

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: FUTURE PROSPECTS

This research on “Sino –Myanmar Cordial Relation and Its Implications to India and ASEAN (1988 –Present)” help clarifying the current situation on Sino – Myanmar closer friendship developed since the 1988 uprising as well as answering to the hypothesis that this closer ties have undeniably brought India and ASEAN, two important Asian neighbors aimed to safeguard their national interest into the Asian power rivalries.

A. Power Rivalries

Sino- Myanmar

The occurrence of students uprising yielding for democracy in Myanmar in 1988 and the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protest has drawn China and Myanmar to cementing it closer ties. Both countries similarly experienced by the isolation and condemnation by the West, especially the US, EU and Japan. Myanmar was considerably suffered when international aids were cut off, plus the implosion of economic sanctions. During difficulties, China was among very few countries that provided Myanmar’s assistances in political support, trade, investment. In return, the military regime seeking for country’s survival willingly receipted Chinese aids. Based on the five principles of co –existence and independent foreign policy, China and Myanmar have developed gradually their cordial and reciprocal relations. Up to present, China successfully establishes its strong presence and influences in Myanmar. It is apparent to see the steady expansion of Sino –Myanmar exchanges and cooperation in all aspects; political, security, economic as well as socio -cultural.

Besides the coincidence of bloody incidents during the late 1980s and the similar adherence to the five principles of peaceful co-existence, in which both sides

will not interfere in each other's internal affairs¹, Myanmar and China are strategically important to each other's national interests. In Myanmar's point of view, China is its major source of political and economic supports thanks to its rising economy and security modernization. From Chinese perspectives, Myanmar occupies an important geographic and strategic position that could open Chinese's trading outlet of its landlocked Yunnan province and provide easy access for China's strong presence in Indian Ocean. Certainly, the axis of North, South, and Southeast Asia, Myanmar is of strategic interest to other states in the region, not only China.

After having witnessed with concerns the Sino-Myanmar cementing ties since 1988, there have been some shifts in the security and power balance of the region, especially by India and ASEAN with Myanmar in order to accomplish their two common objectives; to counterbalance the sphere of Chinese influences over the region and to gain benefits from Myanmar's geo-strategic location. The shift to engagement policy, instead of criticism on Myanmar may disappoint the West like the United States and the European Union, but states' interest in security and economic development has proven essential for the two powers; India and ASEAN, instead of principally upholding the western values of democracy or human rights.

India

India, Myanmar's the new strategic partner in recent years has become the one who can alter the balance of power in the region. Myanmar and India share a border of about 1,331 km. Furthermore, Myanmar has a long coastline of 2,276 km that shares parts of the Bay of Bengal, in particular the surrounding areas of the Coco Islands and the Andaman Sea, which are very important in India's strategic considerations, especially when China is growing its strong military presence through Myanmar. Moreover, Myanmar's location is central to strengthening India's geopolitical position in Southeast Asia as a key stepping stone in India's new 'Look East' policy which seeks to develop and expand political, economic and security ties

¹ See Appendix 5.

with ASEAN. India's growing interest in Myanmar could be seen from the shift of its low-key policy in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s; the emphasis on human rights and democracy changed to a strategic realist policy towards Myanmar. India increased its high-level delegation visits to Yangon, with the primary aim of moving Myanmar away from close ties with China.

ASEAN

Myanmar's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations represent one of the keys of Myanmar's foreign policy. China's growing influence over Myanmar has resulted in anxiety for the ASEAN states. The wariness over China's inroads into Myanmar resulted in the ASEAN's lobby for Myanmar to become a full-fledged member of ASEAN in 1997. From Myanmar's perspective, joining ASEAN moderates relations with China. Moreover, joining ASEAN, carried economic benefits as well as the prospect of having sanctions from the West lifted. However, since the 1990s, relations between China and ASEAN greatly improved; China and ASEAN have signed a framework agreement on mutual co-operation. As a result, China has enhanced mutual understanding and trust with ASEAN in the political and security fields. The close ties between China and ASEAN could indicate that China would prefer a dialogue regarding Myanmar within the framework of ASEAN. There is no doubt that China has a stake in ASEAN. If the Myanmar issue damages intra-ASEAN relations, it could also damage Sino-ASEAN relations.

In conclusion, in order to assess the game of power balancing challenged by India and ASEAN countries against Sino-Myanmar recent relationship, India and ASEAN would gain the different results. Facing a moral dilemma whether to side with democratic forces or engage the military government, the Indian government could develop successfully a deep economic relationship at some level with Myanmar and engage it through multilateral forums to counterbalance China's economic influences and expand its strategic position to Southeast Asia. In term of political security, Myanmar and India perceived China as a common threat have moved closer through high level visits and naval cooperation. With less leverage comparing to

China, India nevertheless gains some benefits from this power rivalries game. In contrast, the current relations make ASEAN disadvantageous. Although Myanmar at first was willing to join ASEAN for economic and security assistance, it finally has found that there are some limitations in ASEAN's supports. Therefore, cooperation through multilateral forum like ASEAN is not a primary choice for the regime to choose for their survival anymore, but it prefers to depend on China and India through bilateral relations. For China and Myanmar which are the two key players in this rivalry, their friendly relationship remains developing in the win-win situation.

B. Future Prospects of Sino – Myanmar Relations

What are the prospects for future Sino-Myanmar relations? The answer is uncertain. Both internal instability and external pressure in Myanmar are contributing factors that influence Sino-Myanmar relations in the short-term. However, the relationship is likely to be stable and friendly in the long-term, largely because China is willing to play an important role in developing relations to a higher and more sustainable level.

China's possible role

Myanmar's national reconciliation is a necessary step towards democratization. It has been at the heart of the democracy movement since 1988. There are two components of the national reconciliation: 1) reconciliation between the military junta and the democratic forces led by Aung San Suu Kyi; and 2) reconciliation between Barman's and other ethnic groups. China views Myanmar's national reconciliation as a domestic issue. To adhere to the principle of non-intervention in state-to-state relations, China will not express any view about how the Myanmar regime should launch a dialogue with the opposition forces.

China has shared the same view as Myanmar with regard to bilateral relations, international situations, human rights and Western values. They were both invaded and exploited by Western imperialists and are suspicious of Western

ideology. They have supported each other in the meetings of the UN Commission on Human Rights. Thus, China will not be happy to see any country interfere in Myanmar's domestic affairs. However, China acknowledges the positive result of dialogue on human rights issues. For this reason, China will not oppose Yangon's dialogue with any other countries regarding the human rights issues in Myanmar. Likewise, China will hold the same attitude towards the dialogue between the military regime and the opposition forces in Myanmar. Furthermore, since China is a regional great power, its influence over the surrounding countries is to be expected. This matters in terms of policy choices in Yangon. Because of the good relationship between China and Myanmar, if China expresses its willingness to see national reconciliation in Myanmar, Yangon would be more likely to listen to Beijing rather than being pressured to act by Western hardliners.

The Prospects for Sino-Myanmar's relations

In June 2000, the Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxun and Myanmar's Foreign Minister U Win Aung signed a joint statement on 'Future Cooperation in Bilateral Relations between the People's Republic of China and Federation of Myanmar'². This document determines the future direction of Sino-Myanmar relations on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the consolidation of mutual relations for wider regional stability and development.

The document indicates optimism about future relations. However, its realization requires serious effort. As discussed above, China has vital interests in this region. By employing a pragmatic foreign policy and using economic cooperation, China believes relations will improve further. China continues to promote the friendly relationship between ASEAN and Myanmar, and to support the Myanmar military government. Beijing's own increasing economic cooperation with Yangon will increase its stake in the country. There is no doubt China will continue to maintain the traditional friendly relationship with Myanmar in the long-term.

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, "Bilateral Relations," 23 November 2003, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>.

From the perspective of Myanmar, positive and reciprocal relation with China not only benefit the current regime, but also represent the only way to escape the hardship imposed by the sanctions of Western countries. Even if the current regime delivers power to the elected democratic government, the latter would still maintain strong relations with China for the sake of Myanmar's strategic interests and economic development. Therefore this paper forecasts that irrespective of who is in power in Myanmar, the maintenance of positive relations with China is inevitable.