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Examining China's Position on Myanmar in the United Nations Security Council

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Abstract

China has often been criticized for shielding Myanmar from international scrutiny, particularly in the United Nations Security Council. The latest instance being China's veto on 3 February 2021 against a UNSC joint statement condemning Myanmar's military for organizing a coup, putting State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under detention and causing hundreds of civilian deaths. This is in addition to two previous negative votes in 2007 and 2017 at the UNSC. This paper by tracing the history of China-Myanmar diplomatic relations and by mapping Myanmar's role in China's regional strategy seeks to understand China's stances in the UNSC with regards to Myanmar, the impact that has on Myanmar, China's interests and perception of the issues in Myanmar, its stance on its principles, its behaviour as a UNSC permanent member, and what that says about China as a rising and as a regional power. It concludes that although it is a genuine concern for China to maintain stability in Myanmar; however, its importance in China's strategic calculation also constrains China from any outright repudiation of Myanmar's repressive actions. As such, China is likely to continue shielding Myanmar from punitive measures as its interests there is deeply entrenched with its political support, particularly at the UN.

Keywords

China, Myanmar, United Nations Security Council, rising power behaviour.

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China has often been criticized for shielding Myanmar from international scrutiny, particularly in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The latest instance being China's veto on 3 February 2021 against a UNSC joint statement condemning Myanmar's military for organizing a coup that shattered a decade-plus-long attempt at establishing a civilian government, for putting State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under detention and causing hundreds of civilian deaths. China's veto is hardly surprising considering it has previously cast two negative votes in 2007 and 2017 at the UNSC.

Sino-Myanmar diplomatic contact originated in 802 A.D. with 'the visit of the Pyu delegation to Chang-an, the capital of the Tang dynasty'

Nevertheless, Myanmar is not only a bordersharing country with China but its internal politics also has a bearing on the stability of its periphery as well as for its regional strategy as a whole. Thus the varying nuances of China's position on Myanmar in the Council will shed light on China's interests and its perception of the issues there, its stance on its principles and its behaviour as a permanent member of the world body. This paper by tracing the history of China-Myanmar diplomatic relations and by mapping Myanmar's role in China's regional strategy will seek to understand China's stances in the UNSC with regards to Myanmar, the impact that has on Myanmar and what that says about China as a rising and as a regional power.

China-Myanmar Relations

Sino-Myanmar diplomatic contact originated, according to Myanmar historians, in 802 A.D. with 'the visit of the Pyu delegation to Changan, the capital of the Tang dynasty' (Tin Maung 2003, 190). However, their modern diplomatic relation began in 1949 with Myanmar recognizing People's Republic of China (PRC) as a sovereign nation. As history would suggest, despite their addressing each other as "little brother" (Chinese form of address towards Myanmar) and Pauk-Phaw (a Burmese term meaning "kinfolk" for China), their relationship has undergone a complicated historical evolution that has continued to influence ties to the present day.

These issues ranged from "a border dispute, the presence of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) troops in Myanmar's border, to incursions into Myanmar by Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces in pursuit of the KMT troops" (Yhome 2019, 5). Moreover, "from the late 1960s to 1978, China supported the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) that fought a power struggle against Myanmar's central government" and "many of the ethnic armed"

groups in northern Myanmar sprung up as offshoots of the BCP" (Yhome 2019, 5). These issues and also the pre-colonial history of Chinese invasion by the Mongols in 1283 and subsequently in the 14th and 17th centuries could explain why Myanmar's leadership has always remained wary of the intentions of its powerful neighbour, although attaching special, familial ties and close diplomatic relation.

The scale and scope of the reforms soon led to the cancellation of economic sanctions from the West and a variety of diplomatic options opening up for Myanmar.

Despite their complicated history, China-Myanmar relations remain one of the most important bilateral relations in Southeast Asia from each other's perspectives as well as for the stability of the region as a whole. Notwithstanding Myanmar's suspicion towards China, the former is aware of China's pivotal role in Myanmar's survival when it faced international isolation and sanctions due to its human rights violations post the 1988-crackdown by the Tatmadaw (as Myanmar's military is known) of pro-democracy uprising. This was when "China's role in Myanmar's diplomacy, trade, and security grew apace" (Chow and Easley 2015, 2).

China fulfilled Myanmar's economic and diplomatic needs by trading with and investing in Myanmar while China "gained access to Myanmar's rich reserves of petroleum, natural gas, timber, and minerals, as well as its potential for hydroelectric power, all of which promised to help fuel Chinese economic growth", and also political leverage with the "SLORC/SPDC", (Chow and Easley 2015, 3). Furthermore, whether and how China chooses to deal with the internal or border conflicts in Myanmar will have an effect on the stability of the neighbourhood with regard to drug trafficking, armed rebellions and illegal crossborder migration issues such as refugee crisis, causing massive inflows into Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The close relation that China cultivated with the SPDC regime had to undergo major evolution with the advent of a civilian government after the promulgation of the 2008 constitution and the political reforms brought about by the Thein Sein administration in 2011. The scale and scope of the reforms soon led to the cancellation of economic sanctions from the West and a variety of diplomatic options opening up for Myanmar. These developments threatened the monopoly of China's influence in Myanmar. What caused particular alarm was "the unexpected decision by President Thein Sein in September 2011 to construction of China's major suspend investment, the Myitsone Dam", and the realization that "the favourable investment

climate China had expected might not be so hospitable after all" (Clapp 2015, 6). As such, '[T]he rapid expansion of Myanmar's diplomatic profile has complicated its relations with China' (Chow and Easley 2015: 4).

Myanmar in China's Regional Strategy

Myanmar's particular importance to China can be understood in the context of China's regional strategy which can be broadly categorized as maintaining a stable peripheral environment, building economic cooperation, increasing regional influence and curbing any attempt at containing its rise - ultimately to achieve a great power status. Specifically, Myanmar's strategic importance to China also lies in the latter's "Two-Ocean strategy" which will provide much needed access to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In order to fulfil this strategy, 'China is pushing to build the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) projects: the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Rakhine State; a railway connecting Kyaukphyu and China's Yunnan province; three border economic zones; and the Namjim Industrial Park in Myitkyina; the Kyaukhpyu port will be crucial to China's goal of developing a route to import oil and gas that bypasses the Strait of Malacca' (Thai PBS World, 16 January 2020).

Ethnic groups living in the borderlands with shared cultural affinities are found on both sides of the border

These economic projects are crucial to China's regional strategy of building economic ties so as to fulfil its development goals. As Myers asserts, "CMEC represents how BRI in Southeast Asia often operates in support of core Chinese interests" which includes economic development (Wilson Centre, 26 May 2020).

In order to sustain its developmental goals, China has high demand for energy, especially from oil and natural gas. Myanmar assumes importance here not only as a source of natural gas but also as the site for an overland oil pipeline that would allow oil and natural gas that comes from the Middle East and the Indian Ocean to bypass the relatively vulnerable Straits of Malacca. Myanmar also serves 'as a "land ridge" to revive China's southwest silk road from Yunnan province to Myanmar and westward to Bangladesh, India and the West' also to implement its "Western and Development Strategy" (Shee 2002, 35).

Having a stable China-Myanmar border thus becomes an issue of utmost importance as instability along the border will create obstacles in the smooth implementation of the aforementioned projects. The potential of ethnic conflicts along the border spilling over to China is also a critical concern considering the ethnic groups living in the borderlands with shared cultural affinities are found on both sides of the border. Nonetheless, the importance China stressed on having a stable

environment in its periphery could very well be limited to the border area and its potential spillover effect, but not necessarily to the actions of the Myanmar government that has time and again been the cause of multiple political instabilities in the country. China's purported adherence to the principle of noninterference in the internal politics of Myanmar has often been an impediment for China to play a more intrusive role as a regional power. This seems to be changing as it has started getting involved in Myanmar's peace process, but in a mediatory role: facilitating talks between Myanmar's regime and the UN, ethnic armed organizations and Bangladesh. Even so, China's intervention "correlates directly with the intensity of the conflict and its spillover effect on China" (Yun 2017, 3); which has precluded China from responding so far in an immediate, substantial manner which Myanmar so needs.

Myanmar often becomes a site of strategic competition between India and China as the two regional powers compete for geopolitical dominance

Meanwhile, China's economic inroads into Myanmar have continued apace with political and strategic implications that not only help in gaining political leverage with Naypidaw, but also further serve its interests of restraining US or India's influence in Myanmar. China has always been wary of external players

intervening in the region, particularly the US which began resuming close relations with Myanmar post 2011-reforms. China considers US involvement in Myanmar as "aiming at "containing Chinese influence", directly threatening China's border, energy, and geopolitical security, enabling the US to "contain" and "encircle" China to ultimately counter China's rise (Shi Aiguo as quoted in Chow and Easley 2015, 4).

China also factors in countering India in its regional strategy. Myanmar often becomes a site of strategic competition between India and China as the two regional powers compete for geopolitical dominance and this often creates a tug-of-war situation with the two seeking not only to advance their commercial interests but also to enhance their regional political influence. In the circumstances, a China-Myanmar nexus is seen as "strategically important for China to contain India's influence in Southeast Asia" (Shee 2002: 33) as well as serving as "a buffer between China's southwest and areas controlled or influenced by the two other major powers in the region: India and the U.S" (Wuthnow 2011, 274).

China's political influence in Myanmar is further aimed at contributing to its goal of becoming a great power. "Myanmar is part and parcel of China's grand strategic design to achieve its goal of becoming a great power in the 21st century" (Shee 2002: 33). Myanmar's significant position in China's regional strategy

in terms of "serving as the land bridge connecting the poor economies of the southwestern part of China and the growing economies of Southeast Asia, India, and even with African and European markets" further demonstrates its crucial part in China's overall strategy of becoming a great power (Dittmer 2010: 272). As the foregoing discussion suggests, Myanmar is important to China not merely in immediate economic gains but also in the context of long-term strategic goals, and this shall be further analysed in the following section.

China instead emphasized that the biggest challenges that Myanmar faced were of 'development, and national unity and reconciliation'.

China's Position on Myanmar in the UNSC

China's first veto with regard to Myanmar was against a proposed UNSC resolution that would have called upon Myanmar's Government to cease military attacks against civilians in ethnic minority regions. Furthermore, China cast two negative votes against issuing joint Council statements condemning the military government in 2017 and 2021. Having established Myanmar's special importance to China's strategic interests in the previous section and in the context of its rising power, it stands to reason that China's vetoes are reflective of its

assertiveness to materialize its long-held interests in Myanmar.

China's 2007-veto was cast on the ground that, 'the matter was an internal affair of a sovereign State and did not pose a threat to international or regional peace and security'. Based on the principled position of non-interference and also arguing that Myanmar's issue fell outside the purview of Council's mandate, China however did welcome the recommendations of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and 'supported the Secretary-General's offices under the General Assembly's mandate'. In subsequent Security Council briefings, addressing the deteriorating situation in Myanmar, China seemed to perceive acceptance by the junta to engage even in minimal dialogue with the outside world as making progress. China instead emphasized that the biggest challenges that Myanmar faced were of 'development, and national unity and reconciliation'.

In response to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), the Tatmadaw had launched massive violence against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017, which the UN has termed a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing", and led to the displacement of the Rohingyas both internally inside the Rakhine state as well as externally into Bangladesh.

China proposed a three-point plan: 'called for a ceasefire, an agreement between Myanmar and

Bangladesh on the repatriation of Rohingya refugees, and international efforts to promote economic development in Rakhine' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 20 November 2017). In addition to facilitating talks, China has also contributed funds to the peace process. 'In 2017, China donated \$1 million and pledged \$3 million to the government's peace process work, in addition to separate contributions for relief to internally displaced persons' (USIP SSG report 2018, 26).

In March 2017, China blocked a UNSC statement that 'would have noted the renewed fighting in parts of Myanmar and stressed the importance of humanitarian access to all affected areas' (Reuters, 17 March 2017). Eight months later, China did 'back a Security Council presidential statement condemning the violence in Rakhine and raising concerns about human rights abuses by security forces', but only after negotiating 'watered down language on Rohingya citizenship rights and a demand to allow a UN human rights mission into Myanmar, and after indicating it was willing to use veto power to block a resolution' (UNSC Presidential Statement, 6 Nov 2017).

Actions taken by China are reflective of its desire to "be seen as supportive of Burmese authorities, both with the civilian government and the Tatmadaw"

Then again in December 2017, China voted against a UN General Assembly resolution calling for the Tatmadaw to end its campaign against the Rohingya, allow access for aid workers, and ensure the return of all refugees and grant citizenship rights to the Rohingya, as well as the appointment of a UN special envoy (The Guardian, 24 Dec 2017).

All these instances show China taking an oppositional stance or at least weakening 'UN resolutions aimed at punishing or pressuring the Tatmadaw to cease its violent oppression of the Rohingya' (USIP SSG 2018, 32). Furthermore, these actions on China's part are reflective of its desire to "be seen as supportive of Burmese authorities, both with the civilian government and the Tatmadaw" so as to protect its interests in Myanmar, and also to "ensure that a coordinated, Western-led action does not occur on China's doorstep" (Joy 2018, 2). Once again by characterizing the conflict as an "economic development issue, where stability can be promoted through poverty reduction and. by extension. Chinese investment". China's approach echoes a "convenient development narrative while failing to address the overwhelming human rights violations" (Ibid, 6).

In the aftermath of the 1 February 2021 coup, China again blocked a UNSC joint statement condemning the military coup in Myanmar. Explaining China's position on the situation in Myanmar, its permanent representative to the

UN Zhang Chun argued that 'The international community should, on the basis of respecting Myanmar's sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and national unity, step up diplomatic efforts', rejected sanctions that 'will only further complicate the situation', and reiterated 'its support for the mediation efforts by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and ASEAN' (quoted in cgtn.com, 1 April 2021).

Once again, "China seems to be signalling its tacit support, if not emphatic endorsement, for the generals' actions", putting it "as if this is Myanmar's 'internal issue' in which what we are observing is a 'cabinet reshuffle,' as China's state media put it" (Prasse-Freeman as quoted in bbc.com, 3 Feb 2021). China did, however, later back a 'watered-down UN statement that expressed concern over a 12-month state of emergency declared by the Tatmadaw and called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi' (Aljazeera.com, 18 Feb 2021). At an "Arriaformula" meeting held on 9 April 2021, China's permanent representative to the UN expressed "concern" at the situation in Myanmar; stressed that the international community on the basis of "respecting Myanmar's sovereignty, political independence, and national unity, must step up diplomatic efforts"; and reiterated its support for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the ASEAN to play a "constructive role" (Youtube).

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Conclusion

Despite their complicated relationship, the fact that Myanmar still assumes special importance in China's regional strategy inevitably results in China being continually engaged with Myanmar both bilaterally as well as at the UN. The nature of this relationship and also Myanmar's geographical position pose significant pressures upon China to handle the situation in Myanmar delicately.

China's numerous investments in Myanmar including and especially those "under CMEC promise to satisfy several of Beijing's domestic and foreign policy interests", and Xi Jinping's first visit to Myanmar on 17 January 2020 only further reinforces Myanmar's importance to China. Hence, China almost always chooses to protect Myanmar against international condemnation by spending its precious veto and attracting condemnation towards itself, and rather expressing a softer form of its acknowledgement of what's happening in Myanmar, namely that of "concern".

Its perception of the situation in Myanmar as "internal" and using that characterization to enforce its "non-interference" principle, arrests the Council from taking any immediate

effective action to resolve the situation by using its veto privilege as a permanent member. As far as Myanmar is concerned, the governing regime is evermore insulated from international scrutiny, while the people are further away from having a long-term stable and peaceful life. Meanwhile, the situation looms large and becomes a growing threat to international peace and security even as China argues otherwise. The spillover effects of the mass exodus of refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons) not only inside Rakhine, wherein the Rohingya face attacks from other communities. but also to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh with a not so well-to-do population could result in conflicts between the refugees and the host countries as the two sides compete for resources.

As UN Secretary-General rightly warned, "The crisis has generated multiple implications for neighbouring States and the larger region, including the risk of intercommunal strife. We should not be surprised if the decades of discrimination and double standards in the treatment of the Rohingya create openings for radicalization" (Briefing at the UNSC, 28 September 2017).

As a regional and a rising power, China has demonstrated its capabilities and willingness to assert its authority and influence in the neighbouring countries, "where strategic, great power and economic interests coincide" (Wesley-Smith 2013, 358). It is a genuine

concern for China to maintain stability in Myanmar; however, its importance in China's strategic calculation also constrains China from any outright repudiation of Myanmar's repressive actions. As such, its inability to hold Myanmar accountable for the conflict and the humanitarian imbroglio caused in its wake that places China not only at odds with and in defiance of western norms of upholding human rights but also of a callous disregard for human lives, to put it broadly. Nonetheless, China is likely to continue shielding Myanmar from punitive measures as its interests there are deeply entrenched with its political support, particularly at the UN.

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