeast against the backdrop of competing territorial claims concerning the border and the presence of KMT troops in Shan State. At the time, the incursions raised important questions about China's commitment to the principles said to underpin

bilateral ties. In the event, U Nu, in his capacity as President of Burma's Anti Fascist People's Freedom League, in September 1956, reached agreement in principle with Chinese leaders regarding the border dispute. The settlement of the border dispute in January 1960 fell to the then head of the caretaker government, General Ne Win. This briefly lifted relations to a new high; and Burma allowed PLA troops to cross over the border to militarily oust remaining KMT forces, seemingly in return for the favourable border settlement.

However, further to strains over the exodus of Chinese resulting from policies adopted in the wake of the formation of the Revolutionary Council in 1962, the latter's relations with China dipped as the politics and popular excitement of the Cultural Revolution spilled over the border. In response, anti-Chinese riots occurred in Burma in 1967. These led to a breakdown in ties, and Beijing subsequently provided considerable material as well as manpower support for the Communist Party of Burma, leading in early 1968 to what Thant Myint-U (2011: 52) suggested was 'nothing less than an invasion from China.' China's support indeed allowed the CPB to stage what was arguably the most significant insurgency organized against the Ne Win regime at the time. Burma did normalize relations with the People's Republic again in the early 1970s, but correct diplomatic ties continued to be overshadowed for a number of years by Beijing's continued links with and support for the CPB, though the latter declined over time. Fighting the CPB resulted in heavy loss of life for the Tatmadaw. By some accounts (Smith 1999: 255) the CPB's forces, consisting in large measure of ethnic minority troops, killed and wounded more than 11,000 Burmese army personnel between 1968 and 1973.

Significant sacrifices continued also to be made by the Tatmadaw throughout the 1970s into the early 1980s. Notably, a major CPB assault on government-controlled town, Mong Yang, still occurred in September 1988 after the SLORC assumed power, leading to heavy casualties on both sides, and with the CPB leadership vowing to overthrow the SLORC, its fighters subsequently conducted 'one of the most savage blood-baths in CPB's 40 year-insurrection' in December that year (Smith 1999: 374). Numerous military leaders engaged the CPB at some point in their military career, and it seems that the role China played in reinforcing and then sustaining the CPB insurgency forms an important aspect of their collective memory. China offered sanctuary to Burman communist cadres once the CPB succumbed to mutinies in the spring of 1989. In view of these experiences, a bilateral arrangement that would have involved tight military alignment even in the context of a more fundamental re-calibration of Western and Japanese policy toward Yangon would probably have been difficult to contemplate. The

following section examines how the military regime has managed its political alignment with the PRC in more recent years.

## Managing the Alignment with China: The SPDC Years

Scholars and commentators analysing the developments of the early to mid-1990s suggested that Myanmar would have to pay a hefty price for access to China's military hardware and its diplomatic and economic support, possibly as political subservience or economic domination. This conforms to expectations that in an alignment relationship greater security for less powerful countries may come at the expense of political autonomy. At the worst, as Malik (1998: 130) surmised, 'Beijing could even threaten to resume assistance to ethnic insurgents fighting for independence on the Sino-Burmese border.' Significantly, Myanmar's perceived wider security environment evolved for the worse within a few years of the SLORC rebranding itself as the SPDC in 1997 because the lack of domestic political change at the time, not least the absence of a political process involving Aung San Suu Kyi and the country's very problematic human rights record, led to increased de facto demands for regime change by Western countries. While bilateral ties with the US under President Clinton were hardly good, relations with Washington suffered significantly when George W. Bush assumed the presidency. Increasingly, the SPDC also came under more severe diplomatic pressure from various quarters within international society as it only slowly implemented its roadmap to democracy, announced in August 2003 in response to the Depayin incident. By the mid-2000s there was a distinct possibility of the US and other critics of the SPDC successfully passing a UNSC resolution against Myanmar unless China or Russia would block relevant diplomatic efforts.

Against this backdrop the question is how successful Myanmar has been in safeguarding its ability to make autonomous decisions regarding core domestic priorities and manage in line with its basic foreign policy principles Naypyidaw's alignment with China. Despite greater dependence on Beijing's willingness to protect Myanmar diplomatically, there is interestingly hardly much evidence to suggest that the SPDC compromised its political autonomy in significant ways. Key domestic political decisions taken by the SPDC leadership do not seem to have even been raised by them with China, let alone discussed. One concerns the removal in 2004 of former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, who was said to be well connected with Beijing. Another is the rather expensive relocation of the country's capital to Naypyidaw in November 2005, which is also said to have surprised China's

government. Of course, what might still apply to the period before 2007, the year when China did veto a non-punitive UNSC draft resolution on Myanmar, might not be true for the last years of SPDC rule. After all, some observers hold that Myanmar's political independence has been increasingly compromised by Naypyidaw's reliance on Chinese support. As former intelligence officer and diplomat Aung Linn Htut (2011) has for instance suggested, the present leaders 'are now in a position to only follow whatever Beijing asks them to do.' While the past is not always a guide for the future, there is however some evidence that the SPDC generally only rewarded China if this suited its economic objectives and actually resisted Beijing on multiple occasions in the process of managing its diplomatic alignment.

## Diplomatic Support in Return for Greater Energy Security?

Given that it lies at the crossroads between South Asia, Southeast Asia and the wider East Asia with a long coastline opening up to the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, Chinese decision-makers have regarded Myanmar as a country of considerable geostrategic as well as geoeconomic significance and business opportunity. Beyond seeing Myanmar as a country that can provide major landlocked parts of China's southwest with access to the Indian Ocean, Chinese officials are also keen to exploit its rich deposits of natural resources to further the PRC's economic development and energy security.

There is a widespread assumption that a connection exists between the PRC providing crucial diplomatic protection and the SPDC handing key contracts to Chinese state companies. In particular, it is believed that Myanmar's authorities made available substantial offshore natural gas reserves in return for Chinese support at the UNSC. Certainly, Myanmar was reported to have signed a gas export MoU in January 2006 with PetroChina that covered most of the estimated reserves in offshore block A-1 although a previous such understanding already existed with an Indian state-owned gas utility (Dutta 2006). This followed initial briefings and discussions at the UNSC, where the situation in Myanmar was subsequently successfully placed on the formal agenda by vote in September 2006. As noted already, Beijing, alongside Moscow, then vetoed in January 2007 a UNSC draft resolution on Myanmar which had been sponsored by Washington and London. Within days, CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation), China's largest gas and oil producer and supplier, entered into a contract with Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) and acquired oil and gas exploration and

exploitation licences for three deep water blocks in offshore Rakhine (AD-1, AD-6, AD-8).<sup>15</sup> It was apparently only in June 2008 that representatives of CNPC, MOGE, and the Daewoo International led international consortium with a stake in Myanmar's offshore blocks A-1 and A-3 signed a MoU on the sale and transportation of natural gas to China. However, earlier reports (e.g. *Times of India* 2007) indicated that Indian delegations to Myanmar had already in March 2007 learnt about Naypyidaw having concluded a MoU with CNPC's listed arm, PetroChina, to export these reserves to China rather than India or Korea, apparently at a lower price than advocated by Daewoo International as the consortium leader of the fields' operator. The decision to sell the gas to China could not be reversed by India despite reported promises to provide soft loans and to construct a power plant (Lundholm 2007), leaving Daewoo International to pick the state-owned CNPC as the preferred bidder (Park and Goswami 2007).

Beyond opting for the export of natural gas by pipeline to China, Myanmar's authorities also approved the construction of a parallel crude oil pipeline that was originally proposed by Chinese academics to address the PRC's so-called Malacca Dilemma and subsequently championed for economic and political reasons by Yunnan's provincial government.<sup>16</sup> This crude oil pipeline, also to enter China at the border city of Ruili, will allow China to re-route some of the oil imports from Africa and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia), possibly about one-tenth of current import levels given an estimated annual pipeline capacity of 22 million tonnes of crude oil. In December 2009, Myanmar's Ministry for Energy and CNPC signed an agreement awarding exclusive rights to the Chinese enterprise to build and operate the crude oil pipeline (*China Daily* 2009). The project includes provision for associated infrastructure, such as an oil terminal and oil berth. Construction of suitable port facilities on Manday Island (Kyaukpyu township) apparently began in late October 2009. The construction of the crude oil and natural gas pipelines, as well as a refinery in Yunnan, followed.

While the timing of these decisions regarding the award of exploration and exploitation contracts and the sale of natural gas from the Shwe, Shwephyu and Mya fields points to their political function, the SPDC regime does not generally appear to have entered into agreements on the basis that China should be compensated to Myanmar's disadvantage. Instead, the military has opted for agreements adjudged to serve the country's political

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15 See CNPC in Myanmar, undated, online: <[http://www.cnpc.com.cn/eng/cnpc\\_worldwide/asiaandpacific/Burma/](http://www.cnpc.com.cn/eng/cnpc_worldwide/asiaandpacific/Burma/)>.

16 The crude oil pipeline reportedly is 771 km, the natural gas pipeline 793 km long before they reach Yunnan. The natural gas pipeline broke ground in Myanmar in August 2011; the project is due to be completed in 2013.

strategic as well as economic interests. For instance, the proposed transit of crude oil and the gas exports from the Bay of Bengal by pipeline will considerably reinforce the interdependence between the two countries rather than accentuate Myanmar's pronounced reliance on the PRC for loans, investment and expertise. Indeed, transit countries generally gain some measure of strategic leverage over destination countries, which Naypyidaw will have welcomed. For the SPDC, the export of natural gas to China rather than India, which in part was attributable to New Delhi's inability to act decisively in good time, was also in Myanmar's immediate and longer-term economic interests. China was always more likely to rapidly implement the project. Moreover, the export of the gas will significantly add to existing state revenue. Transit payments to be raised by Myanmar for the pipelines are also estimated to be worth at least nine figures, and may amount to USD 1 billion per annum (Bo Kong 2010: 64). In addition, the gas is to be partly tapped for domestic consumption in Myanmar (*China Daily* 2008), and prices may be re-negotiated regularly, possibly on a quarterly basis.

The SPDC also ensured that the state oil and gas companies from other countries know that they continue to be welcome in further exploring and harnessing Myanmar's hydrocarbon reserves. Although it is too early to know how the various physical infrastructure projects will shape Naypyidaw's future ties with the ethnic nationalities, it would appear that the military leadership also estimated their likely effect on stability to be positive in so far as such infrastructure could be considered useful for a further expansion and/or tightening of state control over the territory traversed. This logic may also apply to the planned railway that is in future supposed to connect Yunnan with the Bay of Bengal. That said, Myanmar's military clearly discriminated between those projects of strategic significance that it found to serve mutual interest and those that were ultimately deemed politically unpalatable. For instance, the SPDC procrastinated on following through with an initial agreement regarding a multi-modal (land and water) transport route crossing Myanmar. This project involved the dredging of the Irrawaddy, the construction of a deep-sea port at Bhamo in Kachin State, the highest navigable point on the Irrawaddy; and the construction of a road from Bhamo to China.

It should also not be overlooked that the SPDC leadership ostensibly used its natural resources and geographical position as diplomatic cards to bring China to tone down even its private criticisms of and advice to the military junta. In September 2007, for instance, China had played an important part in accomplishing the UNSG Special Envoy's visit to Yangon in the aftermath of the suppression of the so-called Saffron Revolution. However, Myanmar's military leadership seemingly became increasingly irritated

with China's diplomacy, especially as Beijing seemed content to sanction a briefing on Myanmar by UNSG Special Envoy Gambari at the 2007 East Asia Summit in support of ASEAN's more critical approach and tone vis-à-vis Naypyidaw at the time. In response, the junta may have delayed until the end of 2009 the aforementioned agreement on the crude oil pipeline on which Kunming and Beijing were keen (*The Irrawaddy* 2010). By some accounts (Aung Linn Htut 2011) General Than Shwe even signalled to Beijing his reluctance to accept the proposed starting point of the crude pipeline route, apparently in view of Chinese suggestions that Myanmar should pursue a more inclusive political process, as reportedly again put to Than Shwe by the Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi in December 2008. A delay also ensued in the two sides moving forward with the railway project close to the pipelines. These illustrations would indicate that the SPDC generally sought to maintain a firm hand on sensitive issues and perhaps even demonstrated a certain prickliness in dealings with China, their need for diplomatic protection notwithstanding. Overall, however, they also show that the SPDC regime played various available cards in efforts to maximise the return for its natural resources and its agreement to enhance China-Myanmar interconnectivity.

## Relations with Armed Ethnic Groups

The SPDC found it a serious irritant that among the armed ethnic groups in the Sino-Myanmar frontier region are ex-CPB forces with longstanding personal, social and business cross-border links that tend to complicate the military's tasks of national re-consolidation and continued state building (Callahan 2007). The United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest ethnic army to emerge from the CPB's collapse in 1989, posed a particular challenge in this regard given its military strength and staunch commitment to securing a higher degree of autonomy than the SPDC was prepared to offer.

Among Myanmar's military, the relationships of the UWSA and other ceasefire groups with various Chinese authorities led to the perception that the PRC 'maintains a balance of power between border ethnic groups and the military government to ensure that neither side gains the upper hand' (ICG 2009: 10). Chinese analysts (Li and Lye 2009; Li 2010) have suggested that Myanmar's military worried that China would be able to draw on its contacts with the armed ethnic nationalities to cause problems should bilateral relations deteriorate, notwithstanding the PRC's position according to which China's central government does not maintain formal relations or official contacts with any armed militias in Myanmar; indeed, the suggestion is that there is no formal recognition, military support, exchanges or eco-

conomic assistance to these groups. That said, PRC citizens have reportedly been enlisted by the armed ethnic minority groups as technical experts or mercenaries (Li and Lye 2009: 275). Also, research conducted by the International Crisis Group (ICG) suggests that Wa weapons have partially been sourced via 'rogue elements' within the PLA. According to Black and Davies (2008), weapons acquired by the UWSA include howitzers, field artillery, anti-aircraft artillery and surface to air missiles, such as HN-5 MANPADS. Although the Wa served the Tatmadaw as a quasi-ally against the Shan State Army (SSA)-South and were allowed to build up a formidable presence along the Myanmar-Thai border, the military regime registered in the 2000s considerable discomfort with the Wa's devolved existence, their appreciable territorial hold and apparent military potency.

A fuller study of the various exchanges and interactions between Myanmar's military and PRC interlocutors on the question of how to manage the conflict between Naypyidaw and the armed ethnic groups has yet to be undertaken. That said, Chinese authorities not only do not appear to have been at all keen to see the Tatmadaw engage in military operations against ethnic nationalities along the border, but also probably saw little need during most of the SPDC years to influence leaderships in the Kokang, Wa and Mongla special regions to make them reach a political compromise with the Myanmar military leadership. In contrast, for the Than Shwe regime talking to China regarding these issues assumed growing significance after the proposed new Constitution was accepted in a problematic referendum in May 2008. After all, the regime's original ambition was to see Myanmar's ethnic ceasefire groups disarm before the coming into force of the new constitution, which was to happen with the convening of parliament following elections announced for 2010. Then General Shwe Mann, during a visit to Beijing in June 2008, reportedly requested the Chinese government to convince the armed ethnic groups on the Sino-Myanmar border to surrender their weapons.

The issue was apparently again raised in December 2008 when Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi visited Myanmar (ICG 2009: 11). According to the ICG, the Chinese authorities responded by encouraging the ethnic militias to discuss the terms of the regime's Border Guard Force proposal, primarily to avoid the spectre of forceful disarmament of the ethnic armies (ICG 2010: 4). This proposal, put forward in April 2009, was designed to achieve greater congruence between the constitutional provision whereby there is to be only one Myanmar military and the reality of multiple armies operating independently of one another within the country's borders. At the same time, Chinese interlocutors apparently also urged the SPDC to desist from armed confrontation, while possibly also suggesting that Naypyidaw might want to

consider offering the armed ethnic groups a greater degree of autonomy in practice. Such a position, it seems, was communicated to General Maung Aye, when he visited China in June 2009. In other words, Beijing appears to have called for dialogue and compromise (ICG 2009: 13, ft 127) without however simultaneously applying much pressure on the armed ethnic groups, although both Naypyidaw and the ethnic groups in question had up to that point clearly failed to demonstrate a willingness to compromise. In the event, some smaller ethnic ceasefire groups would accept BGF-status, but the majority of armed ethnic armies operating close to the border with China refused to entertain the idea of Tatmadaw control over their armed forces, including the main ex-CPB armies. It was in this context that Naypyidaw employed force to eject Kokang's leadership.

In August 2009, Myanmar's security forces, reportedly acting on a tip off from a Chinese official (Zaw Myint 2009), moved against a weapons factory in Kokang and targeted the premises of then Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) chairman Peng Jiasheng. According to local observers, the ensuing standoff was soon followed by military clashes involving members of the MNDAA, supported by other ethnic armies, as well as the Tatmadaw, backed by local allies.<sup>17</sup> The use of force marked the first time since 1989 that a ceasefire was unambiguously broken along the Sino-Myanmar border. In the event, the Tatmadaw quickly established control of the Kokang capital of Laogai, and MNDAA soldiers as well as its chairman reportedly fled to China. Peng's deputy, Bai Suoqian, who was more favourably disposed to Naypyidaw's border guard forces proposal, replaced him heading the pro-junta Kokang Region Provisional Leading Committee.

From China's perspective, this police and military intervention seriously undermined stability and security on the border, not least because it reportedly resulted in 37,000 refugees temporarily crossing into Yunnan, the deaths of two Chinese citizens and widespread damage to ethnic Chinese economic interests in the Kokang region (Wai Moe 2009; Jagan 2009b). It was classified a level-1 incident, the highest possible among emergency contingencies, requiring unified leadership from the State Council (Thompson 2009). To deal with the situation, Beijing dispatched Meng Jianzhu (Minister for Public Security) and General Chen Bingde (the PLA Chief of Staff) to the border. Several hundred PLA troops were also deployed (Jagan 2009a). Apparently, China's authorities had not been informed about the raid beforehand. While some outraged Chinese nationalists and bloggers called for

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17 Approximately 26 soldiers and police force members were killed on the Myanmar side.

the retaking of Kokang by force of arms, the Chinese authorities essentially opted for some straight talking with Naypyidaw about the need to prevent a reoccurrence, although Chinese officials also asked for compensation for damages incurred in the violence. While Myanmar's military leadership agreed on the importance of border stability, Chinese leaders have made the latter a focal point of bilateral ties. For instance, maintaining peace and stability on the border was one of four tasks identified by Beijing for improving bilateral relations, as put forward by Vice-President Xi Jinping, when visiting Myanmar at the end of 2009 (*Xinhua* 2009). Premier Wen Jiabao also broached the issue when he travelled to Naypyidaw in June 2010 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Myanmar diplomatic relations.

The Kokang incident represents an interesting facet of bilateral ties. It demonstrated the SPDC's preparedness to take the risk of irritating its chief diplomatic partner in the pursuit of its core domestic agenda. It of course also signalled both to other armed ethnic groups and Beijing that its hand would not be tied forever by the apparent preference of Chinese authorities to leave the situation along the border unchanged. This seems to have forced Beijing to reconsider whether China should continue its hands off approach and perhaps still even rely on the ethnic nationalities as de facto buffers for possible leverage over Myanmar. According to the ICG (2010: 3), Chinese officials reassessed as destabilising the uncompromising stance towards Naypyidaw adopted by the ethnic political-military leaderships. This has seemingly led to Beijing assuming more proactive facilitation if not mediation efforts to influence the armed ethnic groups concerned to reach a settlement with Naypyidaw. China's interest in border stability and the safety of Chinese nationals reflects the increasing levels of investment in Myanmar. At issue is not only pipeline security, but a swath of projects, including controversial ones, in major industries such as hydropower. As further cease-fires between government forces and armed ethnic groups threatened to collapse in early 2011, Chinese behind the scenes involvement continued.

In short, Myanmar's limited alignment with the PRC did not prevent the SPDC from defending and asserting vis-à-vis Beijing a robust position concerning the armed ethnic groups. Indeed, when the opportunity arose, the SPDC did not shy away from escalating the conflict with ethnic Chinese forces despite the risk of antagonising PRC leaders. It is likely that taking such a risk proved easier to take in a changing political context in which the Obama administration was moving toward a policy of pragmatic engagement. Nevertheless, the broader handling of the Kokang incident suggests that the SPDC was clearly happy to signal not only its disapproval of the political and military status quo in the frontier region, but also its disgrun-

tlement with perceived Chinese ambiguity on the issue. Such a stance should not normally be expected from a lesser state that depends on a major power for support. In this case, a rattled Beijing has been guided in its response by the realities of economic interdependence and its strategic interests. The last section will briefly assess whether the nature of Myanmar's alignment is changing in the nominally civilian administration that succeeded the SPDC.

## Towards Tighter Alignment?

Incoming President U Thein Sein in his inaugural address to the newly formed parliament committed Myanmar to a nonaligned, independent and active foreign policy (NLM 2011a). Notably, however, China now appears intent on securing a tighter political embrace than was characteristic of the SPDC era. Having already offered a firm endorsement of Myanmar's political process in the lead-up to the 2010 elections, Beijing's support for the new government in Naypyidaw has been quite emphatic. Within three days of the new government assuming office, Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Consultative Conference and one of the highest ranking members of the CCP Politbureau Standing Committee, visited Myanmar, as the first foreign leader (*Xinhua* 2011a, b). Against the backdrop of the breakdown of a further ceasefire, involving units of the Shan State Army-North, Jia's visit carried the message that China expected Myanmar to safeguard stability in border regions. However, suggesting that Beijing and Naypyidaw were heading toward closer alignment, it was also declared that bilateral ties had reached a strategic level.

In May, General Xu Caihou, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, became the first senior foreign military leader to visit Naypyidaw following the formation of the new government. During this visit Naypyidaw not only reaffirmed existing pillars of bilateral ties, but also indicated its preparedness to strengthen relations with Beijing. President U Thein Sein, for example, affirmed 'Myanmar will abide by the 'one China' policy no matter how the international situation changes' (*Xinhua* 2011c). Moreover, Myanmar's host, General Min Aung Hlaing, Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Defence Services, agreed with Xu's proposals to enhance mutual strategic trust, strengthen links between the PLA and Tatmadaw and pursue practical cooperation. Heading a large delegation, President U Thein Sein then travelled to Beijing in late May 2011. In the initial meeting with Jia Qinglin, he reportedly (*Xinhua* 2011d) thanked the latter for his 'valuable advice on developing bilateral relations.' More importantly in substantive terms was that the two sides issued a joint statement on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership based on the

Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Even before U Thein Sein's visit, China's ambassador to Myanmar had referred as a 'new breakthrough' to this joint statement (quoted in Zhang 2011), which outlines agreement on continued high-level contacts and exchanges, consultations between foreign ministry officials as well as timely exchanges and regular meetings to reinforce strategic communication. It also highlights agreement on issues that have in the past been of concern to the People's Republic, such as more efforts to create a favourable environment for trade and investment and improved business ties as well as to 'conduct timely communication on border management affairs, and strive to maintain peace, tranquility and stability in border areas.'<sup>18</sup> As such, Myanmar leadership was ready to commit in a politically binding statement to a good number of the points that Chinese officials have put forward in past years. At the same time, it is not clear to what extent Naypyidaw has agreed to substantively alter defence and security cooperation.

This is notable because Thein Sein's first official visit to China as incoming President took place against the backdrop of speculation that Beijing was keen to secure both regular access to Myanmar ports for PLA (Navy) vessels and provide naval protection for future sensitive physical infrastructure in the Bay of Bengal (Wai Moe 2011). Although the bilateral relationship was upgraded to a 'cooperative comprehensive strategic partnership', neither the joint statement on the bilateral relationship nor other official releases made explicit mention of the issue. If the PRC has indeed approached Naypyidaw regarding improved port access arrangements, the Thein Sein government is clearly aware of and careful about the signals that access provision and closer defence cooperation are likely to send. In that sense, the President seemed intent on maintaining Myanmar's independent foreign policy.

That said, the official *New Light of Myanmar* (NLM 2011c) did indicate that Myanmar 'fully supports China for reconstitution of the UN and South China Sea issues.' One question the first point raises is whether this implies Myanmar aligning its position with China concerning UN Security Council reform, especially the question of permanent membership. Beijing supported neither Japan's nor India's moves for a permanent seat in the past. In the case of Japan, this is due to what some would call 'historical baggage', in the case of India, Beijing's lack of support has been said to follow from New Delhi linking its bid with Japan in the G4 group of nations (Krishnan 2011). As one of the BRICS states, China has more recently indicated it does 'un-

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18 Joint Statement between the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and the People's Republic of China on establishing a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, Beijing, 27 May 2011.

derstand and support' India's aspiration to play a greater role in the UN.<sup>19</sup> Myanmar in the past failed to support Japan's bid (in contrast to several other ASEAN countries), but publicly endorsed India's. Given China's recent limited endorsement of a greater UN role for India, Naypyidaw's supporting remarks do not equate to a departure from its previous position or its independent foreign policy more generally.

The question is whether Naypyidaw's expression for support on the South China Sea is qualitatively different. Myanmar was not previously known for publicly offering such support. Also, the remarks were released at a time when ASEAN claimants and the wider region articulated concern about perceived Chinese ambition, intransigence and strong-arm tactics concerning the South China Sea. Indeed, Naypyidaw's support was made public as China and the claimant ASEAN states were at loggerheads in negotiations to produce concrete guidelines to implement the 2002 Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Consequently, apart from highlighting ASEAN's intramural fissures, it might be possible to see Naypyidaw's position on the South China Sea as a quid pro quo for Chinese support, perhaps specifically for China's support of Myanmar assuming the ASEAN chairmanship in 2014 (Htet Aung 2011). Certainly, China's endorsement of Myanmar's ambition to assume the ASEAN chairmanship is politically important for the Thein Sein government as even ASEAN by the summer of 2011 remained hesitant to offer its definitive backing on the issue. Nevertheless, Myanmar's position on the South China Sea is vague. For what aspect exactly is it that Myanmar fully supports? Presumably the expression of support does not imply that Naypyidaw agrees with Beijing's territorial claims as one would also not expect Naypyidaw to side with the various arguments of ASEAN claimants. If the support is given for an application of general principles espoused by China (and others) to address the South China Sea issues Myanmar's stated commitment to an independent foreign policy is not affected.

Deeper levels of security and perhaps defence cooperation with China may be unavoidable over the longer run, however. After all, the PRC's official investments in Myanmar are increasing rapidly (the cumulative investment was put at USD 15.5 billion at the end of March 2011, after reaching USD 12.3 billion by the end of 2010). Some of these are rapidly moving into their operational phase, such as the biggest cooperative mining project between China and Myanmar, the Myanmar Taguang Taung Nickel Ore Project Mining System. Significantly, China will want to protect in future major

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19 Sanya Declaration of the BRICS Leaders Meeting, Hainan, 14 April 2011, online: <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-04/14/c\\_13829453.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-04/14/c_13829453.htm)>.

strategically important infrastructure, such as the gas and crude oil pipelines.<sup>20</sup> However, this will not necessarily transform Myanmar's limited alignment with China into tighter alignment. Indeed, given that Myanmar's overall security situation is improving, the new government will probably not need to depend as before on the kind of military assistance and diplomatic protection that China provided in the past. Moreover, insofar as the government perceives security challenges in the emerging strategic context Naypyidaw may consider and take forward limited alignments with other countries. Whether such alignments would transpire or develop will primarily depend on whether there are relevant promises and expectations underpinning these relations.

For now, a series of diplomatic moves and domestic developments underline Myanmar's intention to foster better relations with major powers other than China. Concerning relations with New Delhi, for instance, the Myanmar government recently again offered visiting Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna 'firm assurances' that Naypyidaw would not allow the frontier region to be used by insurgents to launch attacks against India (Wade 2011). Although momentum does not compare well with that of Sino-Myanmar relations, the two sides remain committed to pursue implementation of agreed projects that will promote economic development on both sides of the border (e.g. Kaladan project). Naypyidaw is also exploring possibilities in relations with Japan, now that Tokyo's Myanmar policy is liberated from the longtime restraint of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest. Most significantly, following the installation of U Thein Sein as president, Myanmar has demonstrated continued eagerness to move forward relations with Washington. Dialogue involving senior officials was resumed, with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Yun travelling to Naypyidaw in May 2011.

Myanmar government's hopes for better relations were also communicated to Senator John McCain just days after U Thein Sein visited Beijing. Achieving these is not straightforward, however. Foreign Minister U Winna Maung Lwin called for a relationship based on 'equality and mutual respect', while Washington has voiced disappointment with Myanmar's political progress since the Obama administration revised its Burma policy to pragmatic engagement. Notably, however, the political-military leadership has visibly worked to change domestic and international perceptions of the incumbent government. After advising repeatedly that the NLD might wish to register the party and stand for elections, Daw Suu Kyi was allowed to travel outside

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20 In April 2011, Myanmar Railways and China Railway Engineering Corporation signed a MoU on the construction of the Muse-Lashio-Kyaukpyu railroad; initially, the focus will be on linking Muse and Lashio in Shan State (NLM 2011b: 1, 7).

Yangon without incident. The government also restarted a dialogue with her that has included a meeting with President U Thein Sein in August 2011. Even before then, Myanmar's new government sought to address US concerns about its apparent nuclear intent. Myanmar also formally clarified that it was not going ahead with the purchase of a nuclear research reactor from Russia (NLM 2011d). It has moreover sought to dispel doubts and concerns about the cargo of vessels suspected of carrying cargo from North Korea to Myanmar in breach of UNSC-mandated sanctions. Though even a quite limited alignment between Myanmar and US seems distant for now, the trajectory of developments in Hanoi-Washington relations suggests such an arrangement is eventually possible under certain conditions.

## Conclusion

Drawing on the wider alignment literature, this article has discussed the nature and management of Myanmar's alignment with China. This alignment, which primarily involved China's promise and the SLORC/SPDC's expectation of diplomatic protection, was an obvious choice for the incoming military regime given the lack of other external sources of support available. Notably, it remained limited throughout SLORC/SPDC rule even as security pressures by the United States increased over time, especially during the time in office of President George W. Bush. The article explained this by referring to the commitment to an independent foreign and security policy that has been at the core of Burma/Myanmar's foreign policy practice since independence; a commitment reinforced by a strong and pervasive sense of nationalism within the military, and past interaction with China. In managing this alignment over the last decade, the SPDC arguably 'rewarded' Beijing for its diplomatic support and protection, primarily by making available to the PRC a significant part of Myanmar's natural resources and by allowing Chinese state-owned companies to construct strategically important physical infrastructure connecting Yunnan with the Bay of Bengal.

However, the argument submitted here is that when agreeing to these large-scale projects with China, the regime in effect opted only for those schemes that stand to foster greater interdependence, generate ample funds for Myanmar's coffers in the future, and perhaps even have the potential, from the military's perspective, to draw the country closer together in the protracted pursuit of state and nation building. As such, the SPDC clearly sought to manage its limited alignment with China based on the principle of mutual gain, while avoiding a surrender of political autonomy. Indeed, it is notable that in acting on its political-security imperative to unify the country, the SPDC, as the Kokang Incident suggests, was even prepared to shock

Beijing into recalibrating its position on the conflict between the military and various armed ethnic groups along the Sino-Myanmar border. The Myanmar case thus shows that lesser powers can obtain security benefits from a major power without this necessarily requiring more than limited alignment or entailing a serious erosion of political autonomy, particularly when the former possesses valuable natural resources and enjoys considerable geo-strategic significance for the latter.

That said, given China's preparedness thereafter to play a more constructive behind the scenes role that seems designed to transform over time the ceasefires along the border into viable peace arrangements, as well as Myanmar's rapidly increasing economic and infrastructure ties with its northern neighbour, decision-makers in Beijing may hope for more wide-ranging security cooperation in part given the need to protect Chinese interests in Myanmar. The nature of the two countries' alignment is unlikely to change in the post-SPDC era, however. Certainly so far, the new ostensibly civilian government has stayed the course of Myanmar's independent foreign policy. With seemingly more earnest domestic political change now under way, Naypyidaw is also likely to improve relations with the United States, thereby lessening political-security pressures and reducing the need for diplomatic reliance on China. Indeed, better relations with Western countries may just be what Myanmar's leadership now wants to balance its burgeoning relations with the PRC.

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