

MYANMAR'S GROWING DEPENDENCE ON CHINA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Myanmar

Chinese President Xi Jinping, Myanmar President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi at a ceremony in Nayi Pyi Taw marking the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations. | Photo Credit: [HANDOUT](#)

Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Myanmar last week is a vivid indicator of the region's changing geopolitics, reflecting adversely on the West and its allies. Its real significance transcends the 33 agreements signed, although it is an impressive number in itself for a short sojourn of a day and a half.

President Xi took his own time in coming to the southern neighbour which had to be content with largely one-way VVIP traffic, as Myanmar's top leaders travelled to Beijing with noticeable regularity. As the Vice-President, he had visited Myanmar in 2009. The last visit by a Chinese President took place in 2001. The 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations was judged to be the ideal occasion to launch a major renewal and strengthen the process of the bilateral relationship.

U. Nu, the first prime minister of Burma (Myanmar's previous name), famously depicted his country's position in the region as "hemmed in like a tender gourd amongst the cacti." Then, it chose the policy of independence and non-alignment. Does the red-carpet treatment extended to the President of China show that today's Myanmar, jointly led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the military, has taken sides?

The optics may probably indicate this, considering how things have changed since 2012 when Barack Obama became the first sitting American President to visit Myanmar and initiate a historic rapprochement. The previous leader, President Thein Sein, played the U.S.-China game with dexterity, but the present leadership, hobbled by the Rohingya crisis and its own internal vulnerabilities, feels compelled to keep moving closer to Beijing.

The joint statement, issued on January 18, claims that "a new chapter" has been opened "in the ever-lasting friendship" between the two countries, stemming from the broad understanding to promote "comprehensive strategic cooperation." It refers to building the "Myanmar-China Community with a Shared Future." Exchanges of "experience in governance" will be deepened and strategic communication will be enhanced. Besides, the two governments plan to make good use of the 2+2 high-level consultations, comprising the two Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers.

A close reading of what the Chinese stated before and during the visit confirms that the traditional "pauk-phaw" (fraternal) ties between China and Myanmar are in full bloom now. An explicit stipulation is that the relationship should encompass not only the governments but also the two peoples. Mr. Xi emphasised that the goal was to craft "a new blueprint for bilateral ties."

A major focus undoubtedly has been on the economic dimension of the relationship that goes beyond trade and investment, as China has been Myanmar's top partner for years. In the domain of infrastructure, a sustained push is being given to turn into reality the proposed China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a vital component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through the agreements signed and discussions held about their follow-up during the visit, CMEC's three pillars seem to have been consolidated. These are: the Kyaukphyu special economic zone; the China-Myanmar border economic zone; and the new urban development of

Yangon City. The basic approach, as Mr. Xi explained, is to deepen cooperation in diverse areas like “connectivity, electricity, energy, transportation, agriculture, finance and livelihood to deliver more benefits to both peoples.”

The Chinese also made it clear that the Myanmar government, currently under intense international pressure due to its rigid position on the Rohingya issue, will continue to receive China’s full support. Beijing has positioned itself as the great defender of Myanmar’s legitimate rights, interests and national dignity at a time when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is about to pronounce on the charges of genocide against the Myanmar military. As regards the Myanmar people, their grievances against some of the Chinese projects are getting addressed, with an unspoken agreement reached not to push the controversial Myitsone Dam project just yet.

Mr. Xi’s conscious choice to spend ample time on discussions with Myanmar’s top three leaders — President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing — conveyed a significant message. Despite past endeavours, the leadership has failed to deliver on ethnic reconciliation or constitutional reform and transition to full democracy. The Chinese side seemed comfortable with the status quo and may have advised its continuation, given the external challenges. This may well suit the NLD government and its military partners, as the nation heads to the elections later in the year. As long as Ms. Suu Kyi does not excessively exert herself to bring full-fledged democracy, her return to power, albeit with a reduced majority, may be on the cards. Her brave defence of the military before the ICJ last December turned her into a national hero, even as she further lost her international following.

As to what happens to Myanmar’s traditional inclination towards neutrality and independent foreign policy, the government is apparently running out of friendly nations that could help it to balance China. The U.S., the European Union (EU) and Japan are unable or unwilling (or both) to play that role any longer. Kyaw Zaw Moe, editor of *The Irrawaddy*, asserts that the “pauk-phaw” relationship “doesn’t exist beyond political jargon.” Nevertheless, it is certain that Myanmar’s dependence on China will rise dramatically. The country should be getting ready to receive more Chinese tourists, projects, companies, products and “Chinese diplomats across the country”, as he put it.

The situation around India has taken an adverse turn in the recent months. Against the general backdrop of consolidation of China-Pakistan relations, Mr. Xi’s visit to Nepal, his strategic gains in Myanmar, and forthcoming visit of the Sri Lankan President to Beijing form part of a pattern. It is one of the setbacks and challenges to India’s diplomacy in South Asia. It calls for deep reflection and comprehensive consultations with the finest minds in the country.

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