For over forty years, the Communist Party of Burma has been engaged in armed struggle, supplied and backed by China. But now, as Martin Smith reports, China is more interested in cultivating friendship with the Rangoon regime. Is this the end of the road for the CPB?

On 4 January 1948 the Union of Burma gained independence. Three months later the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) went underground and began an all-out offensive to seize power under the slogan ‘Victory Within Two Years’. The attempt failed, and as government troops gradually captured communist-held towns, the CPB forces were pushed into the deep forests and mountains of Burma to regroup.

Thirty-eight years later the CPB remains underground, with an estimated 10,000-strong People’s Army, and is still Burma’s largest insurgent force. But if successive Burmese governments, since independence, have been unable to quell the CPB threat, there have been increasing signs in recent months that the Party is in a deep crisis. This follows a drastic cut-back in Chinese support, both material and political. Material aid, first reduced after Deng Xiaoping came to power, appears to have been terminated altogether during 1985.

The CPB, like the communist parties of Malaysia and Thailand, has always shown marked pro-Chinese sympathies. In the early years the CPB split into two factions, the ‘red flags’ and the ‘white flags’, but the ‘red flags’ under Thakin Soc, labelled ‘trotskyist’ by other communist parties, soon dwindled in importance. The ‘white flags’, however, under Than Tun retained a solid following in the countryside throughout the 1950s, as well as above ground in various workers’ and peasants’ organizations. On several occasions negotiations with the Rangoon government were mooted.

However, it was the breakdown of talks with the new military government in Rangoon in 1963, shortly after General Ne Win seized power, which led to a deep ideological split within the CPB leadership. A number of cadres trained in China returned to Burma. Known as the ‘Peking returnees’, they advocated an escalation of the armed struggle, based on Mao’s strategy of waging protracted war, to build up base areas and encircle the cities from the countryside. Those who continued to call for talks with the government were bitterly denounced. The outcome was the CPB’s own ‘cultural revolution’ in which several veteran party theorists were executed. Or as one of the leading returnees, present Party chairman Ba Thein Tin, put it: there was a ‘fierce struggle’ in which ‘the Marxism-Leninism of Mao Zedong’s thought triumphed’.

The Maoist faction received a considerable boost as a result of the complete breakdown in relations between the Burmese and Chinese governments. After anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon, all Chinese personnel in Burma were recalled in November 1967. Shortly after, for the first time, significant military supplies were made available to the CPB and an important new base area—the North East Command—was established in northern Shan State along the Chinese border.

Party weakened

But if Chinese support had strengthened the hand of maoist ideologues in the CPB, the more immediate result of the CPB’s own ‘cultural revolution’ was a damaging reduction in its popular support in traditional strongholds in the Delta and Pegu Yoma regions of central Burma. The purges and executions were followed by a series of defections and surrenders which left base areas increasingly open to effective government offensives. Party chairman Than Tun was assassinated in 1968, and with the death in action of his successor, Thakin Zin, in 1975, CPB military operations in central Burma came to a virtual standstill.

However, it was only after the fall of the CPB’s last stronghold in the Pegu Yomas that the scale of Chinese aid in north east Burma became apparent. Since early 1968 heavily-armed units of the CPB’s People’s Army had slowly pushed their way north and south, along the Chinese border, taking control of the countryside and occasionally attacking large towns. By late 1973 the CPB was able to put 4,000 troops into the field in one battle alone in the Kengtung region.

Today, despite having failed to capture and hold any major town, the CPB retains effective control of much of north east Burma. While small cadre units are still active in the Tavoy-Mergui districts of southern Burma, and in the north in Arakan State, their effectiveness is minimal. But in large areas of the rugged Shan State and border region of Karen State parallel administrations have been established. In the most important of the CPB’s base areas—the North East Military Region under the People’s Army’s 683rd Brigade—the CPB claimed in a 1980 politburo report to have established a ‘liberated zone’ of some 28,000 sq km with over 3,000 villages and a population of 436,000; 183 schools and 30 medical centres had been set up and there are 883 peasants’ unions, with some 87,000 members.

Limited success

The CPB faces considerable difficulties, though, in expanding its operations from these secure base areas. Much of north east Burma remains poor and backward, home to a diverse array of rebellious ethnic minority and hill tribe peoples, many of whom are represented by insurgent separatist movements of their own. CPB critics maintain the Party’s greatest failing has been its inability to recruit new members in conditions of open discontent. Currently the CPB membership is probably less than 5,000. During 1985 the CPB is believed to have attempted holding its first General Congress in many years, based on the attendance of one quarter of its membership, but as yet no details have been officially released. Moreover, the leadership remains predominantly ethnic Burman, while the majority of its troops are minority hill tribe people—mostly ethnic Wa and Akha.

Nor has the CPB, until recently, had much success in forging alliances with the ethnic separatist movements, whose primary goal is greater autonomy from any government in Rangoon, regardless of political persuasion. At issue has been the CPB’s insistence that the ‘revolutionary national minorities’ accept the leadership of the CPB as Burma’s ‘sole proletarian party’. But as one leader of the Karenni Revolutionary Army put it, ‘the CPB seems to want to practise the same chauvinism as the Burmese government.’

While arms supplies from China were plentiful the CPB appeared to follow a ‘fight or join’ policy towards the ethnic rebel armies. It was only after the CPB and the Kachin Independence Army had fought each other to a standstill in 1975-6 that a truce was called. In January 1977 the Shan State Army split into two factions after an alliance was formed under which the SSA accepted ‘Mao Zedong thought as its basic and guiding ideology’.

Political line softening

However in recent years, in line with the changes in China since Mao’s death, there has been a considerable softening of the CPB’s maoist-leninist-maoist orthodoxy. The first indication of this came in 1977 when CPB chairman Ba Thein Tin told a visiting SSA delegation to CPB HQ at Pangsang that Chinese contributions to the CPB’s total annual budget, which he estimated at some 560 million kyats (£50 million) per annum,
were soon to be reduced. New sources of income would have to be found. Shortly after, the first reports began of active CPB participation in the opium trade. The scale of its current involvement is impossible to estimate, but many of the prize poppy fields in Kokang and Wa sub-states are certainly under CPB control. Recent reports indicate increased poppy cultivation in the south of Shan State, east of the Salween River, where CPB units have been more active lately.

As a result of reduced arms supplies, the CPB's military and political strategy has also undergone a significant change. After seizing, and briefly holding, the towns of Muse and Mong Yawng in 1980, the CPB refrained from the full-scale assaults which characterized its operations during the late 1970s, when heavy casualties were sustained. After a series of party meetings, a new military line of “strategic defence”, defined as ‘mobile defensive warfare which is active’, was announced in March 1980. Military operations outside CPB base areas are now largely confined to guerrilla raids and ambushes.

New alliances sought

Instead, greater attention has been devoted to winning the support of the ethnic insurgent armies. Since 1981 high-ranking CPB officials such as vice-chairman Pe Tint and central committee member Myo Myint have been constantly active, moving through Shan State and beyond with armed support, holding talks with various ethnic organizations. According to one hill tribe leader approached, arms supplies were offered with no conditions. Significantly, much of the doctrinaire maoism of previous years has been dropped altogether.

The new policy has met with some success. The treaty with the powerful Kachin Independence Army was strengthened in July 1981 and the alliance with the Shan State Army resumed in November 1982. Under these agreements CPB troops are allowed to move freely through their territories. Furthermore, CPB troops, mostly ethnic Wa, have been allowed in to strengthen smaller hill tribe forces, such as the Kayan New Land Party and the predominantly Pao Shan State National Liberation Organization. Using the forces as stepping stones, CPB cadre units have been able since 1983 to penetrate to the hills above Pyinmana and their old Pegu Yoma strongholds. CPB units currently continue to be active on the western edges of the Shan plateau. In recent months, though, due to financial difficulties, it would appear that aid to minority groups south of Taunggyi has been reduced and that CPB efforts are now being concentrated on Katha District further north.

However, the CPB continues to be mistrusted by many ethnic forces, especially in the nine-member National Democratic Front where deep division over the question of cooperation with the CPB exists. Accor-
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ding to Major Okker of the Pao National Army, which has recently clashed several times with CPB forces, ‘there is no party which has been stronger because of CPB protection and support.’

Perhaps the clearest sign of the CPB’s policy change were the negotiations with the Ne Win government during 1980 and 1981. Chinese influence is widely believed to have been instrumental in initiating the talks during a visit by Ne Win to Beijing. The talks broke down when the Burmese government refused to accept the CPB’s basic conditions—the continued existence of the Communist Party, the People’s Army and the ‘liberated zones’ as separate entities. Despite this failure the CPB has continued to call for new talks under the three banners of ‘ending civil war, developing democracy and building national unity’. And while the armed struggle has not been abandoned, most current CPB propaganda consists of calls for the establishment of a multi-party democracy and detailed criticisms of the woeful economic record of the Ne Win government. Noticeably, praise for China continues unabated.

China’s priorities

The most difficult question in understanding the shifting strategy of the CPB is the role of the Chinese government in Beijing. According to ethnic minority sources in the Kachin and Shan States, who have long had contact with Chinese Communist Party officials in the adjoining Yunnan Province, Beijing’s undoubted priority, despite regular pledges of international proletarianism, has always been the security of China’s vast borders. An agreement defining the rugged 2,100 km border with Burma, along which Guomindang remnants had caused trouble for many years, was not concluded until 1960.

Except for a short period at the height of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese officials have always taken care to distinguish between party to party relations with the CPB and government to government relations with the Ne Win government in Rangoon. But if the attitude of Beijing has appeared ambivalent in the past, over the last year there have been increasing signs of a definite break with the CPB and a deepening of ties with Rangoon.

A joint border survey has been started and a variety of Chinese-backed construction projects are under way. The CPB radio station, the Voice of the People of Burma, which has broadcast anti-Ne Win propaganda from the Yunnan border since 1971, ceased abruptly on 16 April 1985. But most significant of all has been the exchange of visits between Burmese and Chinese leaders, culminating in Ne Win’s visit to China in May 1985, his first in his capacity as chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. Deng Xiaoping greeted him as an ‘old friend’ and Ne Win announced that there were no special problems between the two countries. For Ne Win, once reviled in the Chinese press as the ‘Burmese Chiang Kai Shek’, the visit represents a considerable diplomatic triumph.

Various theories have been advanced for the change in Chinese attitude. No doubt the CPB’s enthusiastic support for the Chinese Cultural Revolution will not have been forgotten by the new pragmatists in Beijing, but in fact aid to the CPB continued for some years after supplies to the Communist Parties of Malaya and Thailand were cut off. Rather, according to diplomatic sources, it was the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea which caused the decisive shift. It was feared that continued support for the CPB could push the Burmese government into the Soviet camp. In particular there has been much speculation that the successors to the ageing Ne Win in the BSPP, including heir-apparent San Yu, are likely to be pro-Soviet.

Extension of minorities policy

But there is yet another factor. CCP officials have recently begun to pay closer attention to the struggle of Burma’s ethnic minority rebels. Since the early 1970s, representatives from several of the insurgent organizations have visited Yunnan, but the Chinese attitude has always been that any aid must be accepted via the CPB. Now, however, according to several minority sources, their criticisms of both the CPB and Ne Win government have been acknowledged. Minorities, like the Kachin, Shan, Wa and Lahu, also live in large numbers on the Yunnan side of the border, where autonomous regions have been established and few of the problems in Burma experienced. Ethnic minority troops have served with distinction in the clashes along the Vietnamese border. While Chinese aid to the ethnic rebels is largely humanitarian, their hope is that China will act as an intermediary in their disputes with Burmese authorities, whether CPB or BSPP.

The more cynical would argue that current Chinese policy allows Beijing influence with all cross-border parties and prepares for any eventuality. Nor is there much likelihood the CPB will turn to Vietnam and Laos as some observers have speculated. The CPB has stood firmly on the Chinese side in the conflict with Vietnam and roundly condemned the invasion of Kampuchea. Indeed CPB units in the CPB’s 815th military region adjoining Laos have exchanged fire with Lao troops across the Mekong River for several years.

The question which remains is whether the CPB will swiftly follow the communist parties of Malaysia and Thailand with the cutback in Chinese aid. Over the past few months the usually secretive Rangoon government has been announcing a large number of CPB surrender. According to one recent traveller in Shan State, ‘the CPB is disintegrating.’ Moreover, with dwindling arms supplies, the CPB is increasingly likely to become involved in trading disputes with other insurgent forces and will find it increasingly difficult to resist government offensives into its base areas.

Yet as CPB vice-chairman Pe Tint explained during the peace talks in 1981, ‘a communist party never surrenders.’ The CPB, for all its weaknesses, remains the best organized insurgent force in Burma, and the only one to lay claim to cross-Burma support. In its 46-year history, more than forty years of which have been taken up in armed struggle, the CPB has survived many crises. Indeed, shortly before going off the air the Voice of the People of Burma had taken on a new militancy. But after nearly 38 years of ‘protracted war’ the coming year may well be the hardest of all.

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