

CHAPTER II
SINO- MYANMAR CORDIAL RELATIONS
(1988-PRESENT)

To understand the development of current relations between China and Myanmar since the post coup era in 1988, it is important to study the historical background of relations until 1988, foreign policy of both sides. Firstly, the historical relations would explain how China and Myanmar have developed their neighborly friendship since centuries. Later, the bloody tragedy in 1988 in Myanmar allowed both sides to re -strengthen their relations. Secondly, the similarity of Chinese and Burmese foreign policy's fundamental principles, foreign policy's objectives as well as the current policy toward each other would be very useful to give explanation on the growing friendliness of the two neighbors. Considering these two basic aspects of relationship, we will understand clearly the growing cordial Sino- Myanmar relations.

A. Sino-Myanmar Relations (1988-Present)

a. Historical Background

Sino-Myanmar relations were evident since the founding of the kingdom of Bagan (Pagan, ancient Myanmar) in AD 849, which occurred during China's cosmopolitan Tang Dynasty (AD 618 – 907). However, when China came under the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) of the Mongols, relations were no longer friendly. Mongol-ruled China invaded and fragmented Bagan in 1287; the Mongols ruled parts of the country until 1303. The Burmese subsequently had discontinuous tributary relations with Chinese empires in the long sweep of history, but this situation was destroyed by the impact of Western imperialism. The fall of the last Burmese king occurred in 1885. China's last dynasty, the Qing, ended in 1911. Burma had become a British colony that was to gain independence in 1948, while China became a republic but faced civil war until 1949. Both suffered from the invasion of Japanese forces during Japan's own imperialist expansion.

The relationship from 1949 -1961 was based on the ambivalent peaceful coexistence. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Sino-Myanmar relations were generally stable. Myanmar prompted to be the first non-communist country to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) after formal relations were established in 1950. Moreover, China and Myanmar jointly agreed the Sino-Burmese Joint Declaration of the 29th of June 1954, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, which are: (1) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty (2) Non-aggression (3) Non-interference in each other's internal affairs (4) Equality and mutual benefits (5) Peaceful co-existence and peaceful settlement of disputes.

Since 1962, the relationship remained nervously friendly until the Cultural Revolution (1966- 1976). From 1967, the relations became temporary setback with confrontations between Burmese and resident overseas Chinese, including militant Maoist students. This caused the anti-Chinese riot movement in Yangon, resulting in the two countries' relations slumping to an historic low. During this time, China pursued a foreign policy inspired by Maoist ideology rather than national interest while Burma strictly maintained a Neutralist foreign policy during the Cold war, avoiding obtaining military and economic aid from China.

Relations eased in the 1970s, particularly after the reduction of Chinese support for the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)¹. Moreover, since 1979, China's Myanmar policy has been in line with its general policy of ensuring a stable external environment with the neighboring states so that Beijing can continue to implement its domestic modernization and development policy. Refer to this, economic cooperation and construction of infrastructure is seen as the only way to improve local people's living standards and maintain stability in this region. The relations, thus, was saw as a more friendly during 1971-1988.

¹ Liang Chi-shad. "Burma's relations with the People's Republic of China: from Delicate Friendship to Genuine Cooperation: From New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Sino –Myanmar relations have stepped up to a new phase after the massacre uprising in Myanmar in 1988. Myanmar has emerged as a key Chinese ally, by which, the official cooperation in all areas; military, trade, investment and cultural exchanges was increasingly established.

b. The 1988 Massacre in Myanmar

In 1988, Burmese pro-democracy protestors took the streets around the country to demand an end to military rule. Six week later the democracy summer ended in a bloody reassertion of power by the military. Thousands were killed and martial law imposed. This violence led to the suspension of international aid and development assistance to Myanmar. The strongest critics were from the United States and the European countries. The government, then, promised free and fair elections by May 1990. The National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi won the election by a landslide. It came as little surprise when the military junta discarded the election results. Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, while other NLD officials were also imprisoned.

Since the uprising in 1988 and its unsuccessful elections of 1990, the Burmese regime has been internationally condemned as one of world's most brutal regimes in the world. For the country's survival under mounting international pressure, Myanmar accepts close friendly relations and supports offered by China². China has been among the few countries that have avoided from criticizing the military junta for the bloody coup or for the back step from democratic values.

The isolation and condemnation experienced by both China and Myanmar in the Yangon massacre of 1988 and the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests the following year in 1989 were two coincident events as apparent factor that allowed closer relations between two parties. The continuation of Chinese support

² Francisco J. Loza, "Myanmar," From Restructuring The United Nations For The Next Fifty Years, 5th Session, 1995, <http://www.munfw.org/archive/45th/agenda.htm>.

since 1988 for Yangon's regime is a rational excuse for China's self- defense reflecting the concern of national interest as a major motif.

B. Foreign Policy

a. The Similarity of China and Myanmar Foreign Policy's Main Characteristics

To explain the friendly ties between China and Myanmar, it is unavoidably to consider the similarity of their current foreign policy's main characteristics; particularly the five principles of peaceful co-existence and independent foreign policy. These two fundamental principles that both China and Myanmar have been adhering allow for their special diplomatic relations.

i.i The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence³

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence first appeared in the agreements⁴ between China, Myanmar and India in 1954 during Chinese Premier Chou En Lai's visit to India and Myanmar. Accordingly, on 28 June 1954 China and India signed in New Delhi and on 29 June 1954 Myanmar and China signed in Yangon, agreements to adhere to these Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence are:

- Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty
- Mutual non-aggression
- Non-interference in each other's internal affairs
- Respect for mutual equality and to work for mutual benefit

³ See Appendix 1

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Republic of China, "China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence," 17 November 2000, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao/3602/3604/default.htm>.

- Peaceful coexistence

From Chinese perspectives, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence have always been highly regarded, despite the changes that have occurred over time in the political and diplomatic environment. China's foreign policy toward Myanmar since the 1988 post coup can be seen in the context of the continuation of maintaining the spirit of Bandung's policy.⁵ As quoted from Premier Li Peng's speech in 1996⁶,

“Friendly Relations and cooperation. China sincerely hopes to establish and develop friendly ties and cooperative relationship with all countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Relations with other states are never based on social systems or ideologies.”

While, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao recently confirms that

*“China will continue its friendly cooperative with Myanmar based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence, including non-interference in each other's internal affairs.”*⁷

Similarly, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence is stated as the cornerstone of Myanmar's foreign policy⁸. Myanmar's foreign policy statement is stated as following:

“Myanmar practices the Independent and Active Foreign Policy in accordance with the following principles: respect of and adherence to the principle of equality among peoples and among nations and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence; taking a non-aligned, independent and just stand in international issues; maintaining friendly relations with all nations, and good-neighborly relations with neighboring countries...”

⁵ Refer to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence

⁶ See Appendix 2

⁷ Xinhua News Agency, November 1, 2006.

⁸ See footnote 14

As well as, it was firmly declared by Prime Minister Lt. General Soe Win on the occasion of the fifty fifth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between both sides that

*“Over the past fifty fifth years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries, we have been able to maintain the long standing traditional Puak Phaw relationship based on the five principles of peaceful co-existence, good neighborliness, mutual respect, understanding and cooperation.”*⁹

i.ii Independent Foreign Policy¹⁰

Another key fundamental principle of foreign policy that China and Myanmar have been adhering is the independent policy. Considering from China’s foreign policy statement, independence is a chief characteristic that has been pursued.

“China has unswervingly pursued an independent foreign policy of peace. The basic objectives of the policy center on safeguarding national independence and state sovereignty, and creating an international environment favorable to its reform, opening and modernization efforts, as well as maintaining world peace and promoting common development”.

Likewise, from Burmese perspectives, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, by its Declaration 3/88 of September 18, 1988 promulgated that it would continue to adhere to the independent and active foreign policy.

“In practising its Independent and Active Foreign Policy, Myanmar will not align itself with any bloc on international issues except to consistently stand on the side that is right. Myanmar also actively participates in activities for world peace;

⁹ Message from His Excellency Lt. General Soe Win, Prime Minister of the Union of Myanmar to His Excellency Mr. Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China by Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, 2005.

¹⁰ See footnote 17.

opposes war, imperialism and colonialism; and maintains friendly relations with all countries”.

b. Foreign Policy’s Objectives since 1988

ii.i China’s Foreign Policy’s Objectives toward Myanmar

Political and Security

China’s strategic consideration in regard to Myanmar has been central not only on Beijing’s pragmatic foreign policy, but also Myanmar’s geographic position. China sees Myanmar as its strategic nexus for the strategic location on a tri-junction between South Asia, Southeast Asia and China, which is economically and strategically significant. Strategically, China-Myanmar nexus is useful for China to contain India’s influence in Southeast Asia. To achieve its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean and its long-term two-ocean objective, China could reach its goal of becoming a great power in the 21st century.

Economic

Geo-economically, Myanmar is important for China as a "land bridge" to revive its ‘Southwest Silk Road’ from Yunnan Province to Myanmar and westward to Bangladesh, India and the Europe. Myanmar could be a trading outlet to the Indian Ocean for its landlocked inland provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. Moreover, the link up with Myanmar could help to develop the poor economies in term of trade and investment between Yunnan province and South East Asian countries. Trade is expected to expand significantly with the realization of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) with a population of 500 million. Moreover, with the development of “Greater Mekong Sub- region”, not only China, but also Myanmar and other countries in this region will benefit. This link up between China’s south-western province and mainland Southeast Asian states can shorten the gap of economic inequality between China’s rich coastal and its poor south-western inland provinces.

ii.ii Myanmar's Foreign Policy's Objectives toward China

Political and Security

Strategic cooperation between Myanmar and China was possible in 1988 due to the West's diplomatic isolation and sanctions on Myanmar. The military coup and the killing of the students in 1988 received strong criticism and resulted in western economic sanctions. China saw a golden opportunity to fill the strategic vacuum in Myanmar's political and economic difficulties. Due to isolation and necessity, Myanmar decided to move closer to China so as to seek both military and economic assistance. The regime's need for external support for its survival led the arms deals with China.

Economic

The events of 1988 were met by the cutting of all multilateral and bilateral aid to Myanmar and the abandoning of the international donors, specially the United States, European Union and Japan. From this regard, the SLORC government adjusted its strict policy of neutrality to a policy of Open Door. This policy was purposed to recover Myanmar's economic recession in substituting for the cut off of external assistance.