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“Canaries in the Mines: Significance of Sino-Indian Interaction in Myanmar”

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Canaries in the Mines:
Significance of Sino-Indian Interaction in Myanmar[♦]

Abstract:

Southeast Asia [SEA] does not appear to play a major role in current geopolitical developments. Furthermore, the concurrent rises of both China and India have also contributed to increasing SEA's relative geopolitical obscurity. However, this paper argues that SEA, and especially Burma, is an important region as it provides a preview of the nature and effects of Chinese and Indian rise. This paper uses prospect theory, which presents a different perspective from expected utility theory, to argue why their interaction with and in Burma is significant. It proposes that using prospect theory to examine their interests in Burma would provide early insights to how these aspiring powers would behave when their interests converge, and eventually collide in theatres of primary importance.

Introduction: Importance of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia [SEA] comprises 11 very diverse states at various stages of development. Writing in 1959, George McT Kahin noted, 'Southeast Asia is not an area of great political homogeneity. Politically as well as culturally, its component states are more varied than those of Europe.'¹ Furthermore, the label 'Southeast Asia' itself is a recent one that could be traced to the establishment of the Southeast Asian Command under Lord Louis Mountbatten during World War II. Previously the region was variously known as Farther India, Greater India, and Indo-Pacific. D.R. SarDesai therefore infers that the multitude of labels is 'suggestive of the minimal role Southeast Asia played in world affairs',² and so 'the region as a *region* has remained under-analysed.'³ As early as 1986, Donald K. Emmerson already opined that '[s]ome names like 'rose', acknowledge what exists. Others, like 'unicorn', create what otherwise does not exist. In

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¹ George McT. Kahin, *Governments and Politics of Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), v.

² D.R. SarDesai, *Southeast Asia: Past & Present*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 3.

³ Ann Marie Murphy and Bridget Welsh, 'Introduction,' in *Legacy of Engagement in Southeast Asia*, ed. Ann Marie Murphy and Bridget Welsh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 3.

between lie names that simultaneously describe and invent reality. “Southeast Asia” is one of these.⁴

This paper adopts a contrary stand. It argues that SEA, far from being a peripheral area, is in fact a theatre of primary importance that provides insights into the nature and effects of the concurrent rise of both China and India in the present. Judging by the burgeoning cottage industry analysing this issue, it is valid to assume that this evolving development is of sufficient interest, which then raises the geopolitical importance of SEA through Burma, though ironically, vis-à-vis its more prominent geographical cousins.

Burma is chosen as the case-study because it is a state where Chinese and Indian interests meet and overlap. Burma shares a 1,370 miles border with China, and a 832 miles border with India.⁵ As China and India become major powers, their interests and concerns will naturally transcend their geographical boundaries as they adopt an increasingly global perspective. It is inevitable that Chinese and Indian interests will eventually converge [which has already happened in Burma], and the effects of this development will invariably affect the international system. Furthermore, as prospect theory points out, states feel losses suffered more acutely than gains made, and so states will focus more on relative gains rather than absolute gains. In this context, China and India, as aspiring powers, would then be expected to devote more effort at consolidating their respective positions in Burma as they size each other up in this contest for status and prestige as they do not want the other actor to achieve any relative gains there at their expense. Long-term Sino-Indian interaction is therefore likely, which then provides credible insights into the nature and future effects of their concurrent rise on the international system.⁶ Hence, Burma becomes the proverbial canaries in the mines.

⁴ Donald K. Emmerson, ‘Southeast Asia: What’s in a Name?’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (1984): 1.

⁵ Ministry of Information, *Myanmar Facts and Figures* (Yangon: State Peace and Development Council, 2002), 1.

⁶ Howard W. French, ‘Letter from China: Myanmar Crackdown Sheds Light on Beijing’s Aspirations,’ *New York Times*, 28 September 2007.

Prospect Theory: Why China and India will Increase their Presence in Burma

Burma's position bordering both China and India is a constant. However, it is only recently that these two rising states have renewed their interest in Burma.⁷ In order to support the validity of Burma as the case study, this paper uses prospect theory to explain why it is likely for these two states' current interest in Burma to persist and escalate in time to come. Consequently, it is then possible to observe if they are able to establish a structure that allows for peaceful co-existence in Burma, which could be applicable to other theatres as well.

Prospect theory seeks to explain why states choose to persist in costly actions in seemingly peripheral areas of secondary importance. Unlike expected utility theory, prospect theory does not assume actors to be rational. Prospect theory regards utility to be a subjective concept because the reference point to determine whether a gain or loss is made is not necessarily the prevailing status quo at that precise moment when the decision was made. Instead, the reference point is subjective. It is influenced by other factors such as prior expectations and social comparisons. An actor may not perceive a gain as a gain if other actors gain more, or if this present gain is unable to offset losses suffered previously. Likewise, the experience of having bigger gains in the past may condition an actor to perceive that amount of gain to be the norm; any gains less than the 'historic' and 'expected' level is perceived as a loss even though real gains are made. This is because an actor adapts very rapidly to any gains made but very slowly, if at all, when losses are suffered. From this perspective, Burma, which has historically been strongly influenced by China and India, provides an ideal area in the present to observe both states' receptivity to rules and norms in less threatening conditions. Their interaction there then provides a preview of how they will act in future when their interests overlap in other theatres of primary importance. In this comparatively low-risk environment, they act the way they do because they choose to, and not because they have to, thereby providing reliable insights to their respective black boxes.

⁷ C. Uday Bhaskar, 'Myanmar in the Strategic Calculus of India and China,' in *The Peacock and the Dragon: India-China Relations in the 21st Century*, ed. Kanti Bajpai and Amitabh Mattoo (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 2000), 349. See also Ashok Kapur, *India-from Regional to World Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.

As Winston Churchill once remarked, ‘Great quarrels...arise from small occasions but seldom from small causes,’⁸ which is pertinent to the paper’s argument that developments in Burma foreshadow how China and India would act in future. A useful way to understand why China and India might undertake costly action in peripheral areas such as Burma, which does not pose any immediate existential threats to them, would be to see their actions in terms of commitments rather than interests. Writing during the Cold War, Stephen Maxwell explained how this distinction is important in understanding why major powers decide to take costly action that does not have any obvious short-term gains, which is also applicable to the current Southeast Asian context:

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from the failure of a state to fulfill a commitment is simply that the commitment did not represent an interest worth defending, at the level of violence and risk estimated to be necessary. Thus if the Americans backed down over Berlin...[t]he only conclusion the Russians could confidently draw was that Berlin was not a vital national interest to the Americans.⁹

Likewise, if either China or India were to stop devoting or to start scaling down attention to Burma, it would signal to the other actor the lack of importance it attaches to Burma. Consequently, this lack of determination encourages the other state to expand its influence and presence in Burma as less resistance would be expected.

In essence then, prospect theory is about how an actor makes a decision by focusing on the milieu he or she is facing, which is applicable to the present purpose of understanding the nature and effects associated with the rise of China and India in the present. This is a dynamic development that is currently unfolding, and its currency means that International Relations theories have difficulty in explaining. Most rational choice theories assume that an actor’s preferences remain largely constant even though the conditions a decision-maker faces may change. Prospect theory is different because it understands that an actor’s propensity for action or inaction changes in reaction to changes in its immediate strategic environment. In Burma, the milieu, as this paper would show, is in flux, which then provides an ideal theatre to observe Sino-Indian interaction.

⁸ Winston Churchill, *Gathering Storm: The Second World War*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Boston: Mariner Books, 1986), 238.

⁹ Stephen Maxwell, ‘Rationality in Deterrence,’ (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1968), 19.

Loss Aversion

Prospect theory's most important implication is loss aversion – the belief that losses count more than gains. Losses inflict and elicit a greater and more enduring psychological impact than comparable gains. Extending this argument to its logical conclusion would be that actors have increased propensity to incur risks to avoid or recoup losses than to achieve and maintain gains. In other words, individuals are likely to be risk-acceptant when they perceive themselves to be in the realm of losses and are likely to be risk-adverse when they are in the realm of gains.

In the positive domain, the certainty effect contributes to a risk adverse preference for a sure gain over a larger gain that is probable. In the negative domain, the same effect leads to a risk seeking preference for a loss that is merely probable over a smaller loss that is certain. The same psychological principle – the overweighting of certainty – favors risk aversion in the domain of gains and risk seeking in the domain of losses.¹⁰

This insight explains why individuals persist in the pursuit of seemingly obvious failing or unprofitable measures. Individuals continue to pursue such counter-intuitive actions because to do otherwise would be to accept a definite loss. The remote possibility of a turnaround provides enough incentive to throw caution to the wind. Opportunity costs are regarded to outweigh the actual out-of-pocket costs.

Robert Jervis believes states, like individuals, 'renormalize for gains much more quickly than ... for losses.'¹¹ When gains are made, the associated euphoria tends to be transient whereas the pains associated with losses tend to be more durable, and the natural reaction is to attempt a recovery to the previous status quo prior to suffering the said losses. The resulting new state of affairs does not count because individuals have yet to accept this new development. However, if gains were to be made, individuals would quickly adjust to this improvement and regard it as *the* normal state of affairs. According to Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, this discrepancy arises as 'gains and losses are coded relative to an expectation or aspiration level that differs from the status quo', which they illustrate with this example. They posit that 'an unexpected tax withdrawal from a monthly pay check is experienced as a loss, not as a reduced gain.' What is seen in

¹⁰ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,' *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979): 268-7.

¹¹ Robert Jervis, 'Political Implications of Loss Aversion,' *Prospect Theory and Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (1992): 200.

the example is that relative gains are weighted more than absolute gains, which then induces the individual to seek ‘more adventurous choices’ to recover the perceived losses.¹² However, in the salary example, if the individual, were to be previously unemployed and finally receives a pay check, he is very likely to be satisfied even though a higher than expected amount of tax deduction had been made. Reactions are therefore dependent on the context, and how the situation is framed. Hence, prospect theory posits ‘that a person who has not made peace with his losses is likely to accept gambles that would be unacceptable to him otherwise.’¹³

Endowment Effect

Losses count more than gains because of the endowment effect. An individual attaches more value to an entity after possessing it than before taking possession of it. Richard Thaler, an economist who coined the term in 1979, defines the endowment effect as ‘the underweighting of opportunity costs’,¹⁴ and provides this example:

Mr. R bought a case of good wine in the late ‘50’s for about \$5 a bottle. A few years later his wine merchant offered to buy the wine back for \$100 a bottle. He refused, although he has never paid more than \$35 for a bottle of wine.¹⁵

This observation is significant to this present analysis of the nature and effects of the concurrent rise of China and India. The endowment effect causes actors to attach more importance to something after they possess it. Burma may not be that important to either China or India; but once they make gains there, its importance increases. In the above example, there is a lack of co-operation and the outcome is akin to that of the Prisoners’ Dilemma as the various actors forgo the opportunity to achieve the best-possible outcome due to the lack of cooperation. Chinese and Indian presence in Burma is growing. As aspiring powers, they are very possessive of their gains and are unlikely to make concessions that might be mutually beneficial. In this context, their interactions are likely to take on the form of a zero-sum in which the gains are deemed to be entirely distributive, and would provide insights to the extent to which they will act to protect their interests.

¹² Kahneman and Tversky, ‘Prospect Theory,’ 286.

¹³ Ibid.: 287.

¹⁴ Richard Thaler, ‘Toward a Positive Theory of Consumer Choice,’ *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 1, no. 1 (1980): 43.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Status Quo: More than Meets the Eye

Whether actors perceive themselves to be recovering losses or making gains depends largely on their perception of the status quo. This reference point is not neutral, though it is often regarded as such. It is important to note that how states frame the status quo will influence the actions they take. A state may become unsatisfied if it *perceives* itself to be short-changed, even if it is not the case. It is entirely possible for a state to adjust to the new references when circumstances change. However, the crux of the issue is that there is often a time lag involved. In most cases, a state is likely to still refer to a previous high point, and not the present diminished position it is currently in, as the status quo. As the rising powers, both states are likely to perceive that they *ought* to have the ability to influence developments along their borders. After all, if they are unable to project force and influence across its borders in the absence of large bodies of water, other states would call their bluff. Hence, China and India are likely to develop heightened sensitivity towards relative changes to their positions in Burma.

In the past, China and India were arguably the most influential actors in Southeast Asia as evidenced by the enduring cultural and economic impact they had on pre-modern Southeast Asian kingdoms such as Sri Vijaya, Majapahit and Melaka. In recent years, as China and India have become more economically developed and diplomatically adroit, they have been increasing their presence and influence in Southeast Asia, and especially in Burma. For instance, they have provided more aid, either bilaterally or multilaterally to Burma. Although such a move helps to expedite development, donor states do not usually do so based on altruism. In most cases, donor states provide aid as a way to increase influence on the recipient state, which is borne out by actual regional developments. For instance, a degree of competition and rivalry, which ought to be absent if altruism were the primary motivation, can be detected; China and India seeks to exclude the other actor from groupings that they participate. In the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, established on 10 November 2000, India together with Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Thailand and Vietnam are exploring ways to increase tourism, cultural exchange, education, and transport connectivity between these states. This six-member grouping has agreed to implement the East-West Corridor project to improve transport infrastructure between the two regions. China is also located in the same geographical area. Yet, it has been excluded from the

Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, just as India is excluded from China's Mekong Basin Development Cooperation initiative.¹⁶ In this latter grouping, attention is currently given to low-politics issues such as preventing illegal migration, human trafficking and infrastructural development such as improving transport links and harnessing hydropower.

Apart from the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, the BIMSTEC Forum [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation] is another initiative to foster increased interaction between the littoral states of South and Southeast Asia, which then excludes China. This grouping consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, Burma and Thailand. The BIMSTEC Forum aims to increase and institutionalise cooperation in a number of different sectors ranging from trade and investment to tourism and poverty alleviation in the respective countries. On 8 February 2004, the foreign and economic ministers of the BIMSTEC member-states concluded a draft agreement to reduce tariffs with the aim of establishing a free-trade area by 2017, thereby increasing and cementing the economic interactions between the two regions. The focus thus far has been to improve land overland transport links between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Some of the major projects include infrastructural projects such as efforts to link the Dawei deep seaport to Kanchababuri in Thailand and the India-Thailand-Burma highway proposal.¹⁷

Currently, there are no sub-regional multilateral institutions that consist solely of China, India and the CLMV states.¹⁸ Even multilateral institutions proposed by Southeast Asian states continue to operate on an either-or basis.¹⁹ For instance, Thailand proposed in 1993 to implement the 'Quadrupartite Economic Cooperation Plan', which consisted of Thailand, China, Burma and Laos. Again, India was excluded. This development is not new. During the 1950s, the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East [ECAFE] initiated efforts for sub-regional cooperation to develop the Mekong area.

¹⁶ Apart from China, the other member-states in this initiative are Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

¹⁷ High Commission of India in Singapore, 'Bimstec-Promoting Cooperation among Bay of Bengal Countries,' *India News*, no. 69 (2004): 5.

¹⁸ The only exception is China's Kunming Initiative. However, it is not at the official level as it is only an informal Track II organization.

¹⁹ N. Ganesan, 'Myanmar's Foreign Relations: Reaching out to the World,' in *Myanmar: Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, ed. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Robert H. Taylor, and Tin Maung Maung Than (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 41.

Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam were the original members. Burma maintained its non-aligned policy and declined to join. The Republic of China and not the People's Republic of China held the UN seat. India was not invited to participate at all.

This embryonic degree of competition and rivalry between China and India in continental SEA is likely to increase over time. This is because as more development aid to regional states and institutions is dispensed, it can be expected that there would also be an enhanced commitment by donor states to recover sunk costs, or to maximise any potential benefits that may be present. This observation is applicable to most states. However, the issue of national prestige and national image is also at work in SEA. These considerations complicate matters further, but it is very useful as they serve as a litmus test that provides an objective assessment of the effects of their interaction as they size each other up in this early contest for prestige in Burma.

As the emerging Asian powers, China and India want their status to be recognised; any attempts to undermine them would be deemed to be of 'inherent bad faith'.²⁰ In this context, they are more concerned about any perceived loss to their status than compared to any potential gains their actions or policies may result in. Hence, if China and India were to suffer any losses now in this present contest for prestige in Burma, the fear that any current losses will have a domino effect might cause these two actors to undertake or persist in risky actions to stem or reverse them. This is because the magnitude of perceived loss is greater than the actual political loss, a misperception that renders states more likely to pursue higher-risk actions to recover perceived losses. In this context, losses count, gains do not. Relative gains outweigh absolute gains. Their thresholds towards any slights can be expected to be much lower than an established, and hence assured, power. It is this very potential for China and India to take exaggerated actions in Burma that makes the latter a good candidate to observe the nature and effects of their concurrent rise on the international system.

China and India have made public pronouncements of their desire to become major Asian powers. By making their intentions public, they have incurred a significant commitment to honor them. If not, they will not be taken seriously for failure to do so

²⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1962), 201.

would advertise their incapacity to reach their stated goals. Should both China and India compete with each other for influence in order to cement their status as major powers, Burma is therefore very likely to be an early site for such a contest since it borders both states. Richard Tucker's observation on the United States' continual involvement in Central America is applicable:

When engaged in a conflict for global stakes, what may appear as a marginal interest will be invested with a significance it would not otherwise have, for almost any challenge is likely to be seen by the challenger and by third parties as a test of one's will.... In Central America there are no vital raw materials or minerals whose loss might provide the basis for legitimate security concerns. Yet Central America bears geographical proximity to the United States, and historically it has long been regarded as falling within our sphere of influence....[If] the Soviet Union observes our passivity to events in our own backyard that signal the loss of American control, what conclusions might it draw about our probable passivity in other, far more difficult areas?²¹

Substitute Central America with SEA and the argument is just as applicable since China and India could use Burma as 'an unimportant context to deliver an important message.'²²

Burma as the case study

According to John Measheimer, continental states such as China and India are perceived to be inherently aggressive and therefore a threat because there are no large bodies of water to limit their power projection capability and the spread of their influence.²³ Likewise, Jack Levy argues that the concurrent rise of continental states such as India and China are likely to have a great impact on the international system because any expansion by a continental state is deemed to be more threatening than expansion by a maritime, and therefore insular state.²⁴ Since Burma borders both states, it will experience such effects, if any, firsthand.

²¹ Richard Tucker, *The Purposes of American Power: An Essay on National Security* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 144-5, 76-7, 80.

²² Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols and War* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 106.

²³ John Measheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton Books, 2001), 114.

²⁴ Jack Levy, 'Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions and Research Design,' in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, ed. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001). Jack Levy, 'What Do Great Powers Balance Against?,' in *Balance of Power: The Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Lewis F. Richardson also argues that borders, apart from serving as a convenient marker, are very important in geopolitical analysis because there is a link between the number of borders two states share and the number of conflicts between them.²⁵ It could be possible that without large bodies of water to serve as natural moats, it is that much easier to project power, force and influence, thereby removing a major obstacle to the waging of war. Due to geographical proximity, it is also fair to assume that there would be more friction and tension, which would then become catalysts for conflicts, as they have more interaction than compared to more distant states.

Borders are psychologically important because they are demarcations to differentiate what belongs and what does not belong. In a sense, borders represent barriers and filters to negative influences.²⁶ Naturally, borders then become the focal point as site of conflicts between states. For instance, John A. Vasquez notes that contiguous states, when compared to non-contiguous states, are more likely to initiate conflicts rather than to join an on-going one.²⁷ In a further sign of underlying tensions between bordering states, they are also less likely to seek third-party arbitration to resolve their disputes. Even if they choose to do so, the decisions reached by the arbitrator are also less binding on them as well.²⁸ In other words, states bordering each other tend to have more conflicts and when they occur, resolution tends to be more difficult to achieve.

The above discussion makes clear that geographical factors render Burma important to both China and India. This is because 'nation-states in international politics are mutually non-mobile.'²⁹ As a result, their interests will inevitably meet and overlap in SEA. As Sunanda K. Datta-Ray puts it, 'South-East Asia is where in ancient times India met China. Hence, Indo-China...South-East Asia is also where the interaction of modern India and China, the world's two most populous nations, both nuclear-armed...' are again

²⁵ Lewis F. Richardson, *Statistics of Deadly Quarrels* (Pittsburgh: Boxwood Press, 1960), 176-80.

²⁶ Barbara J. Morehouse, 'Theoretical Approaches to Border Spaces and Identities,' in *Challenged Borderlands: Transcending Political and Cultural Borderlands*, ed. Vera Pavlakovich-Kochi, Barbara J. Morehouse, and Doris Wastl-Walter (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 23-4.

²⁷ John A. Vasquez, 'Distinguishing Rivals That Go to War from Those That Do Not: A Quantitative Comparative Case Study of the Two Paths to War,' *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1996): 541-53.

²⁸ Gregory A. Raymond, 'Democracies, Disputes, and Third-Party Intermediaries,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 1 (1994): 24-42.

²⁹ Hans Mouritzen, *Theory and Reality of International Politics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 1.

meeting in the present.³⁰ Due to the geographical proximity and presence of major powers bordering Southeast Asian states, the region dovetails with Saul B. Cohen terms as ‘shatterbelt’, and its ‘distinguishing feature...is that it presents an equal playing field to two or more competing powers operating from different geostrategic realms.’³¹ Consequently, an analysis of the norms and rules that govern Chinese and Indian interaction in Burma provides a preview of how they accommodate each other and co-exist in an area that does not pose a clear and present existential threat to their core national interests.

China and India have ongoing direct strategic interests in East and South Asia. In East Asia, Taiwanese and North Korean developments figure very prominently in Chinese geopolitical calculations, just as developments in Pakistan and Bangladesh matter a lot to India. Hence, Indian leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru traditionally attached more importance to the Himalayan region as a site of Sino-Indian competition. Conversely, Burma was regarded to have less geostrategic significance.³² Gathering insights into Chinese and Indian foreign policies are necessary to understand the nature and effects of their rise on the international system. However, in order to gain a high fidelity picture, it is important to observe their actions when they act voluntarily, not when they are under duress, or when there is only one viable option available to them. Arnold Wolfer’s burning house analogy illustrates this point effectively:

Imagine a number of individuals, varying widely in their predispositions, who find themselves inside a house on fire. It would be perfectly realistic to expect that these individuals, with rare exceptions, would feel compelled to run towards the exits. General fears of losing the cherished possession of life, coupled with the stark external threat to life, would produce the same reaction, whatever the psychological peculiarities of the actors. Surely, therefore, for an explanation of the rush for the exits, there is no need to analyze the individual decisions that produced it.... A different situation would arise if, instead of being on fire, the house in question merely were overheated. In such a case ... serious external danger...would be absent. The reactions of different inhabitants might range all

³⁰ Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, ‘Rediscovering Suvarnabhumi: India and South-East Asia,’ in *Indian Foreign Policy*, ed. Atish Sinha and Madhup Mohta (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007), 407.

³¹ Saul B. Cohen, ‘Global Geopolitical Change in the Post-Cold War Era,’ *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 4 (1991): 567.

³² Kapur, *India-from Regional to World Power*, 3.

the way from hurried window-opening and loud complaints to complete indifference.³³

From the Chinese and Indian perspectives, any threats emanating from East and South Asia would be akin to the said burning house. Their instinctive reactions would be to undertake drastic actions, such as using military force, to safeguard their national interests. For instance, if Taiwan were to declare *de jure* independence, China will react very strongly and the use of military force is to be expected. Likewise, if Pakistan were to attack India, India will take swift retaliatory action as well. To point out that China and India are both willing to use military force to assert their strengths and protect their core national interests do not provide any useful insights into the nature and effects of their rise. This is because it can be assumed with a very high degree of certainty that other states in their positions would react in a similar manner. To gain an insight into their internal dispositions, it is important to observe them in a context where there are a number of alternative options available to them.

Unlike East and South Asia, the threat of a major conflict emanating from SEA that impinges on their direct national interest is remote. SEA is therefore a strategically neutral area since it does not pose any immediate strategic concerns or threats to either China or India. However, the region is still important because of its geographical proximity to both states. From the Chinese strategic perspective, continental Southeast Asia is arguably more important than maritime Southeast Asia for the former 'is the most receptive region for Chinese influence.'³⁴ In this context, continental SEA, and Burma in particular, constitutes the over-heated house. Furthermore, given Burma's estranged relations with Western states, they have minimal presence there. Although Hillary Clinton announced in late September 2009 that Washington was willing to engage directly with the military junta, it remains to be seen whether Burma's receptivity is going to be *ad hoc* or permanent. Clinton's statement came in the wake of Democratic Senator Jim Webb's visit to Burma in August 2009 when he secured the release of an American detained there. While Webb was in Burma, he met with General Than Shwe. In

³³ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), 13-4.

³⁴ Zha Daojong Zha and Weixing Hu, *Building a Neighborly Community: Post-Cold War China, Japan, and Southeast Asia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 59.

fact, Webb is the first American leader to meet the General, and he wants the United States to have more interaction with Burma:

...I think it's very important to say that the sanctions that have been put in place against Burma: we need to find a different way to deal with the problem. We have isolated the Burmese people from cultures and individuals and systems of government that could actually elevate their consciousness. And at the same time, in terms of strategy, we essentially are delivering Burma over to the Chinese.

... Sanctions don't work when the largest country in the world is on your border and is buying you up. It's a huge strategic error that the United States is making. And we all want to assist and help the people of Burma to move forward, but we have to find a way that actually can do that, and allow the people of Burma to prosper and have access to the outside world.³⁵

However, Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, in a statement before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on 30 September, stated that, 'Lifting or easing sanctions at the outset of a dialogue without meaningful progress on our concerns would be a mistake.'³⁶ Hence, it is clear that in the absence of a coherent approach, it would be difficult for the United States to increase its engagement of Burma.

In the absence of significant Western presence, Burma provides yet another unique vantage point to observe Sino-Indian interaction. Their actions there are not influenced or constrained by other major actors that are present in areas of primary importance such as in East and South Asia respectively. There is less background noise. What happens in, and to Burma, is thus the unadulterated results of Sino-Indian interaction. Hence, how China and India react to developments there provides a nuanced picture of their internal pre-dispositions, and better reflects the possible nature and effects of their expected rise to great powers status. If China or India were to adopt overly hostile or aggressive action in this theatre of secondary importance, it would demonstrate their low thresholds against any perceived threats; or if India were unable to balance against China, it would undermine its ambition of being a major power.

³⁵ NPR, 'NPR's Morning Edition: Sen. Webb: U.S. Can Help Myanmar Move Forward,' (2009), http://webb.senate.gov/newsroom/record_article.cfm?id=317156.

³⁶ Kurt M. Campbell, 'U.S. Policy Towards Burma,' (2009), <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2009/09/130064.htm>.

Importance of Burma to China

Among Southeast Asian states, Burma is arguably the most strategically important to both China and India,³⁷ yet it is still only of secondary importance to them. It is unlikely that Burma would be involved in a conflict with either China or India in the foreseeable future. Even though the potential for conflict is remote, the fact that Burma shares land borders with both China and India is significant. Without the stopping power of water, it is easier for both China and India to project their force and influence into the country. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution, it was easy for China to export its revolutionary zeal to Burma through radio broadcasts,³⁸ and the distribution of Mao badges.³⁹ However, the advantage afforded by the absence of a body of water is a double-edged sword. It is possible for the reverse to take place as well,⁴⁰ a fact China and India are aware of. Burma may not be strong enough to affect China and India directly, but it could be a conduit for other powers to do so.⁴¹ Sheng Lijun elaborates on this sense of Chinese vulnerability vis-à-vis Burma that is still present today:

China feels vulnerable strategically in its northern and western hinterland. Even if China's modernization proceeds smoothly...other powers, or its competitors might well place constraints on China. With these external and internal constraints and vulnerabilities, China might find it against its interests to adopt an aggressive stance which might succeed in pushing other powers into forming a coalition of containment. For example, a massive military advancement would likely to push the states to the side of other powers.⁴²

This sense of Chinese vulnerability has a long history and it could be traced as far back as to the Ming dynasty. Then, China believed Burma was a strong regional power

³⁷ Sree Kumar and Sharon Siddique, *Southeast Asia: The Diversity Dilemma* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2008), 161.

³⁸ David I Steinberg, *The Future of Burma: Crisis and Choice in Myanmar* (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1990), 76-7.

³⁹ Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 178.

⁴⁰ For instance, see Laichen Sun, 'Burmese Bells and Chinese Eroticism: Southeast Asia's Cultural Influence on China,' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007).

⁴¹ David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 224.

⁴² Sheng Lijun, 'China's foreign policy under status discrepancy, status enhancement', in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol.17, n.2, p. 119, quoted in S.D. Muni, *China's Strategic Engagement with the New ASEAN: An Exploratory Study of China's Post-Cold War Political, Strategic and Economic Relations with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2002), 17.

that could be courted as an ally to undermine the Mongols' position in Yunnan.⁴³ Hence, Burma was commonly referred to as the 'back door' to China.⁴⁴ In later years, Sun Yatsen has gone as far as to assert that Burma was 'Chinese territory' lost to foreign powers during China's century of humiliation that dated from its defeat in the first Opium War in 1840.⁴⁵ Consequently, some post-war Chinese maps included northern Burma as Chinese territory.⁴⁶

Burma's strategic importance to China was again on display after 1949 when some defeated Nationalist troops withdrew from China and retreated to Burma.⁴⁷ By 1951, Nationalist troops based in Burma, with arms supplied by the United States, undertook military incursions into Yunnan.⁴⁸ Hence, it is clear that Burma 'stands high in the degree of importance China attaches to its peripheral areas',⁴⁹ and so China has been keen to ensure that Burma remains friendly and receptive to its overtures. Furthermore, China also regards India as a threat and challenger. It is therefore in China's interest to ensure it has positive relations with both Burma and Pakistan, states bordering India, in order to contain the latter more effectively. If China were successful in this endeavour, it would be able to act with fewer constraints since India is rendered less effective as a counterweight.⁵⁰ The regional environment would then become more hospitable for China.⁵¹

Bilateral relations between China and Burma became closer after Beijing's violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters at Tiananmen on 4 June, 1989. Just like Burma a year earlier, China faced immense international pressure for its heavy-handed action,

⁴³ Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)*, vol. 8 part 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 313.

⁴⁴ John C. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 242.

⁴⁵ Sun Yatsen Sun, *San Min Chu I*, trans. Frank W. Price (Taipei: China Cultural Service, 1953), 9.

⁴⁶ Steinberg, *The Future of Burma*, 76.

⁴⁷ Victor S. Kaufman, 'Trouble in the Golden Triangle: The United States, Taiwan and the 93rd Nationalist Division,' *China Quarterly* 166 (2001): 440-56.

⁴⁸ Garver, *Protracted Contest*, 252.

⁴⁹ Daw Than Han, 'Burma's Regional Outlook,' in *Occasional Paper* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University Press, 1988), 62.

⁵⁰ Mohan Malik quoted in Steinberg, *Burma*, 226.

⁵¹ Evelyn Goh, 'Developing the Mekong: Regionalism and Regional Security in China-Southeast Asia Relations,' in *Adelphi Paper* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2007), 15.

which then moved the two states into even closer alignment.⁵² Since 1988, apart from providing diplomatic support to Burma in various multilateral institutions in the face of Western criticisms over its military coup and detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, most recently in August 2009 after the junta extended her period of house arrest, China has also provided Burma with concrete assistance. China has sold military equipment and technology to Burma at friendship prices that made it possible for the Burma military to undergo significant expansion in recent years.⁵³ For instance, in 1990 and 1994, China sold arms and military technologies to Burma in two deals worth US\$1.2 billion and US\$400 million respectively, which allowed the *Tatimadaw* to modernise itself,⁵⁴ and more importantly, maintain its grip on political power.⁵⁵ The Chinese military is also reportedly to be manning military intelligence installations at various locations such as at Great CoCo Island, Ramnee Island, Hainggyi Island and Zadetki Kyun. However, the exact nature and degree of Chinese involvement is unclear due to the lack of access to official records.⁵⁶

The closeness of this particular bilateral relation is clear when it is frequently described as *paukphaw*, meaning cousin. In yet another sign of their closer bilateral relations, anecdotal accounts indicated that the military government employed Chinese engineers to assist in the construction of the new capital in Naypyidaw.⁵⁷ Since Yangon, the former capital was near the coast, this unannounced shift to a remote inland site confirmed the regime's fear of a naval invasion by Western forces. This fear was clearly on display when the military government refused foreign naval vessels to dock and provide humanitarian assistance when cyclone Nargis hit. Hence, the use of Chinese

⁵² Liang Chi-shad, 'Burma's relations with the People's Republic of China: From delicate friendship to genuine co-operation', quoted in Peter Carey, *Burma: The Challenge of Change in a Divided Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 71-93.

⁵³ Sudhir Devare, *India & Southeast Asia: Towards Security Convergence* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 189.

⁵⁴ Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Myanmar and China: A Special Relationship?', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2003*, ed. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 197. See also Liang Chi-shad Liang, 'Burma's Relations with the People's Republic of China: From Delicate Friendship to Genuine Co-Operation,' in *Burma: The Challenge of Change in a Divided Society*, ed. Peter Carey (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1997), 84-6.

⁵⁵ Seth Mydans, 'More Than Just a Fighting Force, Myanmar's Military Is the Nation's Driving Force,' *New York Times*, 7 October 2007.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Haacke, 'Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Domestic Influences and International Implications,' in *Adelphi Paper* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006), 26.

⁵⁷ 'Built to Order: Myanmar's New Capital Isolates and Insulates Junta,' *New York Times*, 24 June 2008.

engineers by the military junta in the construction of the new capital provided further evidence that a very high level of trust exists between the two states.

Due to their increased political and military ties, Sino-Burma economic relations have also become closer in recent years. For instance, in January 2003, General Than Shwe headed a high-level delegation to China. During this visit, China's president Jiang Zemin indicated that China would provide a US\$200 million loan to Burma at preferential rates. In return, Burma is understood to be required to be more receptive towards Chinese investment there.⁵⁸ With the explicit approval and backing of senior political leaders from both sides, bilateral economic ties improved very rapidly. Unsurprisingly, in terms of trade and economics where official figures are available, China replaced Thailand to become the top investor nation in Burma in July 2009.⁵⁹

Apart from economic considerations, geostrategic factors are also responsible for Chinese interest in Burma. China requires energy resources to power its growing economy, which Burma is keen to export to a friendly state such as China to earn much needed foreign exchange.⁶⁰ Aware of Burma's receptivity, Fu Chengyu, chairman of China National Offshore Oil Corporation, stated in 2006 that China was focusing its attention on exploring oil in Ramree Island as well as in other sites in Burma that it has rights to.⁶¹ Such an arrangement suits China. The majority of China's energy imports pass through the Straits of Malacca. As the world's second largest energy consumer and the third largest energy importer, China has heightened sensitivity towards safeguarding its energy security. By having a strong presence in Western Burma, China is able to diversify the routes of its energy imports by building a pipeline running from Burma's coasts along the Indian Ocean to Yunnan directly, thereby bypassing a potential choke point in its energy supply – the Straits of Malacca. Zhang Yuncheng argues that China's

⁵⁸ Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Country Report: Myanmar,' ed. Danny Richards (London: Economist, 2003), 15.

⁵⁹ The Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Myanmar, 'China Becomes Largest Investor Nation in Myanmar,' The Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Myanmar,, <http://mm.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/jmxw/200907/20090706411299.html?4008931297=316931864>.

⁶⁰ Jane Perlez, 'Myanmar Is Left in Dark, an Energy-Rich Orphan,' *New York Times*, 17 November 2006.

⁶¹ Jane Perlez, 'Power and Politics in Myanmar - Asia - Pacific - International Herald Tribune,' *New York Times*, 16 November 2006.

over-reliance on the Straits of Malacca is very risky as any incidents, either civilian or military in nature, would severely disrupt Chinese energy imports.⁶²

From the perspective of international strategy, the Straits of Malacca is without question a crucial sea route...It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China. Excessive reliance on this strait has brought an important potential threat to China's energy security.⁶³

As a sign of Chinese intent to diversify the routes for its energy imports, construction work on oil and gas pipelines running from Kyaukphau to Yunnan started in September 2009. China is understood to be paying for the entire cost of the project, estimated to be US\$2.5 billion.⁶⁴ Expectedly, increased Chinese presence in Burma is making India uncomfortable, as it now seeks to play a bigger role there as well.

Importance of Burma to India

India and Burma were historically very close. Due to their geographical proximity, Burma was governed from Calcutta and later Delhi until 1937. From India's perspective, Burma is very important to it for the same reasons as China. During WWII, Japan's attacks against Nagaland and Manipur were undertaken by troops based in Burma. Hence, noted Indian strategic analyst K.M. Panikkar posits 'the defence of Burma is in fact the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. In fact no responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to the question of defending Burma.'⁶⁵ Like China, India also does not want hostile states to use Burma as a staging point for military action. Yet, for prolonged periods, India and Burma had failed to register on the consciousness of the other actor. 'In India, Burma has hardly featured prominently as a large and important neighbour, while in Burma the common view about India is ambivalent.'⁶⁶

With Burma developing closer ties with China, India has now sought, albeit belatedly, to improve its ties with this Southeast Asian state. As C. Uday Bhaskar points out:

⁶² Zhang Yuncheng, 'The Malacca Strait and world oil security', *Huanqiu Shibao*, 5 Dec. 2003, quoted in U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Energy Consumption and Opportunities for U.S.-China Cooperation to Address the Effects of China's Energy Use*, 14 June 2007, 3.

⁶³ Shi Hongtao, 'China's Malacca Straits', *Qingnian Bao*, 15 June, 2004, quoted in *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁴ Ian J. Storey, 'China a Major Player in S-E Asia Pipeline Politics,' *Straits Times*, 23 September 2009.

⁶⁵ K.M. Panikkar, *The Future of South East Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 46.

⁶⁶ Devare, *India & Southeast Asia*, 190.

It is commonly averred that Indian security concerns...since Independence have focused on two visible neighbors - Pakistan and China, in that order of priority. However, using the term strategic in a more rigorous sense, [it can be argued] that India's primary strategic concern is China, and if so, Burma occupies the next slot...while Pakistan follows in the next position.⁶⁷

This shift in Indian sentiment was in sharp contrast to its 'holier-than-thou' attitude towards Burma after the State Law and Order Restoration Council [SLORC] seized power after the coup on 18 September 1988. Then, India was one of the most vociferous critics of the SLORC and the military regime in Rangoon. For instance, India supported Aung San Suu Kyi and awarded her the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding, a move that understandably worsened bilateral relations. Indian actions were in sharp contrast to the strong support China offered to the military regime. Hence, General Than Shwe, when hosting the visiting Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference Li Ruihan in 1995, said China was 'the Burma people's most trusted friend.'⁶⁸

India's quasi-alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War also made it more difficult for them to have good bilateral relations. Although Burma, like India, was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement [NAM], it withdrew from the organisation in 1979 when Cuba hosted the conference. This was because Burma opposed the movement's pro-Soviet stance. It only rejoined the NAM in 1995 upon Suharto's invitation when Indonesia hosted it. Until the early 1990s, bilateral relations between India and Burma were therefore very poor. However, this situation changed as with the Cold War over and the Soviet Union's dissolution, India was, according to C. Raja Mohan, 'in deep mourning.'⁶⁹ Not only did India lose a valuable and long-time political and economic ally, it represented the 'loss of an entire world.'⁷⁰ India had to re-think its foreign policy. Without Soviet support, it had to implement new measures and the 'Look East' policy was one of them. The primary objective was to re-engage with SEA. For

⁶⁷ C. Uday Bhaskar, 'Myanmar: Advancing India's Interests through Engagements,' in *Securing India's Future in the New Millennium*, ed. Bramah Chellaney (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1999), 415-6.

⁶⁸ Liang, 'Burma's Relations with the People's Republic of China: From Delicate Friendship to Genuine Co-Operation,' 80.

⁶⁹ C. Raja Mohan, 'Balancing Interests and Values: India's Struggle with Democracy Promotion,' *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2007): 102.

⁷⁰ Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam, *Power and Contestation: India since 1949* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2007), 166.

India to select SEA as the first destination indicates the importance it attaches to the region. From a geopolitical perspective, the Soviet Union's collapse meant that India had to deal with China in its own right. Since Chinese economic and political influence in Burma was increasing since the late 1980s, India had to increase its presence in the state as well in order to prevent itself from being flanked by states that are friendly to China. India's 'Look East' policy is therefore not just an economic exercise. It is, as E. Ahamed, Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, opined, a 'strategic shift in India's vision of the world' and a means to reach out to 'civilisational neighbours' in that region.'⁷¹

The growing Chinese presence in Burma, which marks the apparent end of Burma's non-alignment policy, has therefore forced 'New Delhi, *for the first time* [emphasis original], to pay increasing attention to events across its eastern frontier with Burma.'⁷² J.N. Dixit's, Indian External Affairs minister, 1993 visit to Burma signaled this reversal in Indian foreign policy. The lack of democracy and Burma's appallingly poor human rights record no longer pose insurmountable obstacles to normalising bilateral relations, which was further evidenced by the conclusion of a Border Trade Agreement with Burma in 1994. In 2001, External Minister Jaswant Singh paid another visit to Burma. While there, he emphasised India's need to have eastward access, and this objective could not be achieved if India distanced itself from Burma.⁷³ Significantly, Jaswant Singh's delegation included senior representatives from Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland as well as Arunachal Pradesh, Indian states that border Burma, which highlighted India's desire for closer links with this Southeast Asian state. In November 2003, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, India's Vice-President visited Burma. It represented the highest level visit since Rajiv Gandhi's 1987 visit prior to the military junta taking over control a year later in 1988.

In 2007, after the junta's crackdown on the pro-democracy protests by the country's monks, India did not censure Burma as it did previously. When asked why India chose to remain silent in this instance, Indian Defence Minister, Pranab Mukherjee

⁷¹ E. Ahamed, 'Reinforcing 'Look East' Policy,' Ministry of External Affairs, <http://meaindia.nic.in/interview/2006/01/17in01.htm>.

⁷² J. Mohan Malik, 'Burma's Role in Regional Security - Pawn or Pivot?,' in *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 112-3.

⁷³ Rakesh Sinha, 'World's Biggest Democracy Gives a Valentine's Day Gift to Myanmar,' *Indian Express*, 15 February 2001.

stated India's 'basic principle is to live in peaceful co-existence and we do not believe in exporting ideologies. It is for the people of the country to decide what type of government they would like to have.'⁷⁴ This is because a pragmatic India seeks to prevent Burma, which had appeared to deviate from its earlier policy of strategic neutrality in the late 1980s, from becoming too close to China in order to prevent itself from being flanked by hostile states allied with the latter state. China's relations with Burma are significantly more developed, and India wants to close the gap by engaging Burma in as many areas as possible; condemning its poor human rights record is detrimental to achieving this objective.⁷⁵

In his memoirs detailing his tenure as India's Minister for External Affairs, J.N. Dixit stated it was important that 'Burma does not become part of an exclusive area of influence of other great powers.' India's post-Cold War policy therefore set about 'normalizing relations with whatever government is in control of Burma and then expanding the range and content of bilateral relations.'⁷⁶ India now regards itself as a major actor internationally, and not just a 'South Asian Gulliver.'⁷⁷ In order to fulfil this role, India now has to ensure it has the capacity to influence developments of states along its borders. Since China has increased its presence in Burma, India needs to do likewise to prevent the former from becoming overly-aligned with the Chinese. Although India remains deeply committed towards its internal democratic institutions, it has now ceased to promote democratisation outside of its borders as other pragmatic interests have now assumed precedence.⁷⁸ Hence, India has been supplying military aid to Burma, which allowed the military junta to maintain its grip on political power, which attests to the complete reversal of its previous policy of supporting pro-democracy forces in the country.⁷⁹ India's new attitude is reminiscent of Lord Curzon's belief that covert

⁷⁴ 'New Delhi Will Not Meddle with Myanmar: Indian Defence Minister,' *AFP*, 3 June 2006.

⁷⁵ Stanley A. Weiss, 'Myanmar's Neighbours Hold the Key,' *New York Times*, 7 March 2007.

⁷⁶ J.N. Dixit, *My South Block Years: Memoirs of a Foreign Ministry* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 1996), 167.71.

⁷⁷ George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, Updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 329.

⁷⁸ Kapur, *India-from Regional to World Power*, 203. The Editor, 'India's Identity Crisis in Myanmar,' *New York Times*, 15 October 2007.

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'India: Military Aid to Burma Fuels Abuses,' (2006), <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/12/07/india-military-aid-burma-fuels-abuses>.

dependence by a weaker state on a more powerful state would over time, inevitably lead to overt and direct dependence, a development that had to be prevented:

Of all the diplomatic forms or fictions...the uniform tendency is for the weaker to crystallise into the harder shape. Spheres of Interest tend to become Spheres of Influence; temporary leases to become perpetual; Spheres of Influence to develop into protectorates; protectorates to be the forerunners of complete incorporation.⁸⁰

In another concrete sign of India's desire to establish and maintain links with Burma, it built a road in 1999 named the Indo-Myanmar Friendship Road to improve transport links between them. It was completed in January 2001. The construction of this road is very beneficial for Burma since India is one of the largest markets for Burma's exports. Given the continual Western embargoes and trade sanctions, Burma's economy has been badly affected. The completion of this road is very timely for it provides another avenue for this isolated state to increase its economic interaction with the outside world and earn foreign exchange, thereby allowing the military government to maintain its hold on political power. As an indication of the importance Burma placed on this transport route, it undertook major upgrading works, due to be completed in 2010, to repair decrepit sections.⁸¹ This is because increased trade with India brings in additional income ensuring that it remains financially beneficial for military personnel to maintain the prevailing domestic political status quo. Even though India's engagement of Burma has contributed to the political longevity of the ruling junta, it has implemented such a policy in order to prevent a 'Tibetanization of Burma', which would be detrimental to its interests.⁸² In recent years, Indian political leaders have therefore met frequently with their Burmese counterparts. For instance Manmohan Singh held talks with Sow Win at the 11th ASEAN Summit held in December 2005 in Malaysia. In 2006, Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam made an inaugural visit to Burma in his capacity as head of state.⁸³

⁸⁰ Lord Curzon, *Frontiers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 47.

⁸¹ Xinhua, 'Myanmar-India Border Road Upgrade to Complete by 2010: Report,' *China View*, 15 March 2009.

⁸² Malik, 'Burma's Role in Regional Security - Pawn or Pivot?,' 118.

⁸³ Indian Chamber of Commerce, 'India-Myanmar Trade & Commerce: Challenges and Prospects,' (India Chamber of Commerce, 2006), 2.

Since India perceives itself to be 10 years behind China in terms of its engagement of Burma, India is now keen to close this gap.⁸⁴

Burma: Holding its own

With its history of being dominated by foreign powers such as China and Britain, an independent Burma has heightened sensitivity towards its sovereign status. Hence, it pursued a policy of non-alignment during the Cold War as it sought to distance itself from the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Even though Burma has become closer to China since the late 1980s, it would be premature to conclude that Burma has renounced its previous non-alignment policy. Compared to either China or India, Burma is a very weak state. However, it is still committed to the defence of its sovereignty. Burma has been keen to play China against India and vice versa, to ensure that no single power holds undue sway over it.⁸⁵ For instance, both China and India have ongoing interests in oil exploration and extraction in Burma. However, it does not wish to have either aspiring power to become overbearing. In a sign of adroit diplomacy, Burma signed an agreement with China in 2006 to export gas from the partly-Indian owned A1 and A3 offshore blocks even though Yangon has assured New Delhi that it would be the recipient of any exports.⁸⁶ Burma's decision surprised India because two Indian firms, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Videsh Limited and Gas Authority of India Limited owned 30 percent stake in the oil fields. Coincidentally, Burma's conclusion of a memorandum of understanding with China came after it accepted a Chinese soft loan totalling \$84 million.

Despite Burma's apparent alignment with China, and appears to be a Chinese client state, recent events indicate otherwise.⁸⁷ In an attempt to introduce a new Constitution in 2010, Burma's military government wants ethnic armies to disband and become militias under the control of Burma's military, which they oppose. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Zauja Nhkri, commander of the Kachin Independence Army Officer's training school, reiterated the group's willingness to fight

⁸⁴ Bethany Danyluk, Amy Donahue, and Juli MacDonald, *Perspectives on China: A View from India* (Washington, D.C.: Allen Hamilton, 2005), 17.

⁸⁵ Aung Zaw, 'Brothers at Arm's Length,' *The Irrawaddy*, 2 September 2009.

⁸⁶ Sanjay Dutta, 'Gas Pipeline: Myanmar Taking India for a Ride,' *The Times of India*, 26 March 2006.

⁸⁷ Larry Jagan, 'China, Burma Bust up over Border Unrest,' *The Irrawaddy*, 4 Oct. 2009.

against government troops.⁸⁸ As a sign of the Burma's government seriousness in disbanding such ethnic armies, it attacked the Burma National Democratic Alliance Army in September 2009, and caused more than 30,000 refugees to subsequently cross the border into Nansan, China. Furthermore, as a result of the fighting, two Chinese citizens were killed and Chinese business interests in Kokang were also affected. At a press conference, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu expressed the Chinese government's concern and 'hope[d] Burma could properly handle its domestic issues and take every measure necessary to restore stability along the border and guarantee the safety and property of Chinese citizens in Burma.'⁸⁹ In the wake of the border unrest, the Chinese authorities are seeking 280 million yuan in compensation from the Burma government for damages to Chinese businesses in Laogai, the capital of Kokang.⁹⁰ China is wary of Burma's reprisal actions because apart from the inflow of refugees,⁹¹ fighting may result in increased narcotics production by the irregular armies in order to finance resistance efforts, which may then find their way to South-west China.⁹² China has been rather supportive of such armed groups. This is because China wishes to maintain order and stability in the border area and also seeks to ensure that it has allies in the event the military regime loses its grip on political power. Or, China could use such armed groups to be its proxy. If the military junta were to introduce policies hostile to China's national interest, China could then influence these predominantly ethnic Chinese forces to wage a military campaign against the Burma government on its behalf. Since such a conflict is considered to be a civil war, other actors would be less likely to intervene. In this scenario, China would then be in the position to influence developments in Burma without being directly involved. In December 2009, Lt-Gen Ai Husheng, chief of staff of the Chengdu Military Region met with Lt-Gen Min Aung Hlaing chief of the Bureau of

⁸⁸ Thomas Fuller, 'Ethnic Groups in Myanmar Hope for Peace, but Gird for Fight,' *New York Times*, 10 May 2009.

⁸⁹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Independent State of Papua New Guinea, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu's Regular Press Conference on September 1, 2009,' <http://pg.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t581877.htm>.

⁹⁰ Ko Hywe, 'Chinese Authorities Seek Damages from Junta,' *The Irrawaddy*, 1 October 2009.

⁹¹ Saw Yan Naing, 'China's Dilemma: Junta Oil and Wa Refugees?,' *The Irrawaddy*, 30 September 2009.

⁹² Ian J. Storey, 'Sino-Myanmar Ties: Border Conflicts a Test of Beijing's Influence,' *Viewpoints*(2009), <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/viewpoint/is3sep09.pdf>.

Special Operations (BSO)-2 to discuss the issue of border security, but no clear resolution was reached.⁹³

From a short-term perspective, new oil and gas pipelines that are due to come into operation in 2012 linking Rakhine to Kunming pass through such restive border regions. Any outbreaks of conflicts there will naturally hinder the construction's progress, which undermines Chinese wishes to reduce its dependence on energy imports from the Straits of Malacca. Hence, Burma's current efforts to forcibly disband such armed groups go against China's preference for maintaining the status quo through observing the ceasefire agreements it helped broker in 1989. Furthermore, China failed attempts to dissuade the military junta from undertaking this recent offensive provides an indication that its influence on Burma is not as strong as previously assumed. Significantly, this recent military offensive also demonstrated that Burma is keen to send a signal that it is not a Chinese client state, which is evidenced by its recent receptivity towards Indian overtures so as to play one power against another.

Burma's current resistance towards China is not surprising as it has been keen to improve relations with India. When General Than Shwe visited India in October 2004, both states concluded agreements that facilitated cooperation in areas of non-traditional security such as combating insurgency, drug trafficking as well as organised crime. This is because, Burma, with its historical commitment towards non-alignment, does not want to be dominated by China. Even though Burma's relations with China had shown much improvement in recent years, nevertheless, it is still expectedly wary of Chinese intentions that remain unclear as evidenced by Chinese support for the various rebel groups.⁹⁴ To this end, Burma has therefore also been very welcoming of India's attempts at improving ties. For instance, Burma's foreign minister, when Win Aung visited India in early 2003, he met with senior Indian officials and discussed ways of improving bilateral ties through enhanced economic cooperation.⁹⁵

Burma's shifting policies towards both China and India mean that their positions there are not secure. They may make gains, but the gains can be easily reversed as the

⁹³ Wai Moe, 'Chinese, Burmese Military Leaders Discuss Border Security,' *The Irrawaddy*, 11 December 2009.

⁹⁴ Wai Moe, 'Is China Two-Timing the Generals,' *The Irrawaddy Magazine* 17, no. 6 (2009), http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=16676.

⁹⁵ Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Country Report: Myanmar,' 15.

military junta changes its stance, sometimes quite abruptly. In this context, an observation of how these two aspiring states react and reverse any losses they experience will provide a unique perspective on their obscured decision-making processes and provides a preview of how they might act in future.

Conclusion

Forecasting the future is inherently difficult. It is important to note that this paper does not predict whether China and India would eventually become major powers, if at all, or whether they would be benign or belligerent powers in future. Instead, this paper argues that their present interaction in Burma provides a preview by magnifying any underlying trends that would provide credible insights into the nature and effects as they seek to become *bona fide* major powers.

SEA is of secondary strategic importance to both China and India as regional states there do not pose any direct or imminent existential threats to them. Yet, this paper has provided evidence that both aspiring powers still devote much effort and resources to improving their respective positions there. Prospect theory provides the missing link, as it is able to explain why China and India are willing to do that instead of focusing solely on their traditional spheres of influence in East and South Asia respectively.

Using prospect theory, it is clear to see why it is very likely for Chinese and Indian interests to overlap in Burma. By observing the dispute resolution process, if present, would then provide a preview of how these two powers will react when their interests clash occurs in another theatre. Burma provides a unique vantage point to objectively observe Chinese and Indian actions and reactions as they interact with each other in a safe environment that does not threaten their core national interests directly. In this environment that is divorced from immediate strategic interests and considerations, these two states act the way they do because they choose to, and not because they have to. Consequently, Sino-Indian actions in Burma provide an early as well as accurate gauge that better approximates the nature and effects of their rise in future thereby justifying the paper's title and establishing the importance of SEA in the present geopolitical context.

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