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EMERGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUU KYI AND BEIJING: A CONFLUENCE OF INTEREST

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Politics makes strange bed fellows or does it? Last week, Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi who was awarded a Nobel Prize for her struggle for democracy in Myanmar visited China on an invitation by the Communist Party of China. The visit lasted five days during which she met President Xi Jinping, ahead of the first democratic elections which are to be held later this year. Ms. Suu Kyi also met the secretary of Yunnan, Mr. Liu Jiheng in Kunming amongst other important party officials including the vice chair of the National People's Congress Standing Committee and president of the All-China Women's Federation, Ms. Shen Yueyue.

The development took the international media by surprise as it is rare for China to invite a leader of the opposition on a state visit, given its official policy of non interference in internal affairs of other countries. It caught attention of the world community even more so since Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest for nearly fifteen years by the erstwhile military regime under whose rule in Myanmar, Beijing benefitted the most. For its part, in 2007, China blocked a resolution criticising Myanmar's Human Rights violation in the UN. Although the relationship seemed to have acquired some friction since President Thein Sein came to power, this event can hardly be seen as a sudden change of guard by China.



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Policy Stability amidst Political Transition

The Democratic transition of Myanmar began in the year 2010. However, the military was to retain substantial influence over decision making, irrespective of the outcomes of the election. A quarter of the seats in the national and state parliament were reserved for the military. Even the current President, Mr. Thein Sein and most of the ministers of the current party in power - Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) are former military officers.

As far as Beijing was concerned, there was no reason to suspect an overhaul in Myanmar's domestic and foreign policies. This was evident from Chinese investments in Myanmar, which increased from \$1 billion in 2008 to \$13 billion in 2011. The period leading up to the transfer of power to the quasi-civilian government in 2011 saw committed investments to the tune of \$8 billion coming in to Myanmar in the form of three major projects – Myitsone dam project, Letpadaung copper mine and Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline.¹

To China's surprise, work on Myitsone dam and Letpadaung copper mine were halted by the Thein Sein government, owing to protests by local population. At first glance this seems ironic since both projects were inked when Mr. Thein Sein was the Prime Minister. It is likely that compulsion of electoral politics might have forced the government to give in to public opinion which was not in favour of Chinese investments.

However, a historical analysis of Myanmar's foreign policy helps better appreciate Myanmar's present policy towards China. Mr. U Nu, the first Prime Minister of Myanmar coined the concept of 'positive neutrality'. In 1981, Prime Minister Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Program Party carried this forward in their adherence to an 'independent and active foreign policy'. The military government at the time claimed that Myanmar is



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'everybody's friend and nobody's ally.'² The present policy of Myanmar towards Chinese investments is evidently aimed at maintaining the same independence in foreign policy decision making.

The democratic transition has paved a way for the release of sanctions by the west. This in turn helps Myanmar reduce its dependence on China for investments. So, for Myanmar, what seems like a continuation of its well established foreign policy objectives came across as a sudden deviation from set norms from Beijing's perspective. China felt that Myanmar government is no longer doing enough to protect China's investments.

China's Interests in Myanmar

According to Mr. Bertil Lintner, an author and journalist, who has written extensively on Myanmar politics, sanctions imposed by the west made it easier for China to gain access to Myanmar's rich natural resources.³ Economic imperatives forced Myanmar to frame policies to invite Chinese investments, often neglecting the environmental and social repercussions. China's biggest investment in Myanmar, the Myitsone Dam and Dapein Dam are both located in Kachin state. The oil and gas pipeline is in close proximity to the conflict zones of lower Kachin and upper Shan states.⁴ The pipeline is a vital alternative to the choke point in the Straits of Malacca through which energy dependent China receives 84% of its crude oil.⁵ Beijing was therefore forced to play a mediator's role in the ethnic conflict in Kachin and Shan state because of its economic and strategic interest.

China also has a socio-political imperative to maintain peace in its border regions. The Kokang population of Shan state are ethnically Han Chinese and the Kachin's are ethnically Jingpo; a minority recognised by the government of China. An outbreak of



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violence between Myanmar's military and ethnic groups will therefore impact internal stability in China.

Thus, President Thein Sein government's policy of reducing dependence on China by inviting investments and encouraging the West to play a role in the ethnic conflict is detrimental to China's economic, political and strategic interests in Myanmar. It is therefore not surprising that China views US involvement in Kachin and Shan states on Sino-Myanmar border as an extension of US encirclement of China.⁶

Beijing's Evolving Myanmar Policy

As the present government plays out its 'independent and active foreign policy' to adapt to the changing environment, even Beijing seems to have adopted a policy of not depending on one political party or leader when it comes to protecting its national interest. In Late 2013, Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Mr. Yang Houlan said, "China stands ready to engage with all of Burma's political parties as long as they are willing to help further the sound development of relations with China." He further assured that China would continue inter-party relations with National League for Democracy (NLD) in the future.⁷

Beijing however is not hedging its investments on a landslide victory for NLD. Barely a month before Ms. Suu Kyi's visit, President Xi Jinping met Mr. Shwe Mann, the Chairman of Myanmar's ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party. The two leaders vowed "to facilitate stronger cooperation between the two countries and ruling parties."⁸

Not surprisingly, when President Xi Jinping met Ms. Suu kyi last week, he said, "I hope this visit will help deepen your understanding on China and the CPC, which will contribute to our mutual understanding and trust, and lay a better foundation for party-to-party and state-to-state relationship." Realising the significance of the visit in gaining



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Beijing's trust Ms. Suu Kyi emphasised the importance of friendly ties between China and Myanmar.⁹

Suu Kyi's Rapprochement with Beijing

The road to the present bonhomie between the NLD and CPC was paved by Ms. Suu Kyi herself. In March 2013 a committee Ms. Suu Kyi was chairing to assess the environmental and social impact of Letpadaung Copper Mine supported the continuation of the project. Given the certainty of public opposition to her decision, this was a bold move by Ms. Suu Kyi whose political career in Myanmar at this point in time depends more on her legacy than anything else. She has also remained silent on divisive issues such as the Rohingya crisis. The politician in her understands that the success of the democratic transition hinges on economic growth, for which Myanmar continues to be dependent on China.

Her political astuteness was also observed in China, where despite calls by human rights advocates, Ms. Suu kyi did not make any comment against the imprisonment of a fellow Nobel Laureate Liu Xiabo, who was jailed for calling for an end to the one party system. It was unlikely that she would disrespect her host on her maiden visit to China.

Conclusion

In the light of the first democratic elections of Myanmar, which are to be held in November this year, the visit was a chance for China to secure its interests in Myanmar in the event that NLD does come to power under the leadership of Ms. Suu Kyi. Although Ms. Suu Kyi is restrained by the constitution to run for president, Beijing is bound to benefit from a good relationship with a possible future kingmaker.

As stated earlier, few years back China was a key supporter of the military regime that had put Ms. Suu Kyi under house arrest. In the light of this, the emerging relationship



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between the beacon of democracy and the Communist Party of China only goes to show that there are no permanent friends or enemies in politics, only permanent interests. It will be interesting to see what the future unfurls.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ Yun Sun, “Chinese Investment in Myanmar: What Lies Ahead?”, (Washington DC: Stimson, 2013), http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/Yun_Issue_Brief1.pdf, p. 2, accessed on June 12, 2015

² Jurgen Haacke, *Myanmar's Foreign Policy- Domestic influences and International Implications* (London, Routledge, 2006), p. 15

³ Bertil Lintner, “Realpolitik And The Myanmar Spring”, *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/01/realpolitik-and-the-myanmar-spring/>, accessed on June 13, 2015

⁴ Yun Sun, “China, the United States and the Kachin Conflict”, (Washington DC: Stimson, 2014), http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/Myanmar_Issue_Brief_No_2_Jan_2014_WEB_3.pdf, p. 7, accessed on June 12, 2015

⁵ U.S. Department of Defence, “Military and Security Developments involving the People’s Republic of China 2014”, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_DoD_China_Report.pdf, p. 18, accessed on June 14, 2015

⁶ Yun, n. 4, p. 10.

⁷ Echo Hui, “Is China Betting on Suu Kyi Presidency?” *The Irrawaddy*, January 17, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/china-betting-suu-kyi-presidency.html>, accessed on June 14, 2015

⁸ “Chinese President meets Myanmar ruling party chief”, *Xinhua*, April 27, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/27/c_134188748.htm, accessed on June 14, 2015

⁹ “China Focus: China’s Xi meets Zung San Suu Kyi”, *Xinhua*, June 6, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-06/11/c_134318791.htm, accessed on June 14, 2015
