Myanmar's Foreign Policy Towards Its Near Neighbours

N. GANESAN

This article examines the evolution of Burma/Myanmar's foreign policy in terms of its ideological orientations and evolution. The collapse of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government in 1988 that had previously pursued a policy of neutrality obtained through self-imposed isolationism has been replaced by a much more realist foreign policy that views international relations and power in competitive terms. Myanmar also maintains a set of competitive relations with its near neighbours to stabilize the immediate external environment and stave off the impact of international sanctions. These bilateral relations are also calibrated to provide a balance-of-power between the three sets of relations in order to avoid being overwhelmed by any of them. All three near neighbours have many important and sensitive issues that are brought to bear on the relationships as well.

Keywords: Myanmar's foreign policy, Myanmar-China relations, Myanmar-India relations, Myanmar-Thailand relations, Near neighbours.

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** Professor of Southeast Asian Politics, Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima City University; E-mail: ganesan@peace.hiroshima-cu.ac.jp
I. INTRODUCTION

Burma’s foreign relations have been subjected to significant changes from the late 1980s. This article examines the domestic contours and considerations in Myanmar’s foreign policy output and the nature of its relations with its near abroad-China, India and Thailand. The term “near abroad” (khit hwee zarnthaikhe) was in vogue from the 1950s to the 1980s and was often used to describe the Soviet Union’s relations with its satellite states (Cameron and Domanski 2005). This early strategy which began from the time of Tsarist Russia was aimed at providing security for the country through the control of immediately adjacent buffer states. In this instance however, the term does not carry such an unequal connotative value but simply asserts the importance of Myanmar’s bilateral relationships with its immediate neighbours.

Myanmar’s foreign policy is derived from a core of elite interests that has been identified as the “political-security complex” that sustains the military junta in power and defies domestic political challenges (Haacke 2006, 17-19). This internal consideration, like in many developing Asian countries, conflates regime security with state security (Waltz 1959, Alagappa 1998). In theoretical terms, it also falls well within the tradition of what James Rosenau (1969) called linkage politics -domestic interests that impinge on a state’s foreign policy output. Generally however, Myanmar’s foreign policy output is delivered within the realist tradition that attempts to obtain and enhance national power in competitive terms (Morgenthau 1948). This competitive world view is then supplemented through a classic balance-of-power approach with its near neighbours that seeks to stabilize the immediate external environment and cushion the country from the vagaries of an international sanctions regime led by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU).

Organizationally, this essay is divided into five major sections. The first section examines normative values that have informed Myanmar’s foreign policy as well as significant historical junctures that have led to major shifts in these policy positions. The next three sections examine Myanmar’s bilateral relations with China, India and Thailand respectively. Finally, the last section examines the significance of Myanmar’s bilateral relations within the larger scheme of things.

II. SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL CONJUNCTURES AND POLICY PRIORITIES

Burma, together with the Indian sub-continent and Malaya, was colonized by Britain in the Eighteenth Century. The process of colonization had two distinguishing features. The first of these was the high level of violence involved in the subjugation of the country—the British fought a total of three wars that came to be referred to as the Anglo-Burmese Wars and ruled the country in a piecemeal fashion from India (Callahan 2004). The second unique feature was the fact that the British, up to the time of independence, had relatively little control over the highland areas that were typically populated by ethnic minorities.

Hence, British control over Burma tended to be restricted to the lowland regions in what came to be called Ministerial Burma. Nonetheless, the British maintained a certain truce with the hill people, and during the Second World War, recruited a large number of Kachin, Chin and Karen to fight Japanese occupation troops. At the time when Burma was granted political independence in January 1948, this broad-based division of the country continued.

Burma’s foreign relations with the external world were a function of domestic political developments as well as a number of important general perceptions. In terms of important political developments, major historical conjunctures occurred in 1962 when the military wrested power from the civilian government and in 1988 when the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government collapsed. Depending on how well the developments are nuanced, 1990 may be added as an important year when the outcome of nationwide elections called by the military government was annulled. The successor military government was renamed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988 and in 1997 it was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Whereas leadership transition in 1988 was marked by a high level of political violence against the democracy movement, subsequent developments, at least in the lowlands, have tended to be less violent. It may be noted however that since 1962, notwithstanding important developments, there has been leadership but not regime transition.

The importance of noting significant conjunctures lies in the fact that these episodes affected the country’s foreign relations. Since 1988 onwards, relations with Western countries, in particular the US and EU have deteriorated significantly. Myanmar’s relations with major Asian powers have tended to be rather mixed—relations with India has been subjected to some turbulence, those with Japan were subject to external pressures and political considerations, but relations with China have certainly improved. Relations with Thailand have been quite complicated and nuanced, just like those with many of the other ASEAN countries (Ganesan 2006).

As a medium-sized and relatively underdeveloped Asian country, Burma’s foreign policy has generally tended to be reactive rather than proactive. The relative instability of the country to determine or influence international relations was realized by the indigenous elite rather early on. Burma, not unlike Indonesia, upon independence, professed an independent and non-aligned foreign policy. Nonetheless, both conditions are dependent on actions as well as circumstances. For all its assertions, independence and non-alignment evaded the country. It began in the first instance owing to the presence of a large detachment of...