



## **China-Myanmar Relations under Xi Jinping: A Critical Assessment**

**Speaker: Dr. Puyam Rakesh Singh**

**Chair: Mr. M V Rappai**

**Venue: Seminar Room, ICS**

The seminar began with the chair's introductory remarks. He welcomed the speaker and informed the audience about the speaker's research background. The chair also elaborated on the agenda of the seminar and gave a brief overview of China's building infrastructure abroad. In the opening remarks, Dr. Puyam Rakesh Singh thanked the Chair and also informed the audience how he initially began to conduct research on the topic.

The speaker's presentations began by providing the outline of his talk, which comprehensively covered post-2010 Myanmar general elections scenario, the impact of China's mass infrastructure building on Myanmar's environment, implementation of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Myanmar, bilateral defense cooperation, Rohingya crisis and the observations of the speaker.

First of all, he elaborated on the development of bilateral relations between China and Myanmar from 2010 onwards. The speaker highlighted how Myanmar is strategically important for China, including China's energy security concerns, its desire for access to the Indian Ocean and the Western Development Strategy. Since the late 1980s, China has tried to get access to the Indian Ocean and construct energy pipelines connecting Myanmar with Yunnan. China had enhanced its relationship with the military Junta and invested heavily on mega projects in Myanmar before 2010. However, the speaker captured the changing dynamics after 2010 Myanmar election. When the former President of Myanmar Thein Sein came to power after 2010 election, Myanmar government also started to listen to the voice coming from different sections and question China's model of infrastructure investment. Thein Sein started to talk about people-centered development, transparency, environmental protections, etc. In the new situation in Myanmar after 2010, the public had a greater say in terms of infrastructure building and the Myanmar governments gave more attention to the opinions of different domestic stakeholders. The speaker contended that China's bilateral engagement with Myanmar has also evolved due to the changing scenario in Myanmar. China started to adopt a more people-centered development approach and gave more importance to

the environmental implication of constructions of infrastructure. Additionally, the speaker argued Chinese corporates also give more attention to social responsibility and the policy had been adjusted in search of a legitimate foothold. It also witnessed some cancellation of projects that were not environmentally friendly. The speaker cited the example that when the new government came to power, Myitsone dam project was canceled in 2011. In September 2012, during Myanmar President Thein Sein's visit to China, he invited Chinese investment while stating that Naypyitaw will not welcome any investment that harms national interests, dignity, sovereignty and environment of Myanmar. In order to build trust with Myanmar people, China started to provide low-interest loan which was used to alleviate poverty. Various programmes and initiatives were launched, such as cultural exchanges, socio-economic development programmes, provision of scholarship to Myanmar students. Moreover, China also provided assistance to the Southeast Asian Games 2013 and engaged with different stakeholders like NGO, national and provincial political parties. Through the example that China and Myanmar signed an electric power cooperation agreement based on the principle of fairness, transparency and environment protections, the speaker observe that public consultancy was incorporated into the installation of projects. The speakers stressed that these phenomena could not be found before 2010.

The speaker's presentation continued to cover the engagement between Aung San Suu Kyi and China. China engaged with Aung San Suu Kyi long before National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election in 2015. In 2011 the then Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar Li Junhua met Aung San Suu Kyi. A 12-member delegation of the NLD party left for China in November 2014, announcing Suu Kyi's plan to visit China in December. However, her visit in December 2014 did not materialise. In 2015, after four NLD delegations preceded Suu Kyi's first China trip, the long-awaited first visit of Suu Kyi to China happened in June 2015. Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed hope for the NLD to play a constructive role in guiding the Myanmar people's view on China-Myanmar cooperation in an unbiased and rational way. In response, Suu Kyi stated that the NLD had committed to the China-Myanmar friendship. China further strengthened exchanges with the NLD after Myanmar 2015 election. In 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi attended China's BRI forum. Additionally, she also discussed the Rohingya crisis.

After giving an elaboration on the cancellation and suspension of China's infrastructure projects such as Myitsone project due to environment concerns, the speaker continued to give the overview of the BRI. He elaborated on several projects, including The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), Ayeyawardy River Corridor, China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, Kyaukpyu Port and SEZ and Energy Pipelines, etc. The speaker asserted that China had been aware India was not in the position to push forward BCIM. Therefore, for the sake of getting

access to the Indian Ocean, China has vigorously developed China-Myanmar corridor and energy pipelines for securing oil and gas supply to Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong. The speaker provided detailed explanation on China's design to build Kyaukpyu port, highway, railway and water way along with pipeline and oil refineries to guarantee its access to the Indian Ocean and safeguard its energy security. Especially in terms of sea lanes connection, the speaker stressed that China would intergrade the Myanmar port with other ports in Indian ocean. Before ending, the speaker argued although China-Myanmar corridor is low profile now, it has the potential to become China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the future.

The speaker discussed the defense and security cooperation between China and Myanmar. Following the three-point proposal on military relations between China and Myanmar put forward by Chinese military official Su Caihou in 2011, the Agreement on Strategic Consultation Mechanism was concluded in November 2012. Between 2013 to 2015, China and Myanmar held two rounds of strategic security consultation meetings in which China called for peaceful settlement of Myanmar's domestic ethnic conflict, promoted joint drills and military ties. The period between 2016 to 2018 witnessed a further enhancement of ties through establishing Diplomacy and Defense (2+2) Consultation Meetings. In terms of arms sell from China to Myanmar, the speakers cited the statistics from SIPRI Arms Transfer Database and argued the volume of arms sell had increased tremendously from 2013 to 2017.

The speaker concluded his presentation by providing his observations of Myanmar-China Relations. First, Myanmar's stability is of significance for China to implement its BRI projects and safeguard its energy pipelines. Therefore, China is keen to play a constructive role in Myanmar's Peace Process as well as the Rohingya crisis. Second, China's approach to engagement with Myanmar has evolved. China has realized that it is important to take different domestic stakeholders of Myanmar on board and it is difficult to ignore the environmental protection, well being of local people and demands of transparency and fairness. Third, the bilateral comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership as well as defense and security cooperation between China and Myanmar has been deepened and expanded enormously. Fourth, China will integrate BRI projects in Myanmar with the security and developments goals. Therefore, BRI should not be seen as a pure economic initiative.

*Report prepared by Feng Renjie, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*