



***DECODING THE INFRASTRUCTURE
DEVELOPMENT ON MYANMAR'S COCO
ISLANDS***

BY SHWE YEE OO

Shwe Yee Oo (shwe@pacforum.org) is Resident Nonproliferation Fellow at Pacific Forum.

Satellite imagery released by Maxar Technologies in January 2023, revealing new construction on Myanmar's Great Coco Island, has raised concerns and questions. The imagery discloses an extended airport runway and two new widened hangars next to it. A [report](#) from Chatham House Policy Institute says that the runway seems freshly lengthened to 2,300 meters (7,500 feet) from 1,300 meters 10 years ago, and the new hangars enlarged by approximately 40 meters. The extensive nature of this development provokes suspicions as to whether the infrastructure under construction is a Chinese espionage base for its military expansion into the Indian Ocean.

Why China?

China has been a friend to the Myanmar military since the late 1980s. Even when Myanmar was isolated during the junta's rule in the 1990s and 2000s, China remained a supportive partner of the regime. Despite the harmonious relations with the civilian government during the democratic transition of 2011-2020, China has always [wanted](#) to keep closer ties with the Myanmar military for economic and security reasons. The 2021 coup has [strengthened](#) the Myanmar military's relationship with China and [increased](#) Beijing's sway over the country. The presence of a Chinese intelligence base on the Coco Islands, [long rumored among](#) the international security community, had little to no evidence before the satellite imagery's release.

Given the prevailing instability across the country, the Myanmar military cannot carry out the ongoing construction on the Great Coco Island without China; only the latter has both the willingness and capability to develop an airport on the remote island.

Why would China secretly—not publicly—develop such infrastructure? What is the project's goal, in the short or long term?

While not part of the Belt and Road Initiative, the infrastructure development taking place on the Coco Islands reminds of other projects under the BRI in other parts of the world, as these projects often generate controversy and criticism. Specifically, rumors have swirled that these projects serve China's regional military and security objectives, rather than the needs of the communities they take place in.

For instance, in 2018 and 2019, Koh Kong province in Cambodia [underwent](#) the Dara Sakor Airport Development project funded by China's Union Development Group. The extreme difficulty of attracting visitors to Koh Kong Beachside resort makes the development of an international airport an illogical decision. Dara Sakor, deviating from the initial plan to develop an international airport for commercial airliners, developed a long runway (10,500 feet) with a "tight turning bay" favored by jet fighters. The Dara Sakor investment zone covers 20% of Cambodia's coastline and lies close to the Ream Naval Base, granted to China for 30 years in return for the funding required to renovate the naval base. Although the developer insisted that the airport will be for civilian use, international observers immediately criticized the project as [benefitting](#) Beijing's military strategy.

Sri Lanka's [Hambantota Port](#), another China-sponsored infrastructure project, also raised security concerns. In 2017, Sri Lanka leased a 70% stake in the port to China Merchants Ports Holding Company Limited (CM Port) for 99 years under a concession agreement signed by Colombo's cabinet of ministers, keeping the remaining 30% under Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA). Although the CM Port and SLPA ostensibly jointly manage the port's commercial operations, observers still [consider](#) the port a Chinese

debt trap. As with Dara Sakor, the Hambantota port is poorly connected to the rest of the country, prompting questions as to its purpose. [Some analysts](#) believe China could potentially use the Hambantota Port as a pretext to establish a security base due to its strategic location for the import of energy from the Middle East.

Why Coco Islands?

As with the projects above, the Coco Islands' remote location, poorly connected to the rest of the country, prompts questions as to whether its airport construction will eventually provide critical infrastructure for China, facilitating future military expansion. The Islands are remote from and poorly connected to the rest of the country. This seems consistent, however, with the PLA's [naval base expansion](#) in Djibouti and China's current aspiration to set up a permanent [military base](#) in Equatorial Guinea.

China considers the Atlantic Ocean important for its exports and the Indian Ocean crucial for its energy and raw material requirements. China has and will continue to undertake infrastructure projects along the maritime route as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. The suspicion and concerns over the China-developed infrastructure mainly arise from the lack of transparency and mysterious nature of the relationship, given the previously mentioned cases of BRI construction in corrupt states.

The Coco Islands' undisclosed construction, along with other infrastructure ventures in its vicinity, has revived the "[String of Pearls](#)" Theory, with the Coco Islands as "beads" in China's strategy to expand its military presence. According to this theory, China will persist in establishing its economic and military footholds in or around the Indian Ocean by investing in dual-use infrastructure development projects. The Maldives, Seychelles, and Madagascar can expect similar projects sooner or later. However, it will remain crucial to observe how China handles [tensions](#) in Pakistan's Gwadar Port, key BRI infrastructure on China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

All in all, the ongoing construction of an airport on the Great Coco Island suggests China's unwavering

determination to broaden its sphere of influence. As Myanmar faces isolation, China sees an opportunity. If it wishes to ease such doubts and suspicions, China should establish a mechanism for *sustainable transparency* to demonstrate its sincere and responsible economic cooperation. Without transparency, China will find it hard to justify the development of infrastructure of such questionable use.

Furthermore, other major powers, namely the United States, European Union, and possibly India, should enhance their active engagement in the Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean subregions through political discussion and/or security cooperation with ASEAN member states to appropriately respond to the expanding influence of China. It is crucial to explore constructive measures with Myanmar's neighbors that promote a balanced regional environment, foster ASEAN's centrality, and ensure collective stability and prosperity.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.