

# THE CONFLICT IN MYANMAR (BURMA) - A NEW ARENA OF SINO-AMERICAN COLLISION

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**Abstract:** *many modern conflicts in the international arena are fraught with hidden "wars", and also have completely different goals. The overall goal of my work is to show how one conflict covers a completely different clash of two "super forces".*

**Keywords:** *clash, division of territory and influence, internal conflicts.*

At one time this country in Southeast Asia was known as Burma. But the locals do not like this name, considering it to be foreign. Therefore, after 1989, the country was renamed Myanmar (translated as “fast”, “strong”). The conflict in Myanmar began in the days of the country's struggle (then Burma) for independence after the end of World War II. It was then that clashes between Buddhists and local Muslims, the Rohingya, began. Buddhists in Myanmar - the majority, Muslims - in the minority and live compactly in the western part of the state of Arakan. A large number of refugees from neighboring Bangladesh, who settled here for a long time, live in this territory.<sup>1</sup>

Myanmar joined the UN shortly after independence in 1948 in order to gain protection from powerful external forces. It pursued a firm policy of neutrality and non-alignment, participated in conferences on disarmament, and sought to establish friendly relations with all key countries.<sup>2</sup>

Myanmar, which borders India, Bangladesh, China, Thailand, and Laos, is rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, gold, uranium, non-ferrous metals, and precious stones, but its economy is predominantly agrarian. At first glance, this is an ordinary developing country, sandwiched on both sides by powerful neighbors. But in fact, it is the most important link in the China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India economic corridor, the creation of which was agreed upon by the governments of these countries in 2013. According to Chinese authorities, this corridor should push, as they say in official documents, the “joint development of three large economic blocs in South, Southeast, and East Asia.”<sup>3</sup>

The city of Yangon, as the former Burmese capital and the main commercial, industrial, and transport center of the country, has been included as one of the commercial ports of the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” route, part of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road” initiative. It is of strategic importance, especially since the Strait of Malacca is located nearby, through which a quarter of the entire sea trade turnover passes. In May 2017, the naval forces of China and Myanmar conducted joint naval maneuvers for the first time. But Myanmar is not only a transit country for Chinese goods and a gateway to Southeast Asia for India. Over time, it can become a regional player in the fuel and energy sector. In terms of gas production potential, Myanmar has the capacity to rank with Kuwait, Libya, and Oman.<sup>4</sup>

China seeks to gain important geostrategic approaches to the Indian Ocean as a whole through Myanmar's ports and islands and to establish control over the Strait of Malacca, which plays a very important role in international strategy. The Chinese authorities are worried that the United States alone or in conjunction with Japan will be able to stop the flow of oil at any time. According to the American politician Joseph Bodansky, the former director of the U.S. House of Representatives Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, China is ready to risk a military conflict with regional states or even with the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The expansion of China military and economic position in Myanmar was made for strengthens the point of India and Southeast Asia and also for admittance to the Indian Ocean. This strategy was irrelevant for the U.S. interests. Unlike the Chinese approach, the American approach may be characterized by a moralistic desire to improve the economic and political situation in Myanmar. However, for some years Burma tried to coordinate a common policy between countries: The U.S., Europe, ASEAN<sup>6</sup>, India, and Japan. Such an approach would push the Myanmar state to accept the same standards of democracy and human rights accepted by its geopolitical partners.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 112 News <https://112.ua/mir/vooruzhenny-konflikt-v-myanmar-pochemu-buddisty-vytesnyayut-musulman-409451.html> 4 August, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Simonia Aida “The Un and Burma” p.94 Magazine “Southeast Asia: Actual Problems of Development”.

<sup>3</sup> Polpred News <https://polpred.com/news/?cnt=108&sector=8> (6 March 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Inosme.ru News <https://inosmi.ru/economic/20171222/241057172.html> (2 December 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Lebedeva Nina “Triangle India-Myanmar-China (PROBLEMS AND COMPROMISE OF INTERACTION)”, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising ten countries in Southeast Asia.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Bert “Burma, China and the USA” Pacific Affairs. Vol. 77. № 2 (Summer, 2004), p. 263.

After a series of political reforms, including the mass release of hundreds of political prisoners in 2012, the country quickly shed its pariah status in the international community, Myanmar's main foreign ally was China. However, the growing dependence on China was increasingly seen as a strategic threat to the then military rulers of Myanmar, and the decision to conduct liberal political reforms were intended to re-engage the West as opposed to China.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Myanmar is becoming for China what China used to be for the United States — a source of cheap labor. The Chinese are actively shifting unautomated manual labor, such as tailoring, on Myanmar's shoulders. Also, the landlocked Chinese provinces of Sichuan or Yunnan, thanks to the Burmese Corridor, receive additional opportunities to improve their economic situation.<sup>9</sup>

In my opinion that if the U.S. chose to impose tougher sanctions against the military leadership of Myanmar, this could push Myanmar even more into the arms of China. The US clearly wants to avoid this risk, while they are looking for regional allies to increase pressure on Beijing. Just look at some numbers in order to understand the threat of Sino-Myanmar economic and political convergence. From 1988 to 2015, the PRC invested in the country about 15.5 billion dollars, becoming its largest investor. Most of the money is invested in energy, transport, and port infrastructure. The turnover is growing rapidly. For example, imports from China in 2015 compared to 2005 increased from 614 million to 5.2 billion dollars. Export - from 274 million to 760 million.<sup>10</sup>

Viewed broadly, Myanmar is an important link in the “crusade” campaign of China against the American monopoly on globalization. Beijing wants to subordinate commodity and logistics supply chains of raw materials to the Chinese market and finished products to world markets.<sup>11</sup>

Chinese economic penetration of Burma has been consequential. Changes in the Burmese economy began in 1988 and especially intensified after interaction with various capitalist economies. Trading with China has significantly increased the percentage of Myanmar in the total market and has outpaced the percentage of China's interaction with other South Asian countries. Because of the large number of Chinese goods and people especially in northern Myanmar, Chinese colonization also led to an influx of Chinese people that increased housing prices and the cost of living. However, for the neighbors of China, such interaction was alarming, since it could be used for subversive geopolitical goals in relation to South and South-East Asia. Yet China can deny employing this as an active political strategy, since this is a normal consequence of economic development.<sup>12</sup>

For all its activity in Myanmar, for the United States, the geopolitical position was not a problem, so there was not even an attempt to change the position of China. The U.S. tiller was motivated by the nondemocratic nature of the regime's violation of human rights and heroin production. The United States also has to deal with the political pressure exerted by its own Congress, leading to a policy neither of completely investing in Myanmar nor in abandoning the status quo, but rather to a policy of trying to be morally correct. The problem of the current policy is not that it cannot withstand the influence of China, but that it cannot improve the human rights situation and push the country towards democratic processes that are recognized by international participants, and crucially by the United States.<sup>13</sup> However, sanctions by the United States in 1997 - a ban on new investments and in 2003 against imports into the United States and the freezing of Burmese assets in the United States led to the interest of other countries, especially in Asia, to replenish the care of the United States, which will have a small effect on Myanmar, but will have a detrimental effect on American firms.<sup>14</sup>

The effect of sanctions has a great effect on the poor, while the military elite is able to provide for themselves. The United States pays the most attention to cooperation with Burma and drug eradication. Beyond the United States, the local drug epidemic has drawn international attention China, which the drug epidemic China suffered costs associated with Chinese policy, for the sake of a ceasefire by minority groups was carried out to a large export of drugs to China, which later led to AIDS epidemic. The U.S. government calls Myanmar to fight drugs at a very limited level.<sup>15</sup> In this matter, I believe that in order to increase effectiveness in the fight against drugs, it is better to attract international efforts to increase the influence on various local actors.<sup>16</sup>

Economic sanctions against the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (RSM) by the US and the EU have been gradually introduced since 1997. In response to the repression applied to the opposition by the military regime, and repeated reports by the world media about violations of human rights in Myanmar. Later, Myanmar also excluded most European countries from similar national GSP systems.

In 2003, President B. Clinton signed the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act law, which suspended all export-import operations between Myanmar and the United States, and owned property in the US. Washington and, following them, the European Union canceled contracts for the supply of weapons and equipment for the needs of

<sup>8</sup> Lebedeva Nina “Triangle India-Myanmar-China (PROBLEMS AND COMPROMISE OF INTERACTION)”, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Lebedeva Nina “Triangle India-Myanmar-China (PROBLEMS AND COMPROMISE OF INTERACTION)”, p. 49-50.

<sup>10</sup> Simonia Aida “The Un and Burma” Magazine “Southeast Asia: Actual Problems of Development”, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Simonia Aida “The Un and Burma” Magazine “Southeast Asia: Actual Problems of Development”, p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> May Maung, “On the Road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the the Sinonization of Upper Burma” (May, 1994), pp.447-459.

Wayne Bert “Burma, China and the USA” Pacific Affairs Vol.77 No.2 (Summer, 2004), p. 266.

<sup>13</sup> US State Department interview, January, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Wayne Bert “Burma, China and the USA” Pacific Affairs Vol.77 No.2 (Summer, 2004), p. 277.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Bert “Burma, China and the USA” Pacific Affairs Vol.77 No.2 (Summer, 2004), p. 278.

<sup>16</sup> Wayne Bert “Burma, China and the USA” Pacific Affairs Vol.77 No.2 (Summer, 2004), pp. 277-278.

the army and police of Myanmar, stopped the purchase of precious metals and stones from this country. A ban was imposed on the exchange of delegations at the highest level.

Since 2010, a process of democratic reforms has been underway in the Republic. About 300 political prisoners were granted amnesty, the country's authorities reformed the legal framework in order to change its provisions that are contrary to human rights, and began to increase interaction with international organizations. In 2010, Myanmar held general democratic multiparty elections, the results of which formed a civilian government. Parliamentary seats were also awarded to the NLD opposition party, headed by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent about 20 years under house arrest during the rule of the military. Regular parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2015.

These measures have led to a gradual decrease in sanctions pressure from the US and the EU.

In July 2012, by decree of President Barack Obama, American companies again received the right to invest in the economy of Myanmar (the oil and gas industry, energy, tourism, food sector), as well as provide financial services to the country in the United States. The US State Treasury has lifted financial restrictions on activities in the Myanmar area of American NGOs implementing humanitarian projects. In 2012, the State Department also called for the restoration of full diplomatic relations with Myanmar. Visa bans were lifted for a number of RSM government officials and exchange of high-level delegations was allowed. In November 2013, a few days before Obama's visit to Myanmar, Washington lifted the embargo on the importation into the US of all categories of goods from Myanmar, with the exception of precious stones.

In 2013, the EU countries agreed to suspend the majority of sanctions against Myanmar. The restrictions previously imposed on about 500 officials and 800 PCM companies were lifted. In April 2013, the European Union also restored Myanmar in its Generalized System of Preferences. The United States has not yet returned Myanmar to the national GSP. US Secretary of Commerce P. Pritzker during his visit to RSM in June 2014, however, spoke about the possibility of the issue being considered by the Congress in August 2014. The most painful for Myanmar remains the US embargo on the export of arms and military equipment, which the Obama administration does not intend to remove.

The ban on the delivery of armaments, military equipment and special means for the police to the RSM from the European Union (this embargo was extended by the EU in April 2014 until 04/31/2014), as well as the import of precious stones from Myanmar to Europe, also remains in force. In June 2014, Barack Obama extended sanctions against individuals and organizations of Myanmar related to representatives of the old regime (mostly middle and high-level merchants who invest in the domestic market the bulk personal funds of former generals).

Because of China's participation in many areas in Myanmar, an image has been created that carries peace and stability. This creates a contrast with the activities of the US, which focused on the economic development of Myanmar and the transition of Myanmar to the progress of integration of Southeast Asia, so that the United States could, along with India and ASEAN, propose China to compete for Myanmar. It should develop a strategy for cooperation with Europe and the ASEAN so that in the future all these countries should cooperate to achieve their goals and not interfere with each other. The ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, have demonstrated their strong reluctance to intervene in the internal affairs of Myanmar. However, this is a very dubious policy of isolation in relation to Burma, in the past, there was the experience of this policy in relation to Cuba, and it did not work. In this situation, there is no single strategy in relation to Burma.<sup>17</sup>

There is an inseparable link between China and the military government, as there is a noticeable need for Myanmar in political economic and military support. However, possible changes could affect other areas of cooperation. For example, they would have influenced the gradual development of democracy but the lacks an independent civil society and a normal standard of living, there is also a lack of civic culture that would influence the current thinking of people and help bring new ideas.<sup>18</sup>

"Ernest Preeg<sup>19</sup> offers a "proactive flexible engagement", including making explicit what changes would need to be made in Myanmar to elicit a more favourable U.S. reaction, initiating high level diplomatic contacts with Myanmar, offering assistance in mediating between the government and the NLD<sup>20</sup>, and offers of specific monetary rewards for progress in certain areas".<sup>21</sup>

Today, it is obvious that various events of the past had little impact on the overall formulation of policies, which could in turn undermine the progress that makes towards developing economically and sociopolitically.

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<sup>17</sup> Jurgen Ruland "Burma Ten Years After the Uprising: the regional dimension".

<sup>18</sup> Larry Jagan "China gives Burma support, but also urges change", Inter Press Service (May 11, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Henry Preeg (1934-2017) is an American economist from Virginia.

<sup>20</sup> National League for Democracy, a political party in Myanmar (Burma).

<sup>21</sup> Ernest Preeg "Feeling Good or Doing Good" pp140-144, Wayne Bert "Burma, China and the USA" Pacific Affairs Vol. 77. № 2 (Summer, 2004), p. 282.

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