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Myanmar in Contemporary Chinese Foreign Policy – Strengthening Common Ground, Managing Differences

Robert Sutter

Abstract: This assessment first briefly examines recent features of China's approach to foreign affairs, and then examines in greater detail features in China's approach to relations with its neighbours, especially in Southeast Asia. It does so in order to discern prevailing patterns in Chinese foreign relations and to determine in the review of salient recent China–Myanmar developments in the concluding section how China's approach to Myanmar compares with Chinese relations with other regional countries and more broadly. The assessment shows that the strengths and weaknesses of China's recent relations with Myanmar are more or less consistent with the strengths and weaknesses of China's broader approach to Southeast Asia and international affairs more generally. On the one hand, China's approach to Myanmar, like its approach to most of the states around its periphery, has witnessed significant advances and growing interdependence in the post-Cold War period. On the other hand, mutual suspicions stemming from negative historical experiences and salient differences require attentive management by Chinese officials and appear unlikely to fade soon.

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Keywords: PR China, Myanmar, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, foreign policy

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Features of China's Recent Approach to Foreign Affairs

Looking back over the post-Cold War period, Chinese relations with Myanmar represent a generally successful application of the main features of contemporary Chinese foreign relations.¹ Those features include attentive diplomacy in bilateral and multilateral mechanisms seeking to pursue areas of common interest in ways of mutual benefit under the rubric of China's "win-win" principle. In interaction with neighbours and many other nations and groups, Chinese officials have endeavoured for the most part to avoid or play down differences over past and contemporary disputes, including China's often extreme policies toward neighbouring countries and other nations in previous decades, competing territorial claims and competition for markets and resources, in the interest of fostering greater cooperation over existing common ground of benefit to both sides (Bergsten et al. 2008; Lampton 2008; Shirk 2007; Sutter 2010; U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations 2008; Wang 2011: 68-79; Jakobson and Knox 2010; Shambaugh 2011: 7-27; *The Economist* 2010: 3-16).

The common ground China seeks often focuses on economic development that has been the most salient feature of China's growing international profile in the post-Cold War period. China is driven to seek capital, technology, resources and markets for its highly resource dependent and globally integrated economic growth – seen as important for long-term Chinese aspirations for greater international power and the lynchpin of domestic stability and popular legitimacy for the administration of the Chinese Communist Party. As a nation repeatedly subjected to international sanctions, most recently following the crackdown against Chinese dissidents during the Tiananmen incident of 1989, China also finds common ground with nations and groups that have been targets of international sanctions and pressures by outside powers that is seen in China as an arbitrary and unjustified interference in other countries internal affairs. China rarely sees its interests well served by standing in the way of the imposition of international punishments broadly supported by world opinion, but it uses its international position, notably as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, to impede or slow the imposition of punishments on countries seen as outliers to world norms by Western nations but not by others.

1 This article is a revision of a paper presented by Robert Sutter at the International Conference on China-Myanmar Relations, Georgetown University, Washington DC, November 4, 2011. The author thanks an anonymous reviewer arranged by the publisher for suggestions for revision.

China impressively growing military power often poses a challenge to China's attentive diplomacy and economic interchange stressing mutual benefit. On the one hand, authoritative Chinese statements make clear China's military need to prepare for contingencies with the United States, especially over Taiwan, to protect Chinese territorial claims from intrusions by neighbours and to insure safe supplies of energy and secure maritime trade. On the other hand, the military build-up backed by over 20 years of double-digit annual growth in China's defense budget is seen as intimidating by China's neighbours and as posing a serious challenge to the United States. Chinese diplomacy at times endeavours to reassure neighbours, the United States and other concerned powers by playing down the significance of Chinese military advances or by promoting closer engagement in formal dialogues and other exchanges. Some of these exchanges involve the sales of weapons and transfers of other equipment and technology.

Other salient features of China's post-Cold War foreign policy have involved, at least until recently, an intense rivalry with Taiwan for international recognition, and continued strong opposition to international interaction with leaders like Tibet's Dalai Lama seen as posing a threat to the legitimacy and territorial integrity of China. China's focus on economic development requires stability, especially around China's periphery. As a result, China tends to oppose changes in policy or foreign intrusions or pressure that would risk destabilizing border areas in ways contrary to China's development and the domestic legitimacy of the Communist administration. Of course, China's emphasis on such stability is conflicted at times when Chinese officials emphasize determination to use force if necessary to protect claims regarding Taiwan and some other territorial disputes along its periphery.

China and Neighbouring Asia: Accomplishments and Shortcomings

The success of Chinese foreign relations and growth of Chinese influence in nearby Asia has been substantial in the post-Cold War period. China's economic importance to its neighbours has grown enormously. China is the largest or second largest trading partner of most of these states. It receives large investments from many neighbouring Asian states and Chinese investment in nearby states is growing from a relatively low base. Economic interdependence has included webs of roads, railways, hydroelectric dam projects, electric power grids, pipelines and other important connections integrating China with nearby foreign border areas. Political interchange between China and neighbouring countries has involved a dizzying array of

bilateral and multilateral agreements, exchanges, dialogues and other interaction that receives wide publicity and serves to reinforce Chinese efforts to reassure neighbouring states as China rises to greater world prominence. Asian multilateral groups and consultations have grown strongly in the post-Cold War period and China has emerged as a leader in these endeavours. The wide array of international and regional exchanges includes growing military interactions that counteract to some degree regional suspicions regarding China's military build-up.

The limitations of China's advancing influence also have been evident as China has risen in prominence in nearby Asia. China's role in world affairs has always been most influential in nearby Asia, but the legacy of the People's Republic of China's often extreme, confrontational and violent actions against nearby countries during forty of its sixty years underlines residual suspicions that China's more benign approach of recent years may not last. In this view, China will need to work hard for many years in order to reassure its neighbours that the aggressive and truculent Chinese behaviours of the past will not return. Chinese patriotism feeds a strong nationalistic trend in Chinese policy which is usually reciprocated by patriotic and nationalistic neighbours. The result is difficulty in finding agreement over significant disputes, notably over disputed territorial claims. Against this background, neighbouring states are more on guard as China expands its military power and engages in displays of their capabilities to use force to defend disputed territory. Against this background, China's Asian neighbours have engaged in active contingency planning. They have worked at domestic strengthening of military and other capabilities; they have endeavoured to use multilateral groupings to help to manage perceived possible adverse consequences of China's rise for their interests; and they have built stronger ties with other concerned power, notably the United States, the Asia-Pacific region's leading power.

The above pluses and minuses for China underscore the mixed record of advances in Chinese relations with neighbouring countries over the past two decades (reviewed in Lampton 2008; Shirk 2007; and Sutter 2010 above). China's economic importance continues to grow steadily, though China's economic interaction with Asia remains heavily dependent on foreign investment in China and the sale of Chinese exports containing large amounts of components for other parts of Asia to Western markets. Political and security relations have encountered significant obstacles. China's relations with Japan, Asia's second most important power and close ally of the United States, remain poor in political and security areas. China's relations with India, Asia's next most important power, have declined in security and some political areas since the previous decade. The sensitive border

dispute between the two powers has become more acrimonious. Similar significant setbacks have been registered in what had appeared earlier as uniformly positive Chinese relations with such important regional middle powers as Australia and South Korea, both of which have registered greater wariness over China's military expansion and its foreign policy in sensitive areas like the Korean peninsula.

In contrast to the ups and downs in advancing Chinese relations around its periphery, China's approach to its Southeast Asian neighbours in the post-Cold War period had appeared to make steady gains. Seeking to secure China's periphery and expand advantageous economic, political, and military contacts, Chinese leaders advanced into Southeast Asia. Isolated by the West and Japan after the Tiananmen incident of 1989, China redoubled efforts to sustain and improve ties with developing neighbouring states in Southeast Asia and other countries of what was called the Third World (Ba 2003: 632).

China accommodated international pressure leading to a peace settlement in Cambodia in 1991 and in the process shifted decades-long Chinese support from the reviled and discredited Khmer Rouge to its former adversary, Cambodian strongman Hun Sen, who had been sharply criticized by China in the past. Later in the decade, the Sino-Cambodian relationship evolved to the point that Hun Sen's regime had closer ties with China than any other Southeast Asian state, as Chinese military, economic, and political support appeared both generous and without major conditions.

Beijing leaders also solidified China's position as the main international backer of the military regime that grabbed power in Myanmar after elections in 1988. China provided military equipment, training, and economic and political assistance to the internationally isolated regime. Chinese support for Myanmar continued, even during the regime's controversial violent crack-down against demonstrations by Buddhist monks in 2007, its inept response and gross malfeasance in reaction to a typhoon disaster in 2008, and its manipulation of elections in 2010 to sustain the military junta's control under a veneer of elected representation. That Myanmar remained wary of Chinese influence was seen in the regime's seeking support from India, ASEAN nations, and even the United States, by its crackdown on pro-China armed groups along the Sino-Burmese border who had in previous decades provided insurgents directed by China against the Rangoon government, and by suspending an unpopular several billion dollar Chinese dam project (Richardson 2010; International Crisis Group 2010; *Comparative Connections* 2012).

Although many remained suspicious of Chinese intentions in Cambodia, Myanmar, and elsewhere in the region, Southeast Asian governments

generally welcomed markedly increased relations with China as Chinese economic, political, and military power and influence grew in the 1990s. Southeast Asian leaders were positively impressed by the more active and accommodating stance of China's leaders to Southeast Asia evident in the late 1990s and into the next decade. Southeast Asian leaders remained pragmatic in seeking an appropriate balance with other powers in the region (*Asia's China Debate* 2003; Yee and Storey 2002).

American influence in Southeast Asia declined following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Philippines in 1992, and episodic and inconsistent U.S. attention to the region followed for several years. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States caused U.S. leaders to focus renewed attention on Southeast Asia as a second front in the war on terrorism. Japan had been the dominant outside economic power in Southeast Asia, but its position declined in the post-Cold War period as economic weakness sapped Japanese influence in Southeast Asia. The European Union (EU) remained interested in the region largely for economic reasons, but this interest fell in tandem with the economic downturn in the region caused by the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998. Russia exerted little influence, though Russian arms were relatively cheap and capable and therefore attractive to some Southeast Asian buyers. As a power with rising capabilities and ambitions, India grew in influence and took initiatives regarding Myanmar, Vietnam, and ASEAN more broadly and in securing sea lines of communications in Southeast Asia (Roy 2002: 4).

Chinese officials tended to be accommodating and diplomatic in most interactions with Southeast Asia during the post-Cold War period, but they showed a hard edge over territorial disputes in the early 1990s that worked against improving China–ASEAN relations. Chinese officials at this time also appeared wary of multilateral discussions on these and related issues. They were presumably suspicious that these fora would put them at a disadvantage on territorial and other sensitive questions. Chinese military-backed expansion of territorial control in disputed islets in the South China Sea came in tandem with the aggressive Chinese military reaction to the Taiwan president's visit to the United States in 1995, prompting U.S. military countermeasures that were welcomed by many leaders in Southeast Asia. In 1995, ASEAN showed unusual unity in confronting China diplomatically over its military-backed expansion in disputed areas of the South China Sea, and some in ASEAN, notably Singapore and the Philippines, took steps to solidify security ties with the United States in the perceived uncertain environment caused by China's expansion (Ba 2003: 633; Roy 2002).

Greater Chinese flexibility on territorial disputes and the management of relations with Southeast Asia was evident by 1997, when Chinese officials

employed their new security concept (NSC) initially in an ASEAN setting. By this time, Chinese leaders were showing more flexibility in dealing with territorial issues with many neighbours and were more willing to participate in multilateral fora that focused on these and other regional concerns. Chinese leaders from that time forward also were very active in diplomatic, economic, and military contacts to reassure Southeast Asian neighbours and others that the image of the “China threat” was an illusion. The image had been prominent in Southeast Asia as a result of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and Taiwan up to the mid-1990s and China’s overall military and economic expansion (Sutter 2002: 22-23).

The shift toward greater moderation in 1997 did not include U.S. policy, however. Chinese moves in Southeast Asia for many years explicitly targeted the United States and U.S. interests. Official Chinese media and comment by Chinese leaders portrayed Chinese initiatives as part of a broader international struggle against the “hegemonism,” “power politics,” and “Cold War thinking” of the United States, the leaders of which were consistently portrayed as taking initiatives in Southeast Asia and elsewhere along China’s periphery with a design to “contain” and “hold back” the rise of China’s power and influence in this and other world areas. Thus, in Southeast Asia, the moderating effect of China’s NSC was offset by the strident Chinese opposition to American power, influence, and policies. The NSC was often juxtaposed to the efforts by the United States to revitalize the alliance relationships with NATO and Japan, seen by Chinese leaders as evidence of “Cold War thinking” adverse to Southeast Asian interests and global peace and development. Many leaders in Southeast Asia felt that Chinese rhetoric seemed to be calling on them to make a choice between Chinese and U.S. approaches – a choice they were loath to make. The net effect of the Chinese anti-U.S. rhetoric was to complicate and hold back Chinese influence in the area (Finkelstein 1999; Roy 2002).

Taiwan’s efforts to expand diplomatic and economic influence in the region ran up against repeated and strenuous Chinese complaints and pressure on Southeast Asian governments, though in the 1990s the pressure was not as intense as that applied to the United States or Japan over Taiwan. For a decade after Lee Teng-hui (Li Denghui) initiated his “informal diplomacy” with a visit to Singapore in 1989, Taiwan’s president and other senior leaders travelled informally many times to the region to visit with Southeast Asian counterparts, and some senior Southeast Asian leaders even ventured to Taiwan. As China became more influential in Southeast Asia, however, it used that influence to restrict ever more tightly Southeast Asian interactions with Taiwanese officials as well as to curb Southeast Asian interaction with the Dalai Lama and activities in Southeast Asia by the Chinese-outlawed

Falun Gong movement (Thayer 2001; Breckon 2003). Other targets of Chinese pressure in Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War period included Japan. Chinese officials and commentators in this period were especially critical of Japanese security cooperation with the United States and its alleged negative impact on Southeast Asia (Wu 2000: 301; Roy 2003).

As Chinese foreign policy took a sharp shift toward moderation during the time of the George W. Bush administration in the United States, by mid-2001 this shift was clearly evident in China's approach toward Southeast Asia. The previously strident Chinese rhetoric and strong diplomatic and other pressure regarding the United States were greatly reduced, much to the satisfaction of Southeast Asian governments that generally did not wish to choose between the United States and China and sought to moderate great-power contention, which was seen to work against regional interests (Breckon 2002). There also was a falloff in Chinese criticism of Japan and its security cooperation with the United States dealing with Southeast Asia.

Nonetheless, Chinese policy and behaviour continued to work, albeit much more subtly, to build Chinese influence at the expense of the United States and other powers in Southeast Asia. This was seen in active Chinese efforts to foster an ever growing variety of Asia-only economic, political, and security fora that took pains to exclude the United States. When a U.S.-backed high-level security forum, inaugurated in Singapore in 2002 and sponsored by the Institute for International and Strategic Studies, proved popular with regional leaders, China for several years sent only low-level functionaries. However, the Chinese administration devoted high-level attention to promoting a new Asia-only security dialogue that excluded the United States. Greater Chinese flexibility and willingness to engage in negotiations with the various claimants to South China Sea territories also saw Chinese officials endeavouring to use the discussions with ASEAN members about a code of conduct over the disputed claims in the South China Sea as a means to restrict U.S. naval exercises in the area. After an annual multilateral U.S. "Cobra Gold" military exercise, China conducted its own military exercise in apparent competition. China also manoeuvred in its free trade agreement (FTA) initiative with ASEAN. Its goal was not only to shore up China's position relative to the United States but also to place in a negative light trade initiatives from Japan, South Korea, and India, undergirding China's leading position in the region in this area (Sutter 2005: 297).

Moreover, as Chinese influence in the region grew, Chinese officials were prepared to use their increased leverage firmly and forcefully regarding certain issues. Heading the list was Taiwan. By the start of the new century, Chinese officials were in a position to block almost all visits by Taiwan's president to Southeast Asia, and no head of state or government in South-

east Asia visited Taiwan – a sharp turnabout from the high point of Taiwan's informal diplomacy in the 1990s. It was increasingly difficult for lower-ranking Taiwanese leaders to travel in the region and meet with Southeast Asian counterparts. Chinese influence also kept the Dalai Lama in general isolation from regional leaders, and Chinese officials went all out to press Southeast Asian governments to work with Chinese authorities against the Falun Gong movement.²

The rapid growth of trade and other economic interchanges was the most important indication of Chinese–Southeast Asian cooperation in the post-Cold War period. Through the 1990s, the growth in trade continued to outpace the rapid development of the Chinese economy. China–ASEAN trade was valued at USD 55 billion in 2002 and USD 78 billion in 2003; trade almost doubled in the following three years, increasing from USD 105.9 billion in 2004 to USD 202.5 billion in 2007, attaining the trade target of USD 200 billion set by leaders of the two sides three years ahead of schedule. The global economic crisis of 2008–2009 curbed China–ASEAN trade, but the value of trade grew markedly in 2010, the first year of the newly implemented China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, reaching USD 292.7 billion according to Chinese statistics, making China ASEAN's leading foreign trading partner and ASEAN China's fourth-largest trading partner (*Comparing Global Influence* 2008: 51, 53; China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011).

ASEAN–China investment also grew rapidly in the post-Cold War period, though it was mainly ASEAN investment in China and not the other way around. The pattern was supported by ASEAN entrepreneurs seeing their interests well served by integrating their enterprises with China's rapidly growing and internationally competitive economy rather than by endeavouring to compete directly with Chinese manufacturers in international markets. In 2010 direct investment from ASEAN countries to China that year was USD 6.32 billion, an increase of 35.2 per cent over the previous year (*Comparative Connections* 2008a: 66; China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011). Chinese investment in ASEAN was much smaller in scale though it began to rise in recent years, reaching about five per cent of FDI entering ASEAN countries, according to ASEAN data.

China's salience in Southeast Asia also showed as in 2010 there were 6,000 Chinese language volunteers teaching 50,000 Southeast Asian students in classes sponsored by, among others, 35 Confucius Institutes. By that time, almost 800 flights took place every week between major cities in China and

2 Thayer 2001; Breckon 2003. On China's success in blocking previously common high-level visits of Taiwan leaders to Southeast Asia, see Kurlantzick 2006.

Southeast Asian countries. Between January–October 2009, 4 million people from ASEAN countries visited China and 3.7 million Chinese visited ASEAN countries. Chinese visitors ranked among the top three of foreign countries visiting ASEAN countries, representing over 6 per cent of foreign visitors to ASEAN countries (*Comparative Connections* 2010a: 58–59).

Perhaps the most concrete and lasting dimension of China's improved economic relations with Southeast Asia came in the form of a wide range of highway, railroad, river, power generation, power grid, and pipeline connections that integrated China ever more closely with those Southeast Asian countries that border China. Some of the projects had the support of such international financial institutions as the Asian Development Bank. Achievements by the start of this decade included modern highways linking south eastern China with neighbouring countries; the development of smoother rail transportation between China and neighbouring states; the start of pipelines linking China and coastal Myanmar, thereby bypassing the choke point of the Malacca Strait; the building of hydroelectric facilities in neighbouring countries and in China and building related electric transmission infrastructure that would advance access to electric power in neighbouring countries and south eastern China; and Chinese alteration of the Mekong River and other rivers connecting China and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries so as to remove rapids and other obstacles to smooth river transportation.

The new developments and infrastructure opened heretofore inaccessible areas to greater economic development; they were welcomed by the Chinese and Southeast Asian governments and placed the economies of nearby Southeast Asian areas ever closer into relationships involving China. The hydroelectric and river alteration projects prompted serious international criticism as well as some criticism in China on grounds of environmental damage, population dislocation, and negative effects on downstream fishing and other interests (Economy 2008–2009: 380–382; China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011).

High-level political interaction and cooperation reinforced economic convergence of interests, as Chinese and ASEAN leaders undertook a wide range of senior-level political contacts and exchanges. Beginning in the 1990s, top-level Chinese leaders regularly travelled to ASEAN countries. When their Southeast Asian counterparts visited China, they reciprocated with warm welcomes. China and the ASEAN countries established various bilateral mechanisms for regular high-level political dialogue, and such dialogue between China and ASEAN developed markedly. For many years, active participation by top-level Chinese leaders in ASEAN functions and their interaction with ASEAN states far surpassed such contacts by other powers with a strong interest in Southeast Asia, including Japan, South Ko-

rea, India, the United States, Australia, Russia, and the EU (China–Southeast Asia Relations 1997: 116; Sutter 2000: 129).

On security issues, China was invited by ASEAN in 1994 to become a consultative partner in the regional security dialogue carried on by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). At the ASEAN–China summit in Phnom Penh in November 2002, Chinese and Southeast Asian claimants finally made some progress in efforts to manage more effectively tensions arising from competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. China and ASEAN signed a Declaration on Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. At the annual ARF meeting in Phnom Penh on June 18, 2003, Chinese officials pledged to seek legislative approval to sign ASEAN’s 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.

Southeast Asian wariness of China’s leadership in the region was seen in the widely reported tug-of-war that occurred behind the scenes over the role and composition of a new regional organization, the East Asia Summit (EAS). China supported the original Malaysian initiative in 2004 that envisaged an exclusive eastern Asian group, and it proposed Beijing as the site for the second summit in 2006. China had supported Asian groupings excluding the United States and other non-Asian powers in the past. An exclusive EAS with China playing a leading role was resisted by Singapore, Indonesia, and others, who were backed by Japan. In the end, they succeeded in opening the EAS to India, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia, all of which were happy to play active roles that implicitly diluted China’s influence. The broadly representative EAS left the door open to U.S. participation. The United States decided to join the group in 2010. Also, ASEAN asserted its leadership as the EAS convener, with the second summit in 2006 slated for the Philippines, not China (*Comparative Connections* 2010b: 63–66; Sutter 2008: 110–112).

Chinese influence in Southeast Asia also seemed to wane in 2007, continuing into 2010, for reasons unrelated directly to China–Southeast Asian interchanges. For one thing, Southeast Asia no longer received the prominence it had received earlier in the decade in Chinese diplomacy as senior Chinese leaders dealt with other important Chinese interests in an ever widening circle of countries, including those in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, and southern Asia. They had less time left over for trips to and long stays in Southeast Asia. Chinese leaders also were preoccupied with affairs at home and other issues. President Hu Jintao did not travel abroad in the second half of 2007 and the first half of 2008, presumably because of concerns over the Seventeenth Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2007 and the National People’s Congress the following March. The year 2008 also brought a string of preoccupations, including

violent outbursts in Tibet, a massive earthquake, and the need for effective management of various complications associated with the August 2008 summer Olympic Games in Beijing. The adverse impact of the 2008–2009 economic crisis added to reasons for senior Chinese leaders to stay close to home while focusing diplomacy on interaction with key world economic powers (*Comparative Connections* 2008b: 65; *Comparative Connections* 2009a: 72).

Although Chinese officials continued to talk about ASEAN taking the lead in Asian multilateralism, they also privately and sometimes publicly showed impatience with the slow pace of progress under the leadership of ASEAN governments, many of which were beset with fundamental problems of political unrest and instability. China's ability to advance relations with ASEAN and the region were postponed when Thailand had to cancel and reschedule the annual ASEAN summit and related meetings in late 2008 because of political turmoil in Bangkok that closed the airports in the city. The Chinese efforts faced an added setback when the rescheduled meeting in Thailand in April 2009 was cancelled and foreign delegates evacuated as hostile demonstrators invaded the meeting site. Following the departure in 2006 of Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi, who was increasingly shunned by Chinese leaders on account of his repeated visits to the controversial Yasukuni war memorial, Chinese leaders were willing to pursue "plus three" summit meetings apart from ASEAN. The first summit meeting of the plus three powers – China, Japan, and South Korea – was held in Japan in December 2008. Chinese officials also saw the six-party talks as a promising Asian regional mechanism separate from ASEAN leadership (*Comparative Connections* 2008c: 76–77; *Xinhua* 2009).

In this context and unlike in the recent past, China found itself following others rather than leading the foreign powers in interaction with ASEAN. Notably, China delayed as the United States considered for years the appointment of an ambassador to ASEAN. As a result, China's eventual appointment of an ambassador to ASEAN seemed to be following the U.S. lead rather than setting the pace as China did earlier in the decade in dealing with the ASEAN–China FTA and signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. China also followed the U.S. lead in setting up a representational office with the ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta (*Comparative Connections* 2008c: 76–77; *Comparative Connections* 2009b: 5–6).

The most serious setbacks for China's influence in Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War period came with developments beginning in 2008. Rising frictions between China and Southeast Asian neighbours, especially over the South China Sea, developed along with rising frictions in China's relations with other powers, notably the United States, over a range of issues including American military presence in the South China Sea and other

waters near China. The United States and a number of Southeast Asian countries appeared to deepen military, political and other cooperation in part in order to support their interests in their respective disputes with China. The cooperation came as the United States and other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, notably Japan, South Korea and Australia, reacted negatively to what were widely seen as new and assertive Chinese approaches – in some cases backed by military or other government-supported maritime shows of force – to disputed territories and other issues around China's periphery. Evidence of Chinese assertiveness toward Southeast Asia included increased naval patrols in the South China Sea, pressure on foreign oil companies to cease operations in contested waters, the establishment of administrative units to oversee China's claims to the Paracel and Spratly Islands, the unilateral imposition of fishing bans, and the harshness of Chinese responses to the outer continental shelf submissions to the United Nations by other claimants (*Comparative Connections* 2011a).

Beginning in July 2010, interventions at odds with China's stance in the South China Sea and concurrent advances in U.S. military and political relations with Vietnam, the Philippines, Australia, South Korea, Japan and others placed China on the defensive over regional territorial issues. A notable statement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, at the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi on July 23 regarding recent tensions in the South China Sea was viewed by China's foreign ministry as an attack on China. The ARF meeting also saw a new U.S. presidential commitment, backed by ASEAN, to participate actively in the East Asian Summit, raising the profile of that regional body over China's preference for Asian only regional groups. Further complicating China's regional calculus were prominent advances in U.S. military and other relations with Vietnam, then holding the chairmanship of ASEAN, shown during celebrations of a U.S. –Vietnam anniversary in August that involved exercises with a U.S. aircraft carrier deployed near disputed regions of the South China Sea (*Comparative Connections* 2011b).

The United States, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries did not allow the rising disputes to seriously disrupt their on-going engagement with China. Nonetheless, by solidifying cooperation with the United States in a period of enhanced disputes with China, several Southeast Asian governments appeared to join the United States and other regional governments in signalling to China that its assertive actions were fostering regional trends adverse to China's interests.

Against this background, China moderated its policy regarding disputes over regional waters near China, including the South China Sea. Some well connected Chinese commentators said that some Chinese claims and actions

regarding the South China Sea had been “reckless.” Prominent Chinese commentators who were sharply critical of the United States and Vietnam in 2010 publicly moderated their positions. Chinese officials also gave renewed attention to ASEAN, endeavouring to reassure the Southeast Asian nations of China’s long term benefit to their interests (China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011; *Comparative Connections* 2011a).

The shift away from China’s previous publicly truculent and assertive posture toward the South China Sea and other recent disputes was broadly welcomed by regional governments and the United States. Nevertheless, limits of China’s moderation also were clear. China’s more active patrolling by government ships and the build-up of naval capabilities continued. Even reassurances from senior Chinese leaders underlined a general Chinese determination to rebuff violations of China’s “core interest” in protecting territorial claims. Some military exercises and enhanced patrols by Chinese government ships also were noted in the South China Sea. Chinese meetings with Southeast Asian governments registered slow progress on the implementation of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011; *Comparative Connections* 2011a).

As of 2011, all parties concerned publicly emphasized the positive, while remaining wary and continuing to manoeuvre in support of their respective interests. Chinese officials and official media endeavoured to win regional influence and good will by emphasizing reassurance and mutually beneficial economic and other relations with Southeast Asian counterparts and other concerned powers during active interchange at multilateral and other gatherings leading to the Asian leadership summit meetings in Bali in November. Nevertheless, China’s leaders failed to keep the controversial and sensitive issue of the South China Sea off the agenda at the Asian leadership summit meeting on November 19. Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao was placed on the defensive and compelled to defend China’s approach to resolving territorial and maritime security issues related to China’s uniquely broad claims and sometimes assertive actions regarding the South China Sea; the Chinese claims and actions generally are not supported in the region or by other concerned powers. Chinese official commentaries reacted to the setback in Bali with criticism directed at the United States, but they tended to avoid hyperbole sometimes seen in unofficial Chinese media. The official commentaries were measured as they depicted various economic, political and security initiatives during President Obama’s November 2011 trip to the region as challenges to Chinese interests. They also registered opposition to initiatives by Japan and India regarding Southeast Asia and the South China Sea that were seen as at odds with Chinese interests. The decision of the Myanmar government at this time to stop a major hydroelectric dam project

being built by Chinese firms added to challenges and complications for Chinese interests as it raised questions about China's influence in the country while Myanmar's new civilian government tried to improve relations with the United States and other powers (*Comparative Connections* 2012).

Relations with Myanmar in China's Approach to its Neighbours

Myanmar–China relations seemed to fit, albeit somewhat irregularly, into the pattern of post-Cold War Chinese relations with Southeast Asia. Of course, the secrecy surrounding the policies and practices of the Myanmar regime has been reciprocated by Chinese secrecy about deliberations between the two governments. This makes it difficult for specialists to discern trends and implications with great precision, though the broad elements of Chinese–Myanmar relations seem clear and consistent with China's approach toward its neighbours.

With the above caveats, it is clear that the two governments established common ground in their mutual search for international contacts and support during a period when both were shunned by the West and like-minded governments in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Chinese leaders overcame international efforts to isolate China by virtue of remarkable Chinese economic growth and growing international outreach including greater adherence to international norms (International Crisis Group 2009).

Unlike China and its Southeast Asian neighbours, whose leaders saw their legitimacy resting on charting paths to effective nation building and economic growth in a period of intense international economic interchange, Myanmar leaders remained isolated, repressive, and sadly incompetent in conventional nation building. They maintained strict curbs on foreign interaction. Thus, the common ground China built with other neighbours on the basis of mutual interest in effective nation building and economic development beneficial to their citizens was less in the case of China–Myanmar relations. Nevertheless, the Myanmar government supported arrangements with China that saw the export of resources such as natural gas and hydroelectric power to China in return for goods and payments beneficial to the members of the regime. China benefitted from the resources provided by Myanmar. Trade with China grew, as did Chinese investment that provided China with greater access to the country's resources and Chinese-built infrastructure of use to the Myanmar administration (Turnell 2011: 154).

Myanmar's role in ASEAN seemed in line with Chinese preference that the regional body avoids interventions or initiatives that could challenge China's rising influence in Southeast Asia, complicate the stability along

China's south eastern flank or introduce the influence of outside powers, notably the United States. For most of the past two decades, Myanmar remained at odds with and isolated from the United States. There were a few occasions when U.S. administrations took a positive interest in relations and Myanmar signalled some reciprocal interest, but little of substance resulted. China seemed aware that Myanmar was reluctant to fall under China's sway and sought to improve relations with India, others in Southeast Asia and other powers, possibly including the United States, as a means to avoid overdependence on China. The visit of Secretary of States Hillary Clinton to Myanmar in December 2011 heralded a new stage in Myanmar's manoeuvring for advantage at a time of keen US interest in improving relations with various states in the Asia-Pacific region (Seekins 2010: 195-199; China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011).

Myanmar had no direct interest in disputes over the South China Sea and presumably was among those members of ASEAN inclined to moderate differences with China over the issue. At the same time, Myanmar had its own set of difficulties over its border with China, a source of occasionally acute concern between the two countries, notably in 2009.

China's strong interest to preserve stability along its boundaries led it to continue active support for Myanmar even during periods of egregious repression and malfeasance in the country. Myanmar was among the many countries with which China established different types of "partnerships" or "strategic partnerships" that over time were characterized by developments and agreements signalling closer relations. The Myanmar regime benefitted from Chinese political support and economic and military exchanges, and from China's stance in the United Nations against Western-led efforts to sanction and punish the Myanmar government (International Crisis Group 2009: i-ii).

In January 2007, China along with Russia vetoed a resolution proposed by the United States at the UN Security Council to take action against the Myanmar government. The Myanmar regime's widely publicized and brutal suppression of mass demonstrations led by thousands of Buddhist monks later in the year produced widespread international condemnation and sanctions. China at times endeavoured to mediate between the Myanmar administration and international critics. It stalled and effectively watered down UN actions regarding the crackdown in Myanmar. It faced calls for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on account of China's support for the Myanmar government, but Beijing adhered to continued support for the military government while participating in various negotiations with other concerned powers and the United Nations (Seekins 2009: 166-169; Ardeth Maung Thawngmung and Maung Aung Myoe 2008: 17-19).

2008 brought an enormous cyclone disaster to Myanmar made much worse by the military regime's refusal to accept foreign assistance except in ways that could be controlled by the largely incompetent government relief efforts. In the end 140,000 people died and many times more were subject to grievous deprivation. China made modest aid contributions and supported the regime in the face of widespread international criticism in the wake of the disaster. China's attention soon shifted as it suffered a massive earthquake in Sichuan Province where Chinese relief efforts proved very good and were open to foreign assistance and support (*Comparative Connections* 2008c: 73-74).

As tensions rose in China's relations with neighbouring countries and the United States in 2009 regarding territorial disputes and claims in nearby waters and border territory, China persisted with strong support for the Myanmar military regime as it moved to make the transition to civilian administration under a new constitution. The Myanmar administration took this occasion to enhance control over some of the armed militias along the Sino-Burmese border, which had long been a source of difference in Sino-Myanmar relations. In August, the junta launched a raid against a local militia group based in a region largely composed of ethnically Chinese communities. These armed groups had served in a Chinese fostered insurgency against the Burmese military government from the 1960s until a cease-fire was reached in the late 1980s. The government attack seemed to undermine the ceasefire and more than 35,000 refugees fled to China. Calm was eventually restored with *Xinhua* reporting on October 20 that Vice Premier Li Keqiang met with Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council First Secretary Tin Aung Myint Oo on October 19 in Nanning and the two agreed to deepen mutual cooperation on various issues and to safeguard stability on the border areas (*Comparative Connections* 2010d: 70).

Despite obvious differences over the border situation, China continued high-level exchanges emphasizing positive relations and strong Chinese support for the Myanmar administration. Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping arrived in Myanmar on December 19 for a two-day visit. Xi met with senior officials in Myanmar to discuss bilateral relations and cooperation in regional and international affairs. The two sides also discussed promoting economic exchanges. According to Chinese news reports, bilateral trade between the two countries reached nearly USD 3 billion in 2008, and China's contracted investments in Myanmar amounted to USD 1.3 billion. Other developments included the announcement in November by China National Petroleum Corporation that it has begun construction of a pipeline across Myanmar in order to speed delivery of Middle East oil to China (*Comparative Connections* 2010d: 70).

While China was engaged in sometimes tense exchanges and shows of force with Southeast Asia countries and the United States over the South China Sea, it upped its leadership attention to Myanmar. In the first visit to Myanmar by a Chinese prime minister in 16 years, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited the capital city of Naypyidaw on June 3, 2010 (*Comparative Connections* 2010c: 69-70).

Featured agreements in Myanmar included those covering oil and gas pipelines then being constructed across Myanmar that linked China with supply depots along the Indian Ocean, avoiding transit through the Strait of Malacca. Other accords covered improved communications facilities, a hydro-electric power station, and some aid packages. Official Chinese media reporting said that China was Myanmar's third largest trading partner and investor after Thailand and Singapore, with trade in 2009 totalling USD 2.9 billion, and Chinese investment as of January 2010 amounting to USD 1.8 billion, 11.5 per cent of Myanmar's total foreign direct investment. Wen also received briefings from Myanmar leaders on their plans to gradually move toward "democratic process," with a general election slated for later in the year. Leaders of the two countries said that they would strive to maintain peace and stability on the border (*Comparative Connections* 2010c: 69-70).

Senior Chinese leaders welcomed and received Myanmar's junta leader General Than Shwe for an official four-day visit in early September 2010. The general's trip came as Myanmar prepared for its first national elections in nearly two decades in November 2010 and tried to solicit Chinese endorsement to help deflect criticisms from the international community about the fairness of the elections. China offered strong support. *The Economist* and the International Crisis Group saw China's growing investment building an important economic stake in Myanmar, in addition to Chinese interests to preserve border stability and spread its influence in the country. As China duly endorsed the results of the November 2010 elections, its officials also were reported active in mediating between the regime and the minorities along the border long supported by and associated with China. A stable transition to civilian rule and continued border stability were seen as essential to prevent disruption jeopardizing pipelines and other advances in Chinese economic involvement in the country (*Comparative Connections* 2010b).

Underscoring Chinese interests in stability, continuity and economic advantage, Jia Qinglin, one of the nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, travelled to Naypyidaw in April 2011 to congratulate Myanmar's newly elected President U Thein Sein. A *Xinhua* report of April 4 said that Jia "is the first foreign leader to

visit Myanmar following the establishment of the new government.” It quoted the Chinese leader affirming interest in pursuing “a series of important cooperation projects” in Myanmar. In an apparent allusion to Chinese interests in a stable frontier with Myanmar and in the fostering of good conditions for Chinese economic enterprises there, Jia expressed confidence that

Myanmar’s new government will make utmost efforts to safeguard the peace and stability in the border area and create a stable environment for Myanmar’s economic development (China–Southeast Asia Relations 2011).

As the year went on, Chinese and Myanmar leaders continued to advance relations with high-level meetings that solidified China’s place as Myanmar’s leading foreign partner. In May, Xu Caihou, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, travelled to the Myanmar capital with a three point proposal to strengthen ties between the armed forces of the two countries. Myanmar President Thein Sein made his first trip abroad, traveling to Beijing in late May for a summit meeting with President Hu Jintao. The agreements signed during the visit involved economic assistance from China designed to solidify closer ties between the two countries. According to Chinese media, two-way trade grew 53 per cent in 2010, reaching a value of USD 4.4 billion (*Comparative Connections* 2011c).

The two presidents also reportedly agreed “to maintain stability on the border.” Myanmar efforts in 2011 to control and disarm another ethnic-based independent security force not known to be closely tied to China along another section of the border with China, had negative consequences for China as the border tensions complicated a large Chinese dam project in Myanmar; they also reinforced Chinese concerns about sustaining border stability, cross border trade and development and constructive relations with the Myanmar administration (*Comparative Connections* 2011c).

In the event, the large Chinese dam project proved controversial and was stopped by the Myanmar civilian government in September. Chinese officials reacted with surprise and urged that the issue be handled “properly” through “friendly consultations.” China commentators responded in a low keyed fashion to the civilian government’s reaching out to the political opposition and concerned powers and their leaders, notably Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who visited Myanmar in December 2011. Chinese leaders continued to register close engagement with and support of Myanmar, notably during the visit of the Myanmar army chief of staff to China in late November. China also in late 2011 worked with Myanmar as well as Laos and Thailand in creating mechanisms allowing for the Chinese and the other countries’ security forces to patrol the Mekong River following an incident

in October when 13 Chinese crew men were brutally murdered along a section of the river bordered by Thailand, Myanmar and Laos (*Comparative Connections* 2012).

In sum, China's leaders have been attentive and flexible in developing closer ties with a wary Myanmar administration that nonetheless values the economic and military support and political protection provided by China. Myanmar's preference seems to be independence, notably of China, the source of Burma's main strategic threat for much of its modern existence. The border disputes in 2009 and periodic outreach by Myanmar leaders for support from India, Southeast Asian neighbours and even the United States suggest that China is well aware of the limits of its influence on the decision making of the Myanmar leadership while it builds influence through economic exchange, infrastructure development and resource extraction of mutual interests to the two governments. How the Myanmar administration deals with Chinese concerns over the halt in work of the several billion dollar Chinese hydroelectric project in Myanmar should provide concrete evidence of the extent that China can influence decisions in the country.

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