



Burma/Myanmar: The Triangulation of Strategic Interests by David I. Steinberg

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A decade ago, in February 2001, Georgetown University sponsored in Washington a conference “Burma/Myanmar: Nexus on the Bay of Bengal.” It was designed to encourage the new Bush administration to consider the strategic importance of that country as an element of US foreign policy. Although well attended by some 150 influential people, it did not accomplish its goal of drawing policy attention to the importance of the pivotal location of that sad country. US policy continued, and still continues, to be focused primarily on democracy and human rights, important but not normally the sole elements of foreign policy. Myanmar is now the focus of three strategic thrusts that will profoundly affect the region and the Burmese people.

Although Washington ignored strategic issues in any public dialogue on Myanmar, China had a decade earlier begun a drive with astonishing vigor to ensure that its varied interests in Myanmar were pursued. After billions of dollars of Chinese military and economic support and tens of billions of dollars in investment and infrastructure development, in 2011 on a state visit to Beijing by the new president of Myanmar, Thein Sein, China declared that the two countries had a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” a term never before used in the Burmese connection, and indicating the importance of Myanmar to China and China’s paramount role in Myanmar.

India had earlier recognized that extensive Chinese penetration of Myanmar was not in India’s national interest, and about 1993 reversed its highly negative policy toward the military regime in Myanmar both to ameliorate Chinese influence and, later, also to foster through Myanmar transport routes bringing economic assistance to support the tranquility and development of its rebellious Northeast India region, which borders Myanmar and parts of which are still disputed with China.

Two legs of the strategic tripod were thus in place. More recently, the third leg has appeared. This is the major \$8.6 billion Italian-Thai development project in Dawei (Tavoy) in eastern Myanmar close to the Thai border. This will be a major industrial development zone with many heavy industries. In addition to three seaports and roads, fertilizer, petrochemical, and labor-intensive factories are planned in this special economic zone. The framework agreement was signed in November 2010, and financing is to be completed in December 2011. The former prime minister of Thailand noted that such construction could not be built in Thailand because

of environmental concerns. Myanmar, however, seems to be fair game. The interests in this development are not simply Thai. They involve Singapore as well, and more recently, the possibility of Japanese participation.

Japan has continuously been concerned about its economic role in Myanmar, and was close to its former ruler, Gen. Ne Win. With his retirement and later senility and Japan’s economic doldrums, Japan lost its cardinal influence in Myanmar to rising China. But a China, strengthened by a strategic economic and policy relationship with Myanmar, is not in Japan’s national interest, as a retired Japanese general quietly noted.

So we are witnessing the development of set of diverse but targeted strategic interests centered on Myanmar. Although these interests may be competitive, their careful manipulation by the Burmese authorities has provided and will continue to provide massive support to the government of Myanmar. In 1988, when the military replaced the previous military socialist government, Burma had foreign exchange reserves of some \$30 million. These reserves today are in the neighborhood of some \$5, billion largely from the sale of natural gas to Thailand. When two Chinese pipelines for Middle Eastern and African crude oil and Burmese offshore natural gas come on stream in the next two years, the resources available to the Burmese government will vastly increase. When the Dawei project begins to be productive, revenue will further expand.

How these extensive resources will be used, and whether effectively for the benefit of the diverse Burmese peoples, are important questions. For the US to continue to call for isolation of that country seems patently counterproductive to the reality of the present and the prognosis for the future. In the public discourse in a democracy like the US, to ignore the vital interests of major Asian states in Myanmar and continue to foster Western and US economic isolation raises serious questions of the relevance of US policy to that vital region, and to longer-range US national interests.

In the 1950s, Burmese Prime Minister U Nu said that Burma was a tender gourd surrounded by barbed cacti, and thus a Burmese neutral foreign policy was necessary. With the Cold War over, Myanmar has embraced its prickly neighbors – but to what effect on the well-being of the Burmese people and regional security?

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