

Comments on paper by Swe Sett entitled

“Myanmar’s Rapprochement with the United States: Is it a Warning for China in Mainland Southeast Asia?”

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Swe Sett’s paper is timely, informative, and persuasive.

The author traces the domestic reforms undertaken by the new Burmese government of U Thein Sein beginning in March 2011 and their implications not only for Burma but also for China, India, the United States, and ASEAN.

He finds that Burma’s new orientation has become rapidly more internationalist, and more balanced, than it has been for two decades. This trend coincided with the adoption of the “pragmatic engagement” and “action-for-action” policies by the United States in 2009 and India’s “Look East” policy that accelerated with New Delhi’s rapprochement with the United States during the Bush Administration. It also coincided with a new phase of ASEAN activism in the ASEAN Plus Three, East Asian Summit, and Asia Europe Meeting initiatives. As a consequence of President U Thein Sein’s reforms, Burma can now play a full part in these developments and will, for example, chair the ASEAN summit in 2014 without fear of ostracism or economic sanction that it previously suffered.

The alleged loser in this process is China, which mentored Burma during its period of relative isolation, but now faces rivals for Yangon’s attention. As Swe Sett put it, China has lost its “monopolistic edge”. For example, the China Power Investment Corporation suffered the abrupt cancelation of the Myitstone hydropower project in Kachin State. The author does not specify whether China’s oil and gas pipeline link from Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal or the PLA-N base are jeopardised by Burma’s new policies, but one must speculate that their use by China as pressure points on the government of Burma will be stoutly resisted.

Is Burma joining the Western camp? Far from it, Swe Sett argues, pointing out that Burma’s adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence of 1955 is still a fundamental principle of its current “Independent and Active Foreign Policy”, and that Burma is now returning to a more authentic non-aligned posture after a period of leaning towards China.

While the return of Burma to cooperation with ASEAN, the United States, India, and the West in general does not herald a break with Beijing, it does add further evidence to the notion that the Asian states adjoining China are, like Burma, hedging against the rise of China by diversifying their diplomatic, economic, and security links. As Swe Sett says with reference to Burma, these initiatives are a “warning” to China that its hegemony will not come easily and can be reversed by bad behaviour such as its naval bullying in the East and South China Seas.

Some hypersensitive analysts in Beijing regard this hedging as hostile “encirclement” instigated by the United States. But the view from Southeast Asia is less dichotomised, appearing as mere prudence in adapting to recent geopolitical shifts that any rational government would undertake, and in no way denying the importance of opportunities that the rise of China offers.

Thus the challenge to the states of Asia, as exemplified by Burma, is to assure China of good neighbourliness while taking prudent measures to assure their sovereign independence. Skilful statecraft, guided by sensitivity and caution, will be required.