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Regional Outlook

CHINESE MILITARY BASES IN BURMA:
THE EXPLOSION OF A MYTH

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"Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth", Regional Outlook Paper No. 10, 2007

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Executive Summary

For 15 years, there has been a steady stream of newspaper stories, scholarly monographs and books that have referred *inter alia* to the existence of Chinese military bases in Burma. This apparent intrusion by China into the northern Indian Ocean has strongly influenced the strategic perceptions and policies of Burma's regional neighbours, notably India. Reports of a large signals intelligence collection station on Great Coco Island in the Andaman Sea, for example, and a naval base on Hainggyi Island in the Irrawaddy River delta, have been cited as evidence that Burma has become a client state of China. Other observers have seen the existence of such bases as proof of China's expansionist designs in the Indian Ocean region and its global ambitions. Few of these reports drew on hard evidence or gave verifiable sources to support their claims, but repeated denials of a Chinese military presence in Burma by Rangoon and Beijing were brushed aside.

As these reports proliferated, they were picked up by respected commentators and academics and given fresh life in serious studies of the regional strategic environment. Each time they were cited in books and reputable journals they gained credibility, and it was not long before the existence of Chinese bases in Burma was widely accepted as an established fact. In 2005, however, the Chairman of the Indian Defence Force's Chiefs of Staff Committee conceded that reports of a Chinese intelligence facility on one of Burma's offshore islands were incorrect. At the same time, he announced that there were no Chinese naval bases in Burma. There are a number of possible explanations for these statements, but this remarkable about-face, on two issues that have preoccupied Indian defence planners for more than a decade, must throw doubt on the claims of other "Chinese bases" in Burma. It also raises a number of serious questions about current analyses of China's relations with Burma, and of China's strategic interests in the northern Indian Ocean region.

It is possible to identify three schools of thought regarding China's relations with Burma. The "domination" school believes that Burma has become a pawn in China's strategic designs in the Asia-Pacific region, and is host to several Chinese military facilities. The "partnership" school sees a more balanced relationship developing between Beijing and Rangoon, but accepts that China has acquired bases in Burma as part of a long term strategy to establish a permanent military presence in the Indian Ocean. The "rejectionist" school, however, emphasises Burma's strong tradition of independence and Rangoon's continuing suspicions of Beijing. This school claims that, despite the conventional wisdom, Burma has been able to resist the enormous strategic weight of its larger, more powerful neighbour. Some members of this school argue that Burma has the whip hand in its relations with China, and has been able successfully to manipulate Burma's sensitive geostrategic position to considerable advantage. While acknowledging the close bilateral ties that have developed since 1988, they are sceptical of claims that China has any military bases in Burma.

Note on Nomenclature

After the Burmese armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) crushed a pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma's name (in English) was officially changed from its post-1974 form, the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma", back to the "Union of Burma", which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989 the military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the "Union of Myanmar". At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. These new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990.

In this study the better known names, for example Burma instead of Myanmar, Rangoon instead of Yangon, and Irrawaddy instead of Ayeyarwady, have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references have been cited as they were originally published.

On taking back direct political power in 1988, the Tatmadaw created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In November 1997 the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In October 2005 the newly-built town of Naypyidaw, near Pyinmana, was named the capital of Burma. For most of the period covered by this study, however, the seat of government was in Rangoon.

1. Introduction

For 15 years, there has been a steady stream of newspaper stories, scholarly monographs and books that have referred *inter alia* to the existence of Chinese military bases in Burma. This apparent intrusion by China into the north east Indian Ocean has strongly influenced the strategic perceptions and policies of Burma's regional neighbours, notably India, and heightened concerns about China's "expansionist" designs. Repeated denials of a Chinese presence in Burma by the Rangoon and Beijing governments have been brushed aside. In mid-2005, however, the Chairman of the Indian Defence Force's Chiefs of Staff Committee, who was also India's Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), stated that reports of a major Chinese intelligence collection station on one of Burma's islands in the Andaman Sea were incorrect. At the same time, he announced that there were no Chinese naval bases in Burma. This remarkable about-face, on two issues that have preoccupied Indian defence planners for more than a decade, must throw doubt on the claims of other "Chinese bases" in Burma. It also raises a number of important questions about current analyses of China's relations with Burma, and of China's long term strategic interests in the northern Indian Ocean region.

2. The Origins of a Myth

The first public reference to Chinese military bases in Burma was in August 1992, when a delegation from the Burmese Foreign Ministry visited New Delhi for discussions. At the time, the bilateral relationship between Burma and India was under considerable strain. Led at first by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian government had strongly criticised the Burmese armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) for crushing a massive pro-democracy uprising in 1988 and creating a new military government, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In 1990 the regime had ignored the results of a reasonably free and fair general election, which resulted in a landslide victory for Burma's opposition parties. The SLORC had also placed under house arrest its leading critic, 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. At a strategic level, India was concerned about Burma's rapidly developing relationship with China, to which the SLORC had turned for help after being ostracised by Burma's traditional friends and supporters. China had readily undertaken to expand official cross-border trade, provide loans and technical assistance to the struggling military government, and to help protect Rangoon's interests in multilateral forums like the United Nations.¹

More importantly, as far as India was concerned, China had agreed to support an ambitious military expansion and modernisation program launched by the SLORC in 1989.² By the time of the 1992 meeting in New Delhi, China had agreed to sell Burma arms and military equipment valued by some observers at more than US\$1.4 billion.³ The deals negotiated with Beijing covered fighter, ground attack and transport aircraft, tanks and armoured personnel carriers, naval vessels and a variety of towed and self-propelled artillery pieces. Trucks and a wide range of infantry equipment were also being provided. The first deliveries were made in 1990, and by the end of 1992 the SLORC had received at least one squadron of F-7 "Airguard" fighters and six *Hainan* class offshore patrol boats.⁴ While the trucks, multiple rocket launchers, radios, small arms and ammunition provided by the Chinese strengthened the regime's ability to quell civil unrest and counter the numerous insurgencies it was then facing, the other weapon systems being acquired were clearly designed for more conventional defence roles.⁵

During the 1992 bilateral discussions in New Delhi, Indian Foreign Minister J.N. Dixit told the Burmese delegation that India supported the restoration of democracy in Burma but wished to maintain normal diplomatic relations. In an obvious reference to the SLORC's burgeoning defence relationship with Beijing and its acquisitions of Chinese arms, he said that India posed no military threat to Burma. At the same time, India reportedly "made no secret about its ... knowledge of Burma's justification in providing construction materials to China for building a naval reconnaissance facility in a sensitive area near the Indian border" [sic].⁶ A news story about the 1992 meeting later stated that "India is claiming that China is considering the possibility of building a reconnaissance facility on an island in Burmese territorial waters".⁷ The facility was reportedly designed to give China easy access to, and help it monitor sea and air movements in, the Bay of Bengal. According to this story, the base would also allow Beijing to apply pressure against the countries of Southeast Asia and "restore" Chinese influence in the region.

In a related development, in early September 1992 *Jane's Defence Weekly* revealed that Burma had embarked on a program to upgrade its naval infrastructure. The program included construction of a new base at Hainggyi Island in the Irrawaddy River delta and development of existing naval bases at Sittwe (also known as Akyab), in Arakan State south of the Bangladesh border, and at Mergui, in Tenasserim Division near the border with Thailand. The report also briefly mentioned plans to upgrade the small Burmese naval station on Great Coco Island in the Andaman Sea, just north of India's Andaman and Nicobar Group.⁸ According to *Jane's*, there were persistent, but still unconfirmed, reports that China was providing technical assistance to Burma in the construction of the

Hainggyi Island facility. It was not clear at that stage whether China was involved in the other three development projects.

This story received a major boost on 17 September, with a report filed by the *Kyodo News Agency*. Citing un-named (but probably Indian) diplomatic sources in Beijing, Kyodo claimed that China was helping to build a naval base on Hainggyi Island, under a secret agreement with Burma's military government.⁹ The report further stated that, in return for this help, Burma would "give China precedence in its use of the base".¹⁰ Indian observers cited by Kyodo "confirmed" an increase in the frequency of visits to the area by Chinese naval vessels since the beginning of the year. The Kyodo story also stated that China was building a "radar facility" on Burma's Coco islands, in the Andaman Sea. The report was picked up by the *Reuter* news service the next day, and repeated in the US newspaper *The Estimate* the following week.¹¹ References to "Chinese bases" in Burma soon began to appear in a wide range of newspapers and magazines.

At first, news reports only mentioned the bases on Hainggyi Island and Great Coco Island. On 22 October 1992, for example, *The Estimate* published a follow-up story citing a "highly-placed, knowledgeable US military source", who stated that Chinese personnel had been seen on Hainggyi Island. The Great Coco Island facility was mentioned in the same context.¹² On 27 February 1993, Edward Neilan published a story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* citing Indian intelligence sources who confirmed that "China is helping Burma build naval bases in exchange for the use of a naval installation or at least a refuelling facility".¹³ It was not long, however, before there were references to other military bases supposedly being built by the Chinese in Burma. There were reports, for example, that a large new naval base was planned for Bassein in the Irrawaddy delta, upriver from Hainggyi Island. Other facilities were mentioned, including some described as "monitoring stations" or "listening posts".¹⁴

When questioned about the Kyodo report, the Chinese Foreign Ministry flatly denied that it was building any military bases in Burma. When the SLORC was asked to comment, it initially declined either to confirm or deny the report.¹⁵ In December 1992, however, a senior member of Burma's Foreign Ministry conceded that Burma was engaged in a naval expansion program. He told reporters that:

a naval build-up was necessary because of increased poaching by Thai fishing boats in Burmese waters. The government sporadically battles Karen ethnic rebels in the Irrawaddy delta and wanted to block any attempts by the Karen, whose main forces are along the Thai border, from linking up with Muslim rebels in Arakan state in the west.¹⁶

The official denied that China was involved in the naval expansion program. In 1994, following a visit to New Delhi by Burma's then powerful intelligence chief, Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, a SLORC spokesman stated that Burma had no military pact with any country, had never permitted Chinese bases on its soil, and would never provide replenishment facilities for foreign forces. Khin Nyunt had given the same message to senior Indian officials during his visit.¹⁷

These assurances, however, failed to settle Indian concerns. New Delhi claimed it had "independent confirmation" of developments on the two islands. The *Times of India* stated that Indian defence officials were "deeply concerned", as a Chinese military presence in Burma would remove the buffer which India had traditionally enjoyed on its eastern border.¹⁸ Also, according to one former Indian ambassador to Burma:

The reported Chinese control over Myanmar and its establishment of a naval base off Andaman and Nicobar island poses "danger" not only to the North-Eastern region but to the entire country as well.¹⁹

Indian defence planners had long felt secure in the knowledge that neutral Burma's poorly equipped armed forces posed no threat to its eastern flank, leaving India free to focus its attention on Pakistan in the west. Reports of Chinese naval and intelligence facilities in Burma, however, raised the spectre of an increased Chinese military presence in the Indian Ocean and the encirclement of India by Chinese client states. This was considered "an ominous development".²⁰ India was also conscious of its vulnerable land border with Burma, and viewed with concern Chinese projects aimed at improving communications between Yunnan and northern Burma. Suddenly, India seemed to be facing a much more dangerous strategic environment.

Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were also said to be "seriously concerned" about developments in the north east Indian Ocean.²¹ Their suspicions of China's long term strategic aims had been heightened by Beijing's aggressive pursuit of its territorial claims in the South China Sea. In 1988, fighting broke out when Vietnam attempted to stop construction of a Chinese facility on Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratley Islands. Three Vietnamese ships were sunk in the battle. In 1990, there were indications that China had constructed a military airfield on Woody Island in the Paracel Group, also believed to be the site of a major intelligence collection station.²² Stories about Chinese monitoring facilities in the Indian Ocean, and Chinese attempts to gain access to Burmese naval bases, seemed to fit the same pattern. The bases in Burma were uncomfortably close to the strategically vital Malacca Strait and to sea lines of communication (SLOC) from the Middle Eastern oil fields.

Regional unease increased as news reports of Chinese bases in Burma became more frequent, and more alarmist. Of particular concern to India was the "monitoring facility" apparently being built on Great Coco Island.

3. The Great Coco Island “Base”

From their first appearance, reports of a base on Great Coco Island were marked by inconsistency and a lack of clarity. The site was variously referred to as a “military facility”, “naval base”, “radar station” or “naval reconnaissance facility”. There was also uncertainty whether the old Burmese naval station on the island was being upgraded or a completely new base was being constructed.²³ China’s role was either to carry out the construction work, possibly using materials provided by Burma, to help the Burmese do the building, or simply to provide “technical help” with the new equipment being installed.²⁴ According to one Indian press report in May 1993, the Great Coco Island base “would require several years to become operational”, and another published in July 2003 described it as being “on the verge of completion”. Other news reports had the base “ready for use” by mid-1994.²⁵ Given its suspected role, however, it was immediately seen by India as a strategic threat. These fears were encouraged by later press reports that dramatically expanded on the size and capabilities of the Great Coco Island base, and its importance to both Burma and China.

In June 1994, for example, the Japanese-language *Sankei Shimbun* claimed that, in addition to constructing a radar station on Great Coco Island, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) had also installed a radar on nearby Little Coco Island. The smaller island was across Alexandra Channel to the south, and thus even closer to India’s North Andaman Island. Beijing had reportedly “leased” both Burmese islands from the SLORC.²⁶ According to the same news story, the intelligence collected by these facilities was to be shared with the Burmese, to help in “strengthening future cooperative military ties between the two countries”.²⁷ The source of all these claims was given as a former senior official of Japan’s Defence Agency, in turn quoting “a British military intelligence official”.²⁸

It was not long before the simple “radar facility” on Great Coco Island had been transmogrified by the news media and various commentators into a large, dedicated Chinese signals intelligence (SIGINT) collection station. By the mid-1990s, the “radar” had become “a large radar”, “high-tech surveillance radars” or multiple “radar sites”.²⁹ Newspapers, current affairs magazines and websites also began referring to a “45–50 metre”, “50-metre”, or “150 foot”, antenna tower on the island. The existence of this structure, construction of which was supposed to have begun in 1992, was reportedly confirmed by “foreign sources”, including US intelligence satellites.³⁰ There were claims of “other electronic facilities”, including sophisticated telecommunications jamming equipment, which together formed “a comprehensive SIGINT collection facility” or “modern maritime reconnaissance and electronic intelligence system” on the island.³¹ The base was also said to have “a powerful telescope” which had the capability of “actually sighting” the northern part of India’s Andaman Islands, just 18 kilometres away.³²

At first, the main purpose of the Great Coco Island facility was reportedly to monitor regional military activities, especially air and naval movements in the Bay of Bengal.³³ Before long, however, journalists and academics began claiming that the base was also established to conduct surveillance of India’s strategically important tri-service facilities at Port Blair, on South Andaman Island. Some suggested that the Chinese, and their Burmese allies, were monitoring submarine activity around the Indian Navy’s base at Visakhapatnam (Vizag) in eastern India.³⁴ In an elaboration of this theme, a number of commentators claimed that the Great Coco Island base was built and equipped by the Chinese to analyse telemetry from Indian missile tests. These included flights by ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles over the Bay of Bengal from ranges in eastern India.³⁵ The electronic intelligence gathered, it was suggested, was shared with Pakistan to help it develop counter-measures against new Indian weapon systems.³⁶

China’s physical presence on Great Coco Island was also the subject of a range of views. According to “intelligence sources” cited by the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in December

1993, it was initially limited to PLA instructors and technicians. It was believed, however, that the new equipment would be operated at least in part by Chinese specialists.³⁷ Asked about the Great Coco Island base in 2004, Desmond Ball told *The Irrawaddy* magazine that there was:

a continuous Chinese presence at that station which has not gone away in the last decade or so since that station has been operating. It would be operated primarily by Burmese. I can't see the Burmese government actually allowing China, in a sense, to have its own listening station there. So it's probably more accurately characterised as a joint listening station with both Burmese and Chinese technicians working together at Great Coco.³⁸

The opposition Democratic Voice of Burma has stated that the Great Coco Island base is manned by "some Chinese military experts alongside several hundred Burmese navy officers".³⁹ The Washington-based Federation of American Scientists (FAS) has claimed on its website that, since 1994, the facility has been operated by up to 70 Chinese naval technicians, in partnership with the Burmese armed forces.⁴⁰

It was widely assumed that China had assigned military personnel to the Great Coco Island base so that its intelligence agencies could directly monitor and report on developments in the north east Indian Ocean. There were also doubts, however, about the ability of the Burmese armed forces to operate and maintain the sophisticated electronic equipment reportedly provided by China. As Renaud Egretteau has written:

Most observers and some military analysts agree with the assessment that the electronic antenna installed on Greater Coco Island can only be used by Chinese engineers who have the knowhow to operate this modern surveillance technology and that the Tatmadaw was not in a position to purchase and use this sophisticated monitoring and espionage equipment by itself. The management of "SIGINT" (Signals Intelligence) calls for extensive knowhow that the Burmese did not have in the early nineties.⁴¹

Most people writing on this subject accepted, however, that the Burmese armed forces could learn how to use any modern equipment installed on Great Coco Island, and by the late 1990s was probably doing so.⁴²

As the reported size, sophistication and importance of the Great Coco Island base grew, so it assumed increasing prominence in strategic analyses of the region, and of China's wider ambitions. The FAS, for example, has described the base as "the most important Chinese electronic intelligence installation in Burma".⁴³ Desmond Ball has gone further and described it as "the most important listening station that China operates outside of China itself".⁴⁴ He has linked it to a string of Chinese SIGINT stations throughout the Asia-Pacific region, all designed to monitor naval and civil maritime movements, including through the South China Sea and Malacca Straits. More importantly, the base has been mentioned in almost every study of the Indian Ocean strategic environment published since 1992. Most analysts have interpreted the base as evidence of China's intentions to exert its influence in the region, and even globally.⁴⁵

Throughout this entire period, Burma consistently denied that it had permitted China to establish any bases on its soil. The military government (known since 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) conceded that China was helping Burma to upgrade its civil infrastructure, but repeatedly stated that there was no Chinese facility on Great Coco Island. Beijing too issued a number of formal denials, describing the story as a collection of unsubstantiated rumours. The Burmese government's reputation was so poor, however, that its statements on the subject were simply not believed. China's denials were also dismissed. Based largely on the number of reports published and the detailed information they purported to contain, the weight of evidence seemed overwhelming.

Indeed, so persistent were Indian claims of Chinese bases in Burma that they threatened to harm the relationship between Rangoon and New Delhi that began to gather pace in the late 1990s.

Due largely to concerns about China's growing influence, in 1993 India reversed its hard-line policy towards Burma and started making efforts to restore bilateral ties.⁴⁶ At first, New Delhi made little progress, but the Rangoon regime came to see India as a useful counter-weight to China. Following the opening of Customs posts on their mutual border, the two governments discussed the management of Indian insurgents based in Burma. There were even a number of loosely coordinated military operations against Naga, Manipuri and Assamese groups.⁴⁷ Defence relations improved rapidly, and there were several exchanges of senior officials. Since 2000 there have been reliable reports that India has sold Burma armoured vehicles, artillery pieces, air defence weapons, surveillance aircraft and infantry equipment. Also, a number of bilateral defence agreements have been negotiated.⁴⁸ Indian naval vessels have paid port calls to Rangoon and, in an unprecedented development, a Burma Navy corvette has exercised with other navies in Indian waters.

Burma and India had a number of reasons for restoring and further developing the close bilateral relations that existed before 1988. It is unlikely they would have progressed so far, or so quickly, however, had the SPDC not been able to settle Indian fears about the existence of a Chinese SIGINT station on Great Coco Island.

In 1999, Khin Nyunt, at that stage still Burma's intelligence chief, personally invited the Indian Defence Attache in Rangoon to visit any place in the country where the Attache believed Chinese forces were stationed, to verify the military regime's denials of a Chinese presence.⁴⁹ This invitation does not seem to have been taken up but, in a later attempt to meet New Delhi's concerns, the regime apparently permitted the Indian Air Force to conduct a surveillance flight over Great Coco Island, to see for itself that there was no Chinese base there.⁵⁰ It is difficult to imagine such a flight being permitted if the SPDC had anything important to hide. In August 2005, India's CNS revealed that, during a visit to India in February, his Burmese counterpart had invited the Indian navy to make occasional visits to the island. While hinting at a possible visit in the future, Admiral Arun Prakash also said that he believed the Burmese when they told him there was no Chinese presence in the Coco Islands.⁵¹

Finally, in October 2005, the CNS stated categorically that India had "firm information that there is no listening post, radar or surveillance station belonging to the Chinese on Coco Islands".⁵² It was an astonishing reversal of position, on a subject that had preoccupied Indian defence planners for more than a decade.

There is little doubt that Great Coco Island has grown in importance in the regime's strategic thinking. Before 1988 it only hosted a small naval station and penal colony, but since then the facilities there have been upgraded. The airstrip appears to have been extended, probably to cater for the larger and faster aircraft acquired by Burma over the past 15 years. According to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, an 85-metre jetty was built in 2002 at a cost of 70 million kyat (US\$11 million).⁵³ This would allow larger naval and supply vessels to call at the island. These improvements, together with the expansion of Burma's navy and air force, permit a higher level of military activity in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal. Such deployments are most likely aimed at policing Burma's extensive territorial waters, guarding against threats to offshore natural gas extraction facilities, and preventing such activities as arms smuggling and fish poaching.⁵⁴ It is possible, however, that they are also part of wider strategic calculations, including defence against an invasion. The regime has long been afraid that a multinational force might attempt a sea-borne attack against Burma to restore democratic rule. While isolated and highly vulnerable, in such a scenario Great Coco Island could play a role.⁵⁵ Burma has also demonstrated concerns about its closer neighbours, which may have helped prompt the construction of intelligence collection facilities of some kind.

It is conceivable that a large Chinese SIGINT base was built on the island in the early 1990s, but later dismantled.⁵⁶ It is possible too that there is a large SIGINT collection station on the island, now operated by the Burmese armed forces with occasional technical help from China. This would still permit the Indian CNS truthfully to state that there are no “Chinese” facilities there. A more likely explanation for India’s remarkable about face, however, is that most of the claims made about the facility over the past 15 years have lacked any firm foundation and there never was a large SIGINT station on Great Coco Island. This would not rule out the presence of a radar, installed with Chinese help and operated by the Burmese armed forces. In addition to its routine functions, this equipment may also perform a modest intelligence collection role.⁵⁷ The Burma Navy base on the island would doubtless also possess radio equipment to maintain contact with the Burmese mainland. It would not be surprising if this equipment was supplemented by additional sensors and used to monitor sea and air movements in the area, or to listen in to the radio traffic of neighbouring countries.

All these assessments, however, must remain tentative until hard, verifiable information about the military facilities on Great Coco Island becomes available.

4. The Hainggyi Island “Base”

Ever since the site was first mentioned in 1992, concerns about a large SIGINT collection station on Great Coco Island have been magnified by the links repeatedly made to other reported “Chinese bases” in Burma, in particular the facility built on Hainggyi Island. This base has not attracted the same level of attention from journalists and academics, but it has not been immune from confusion and a few startling claims. Initial descriptions of the Hainggyi project all agreed that it was a new base, being built on a small island at the mouth of the Bassein River in the Irrawaddy delta, with Chinese financial or technical assistance.⁵⁸ Beyond that, however, reports differed on its size, role, importance to Beijing and wider strategic implications.

In 1992, the SLORC revealed that the Hainggyi Island base was part of a naval expansion program, introduced by the regime after a comprehensive assessment of Burma’s strategic vulnerabilities.⁵⁹ It was variously described as a “naval facility”, “naval station” or “regional naval headquarters”. All these names appear correct, as the operational naval base on the island also functions as the headquarters of the Panmawaddy Naval Region Command.⁶⁰ There were both practical and military reasons to construct the new base. The river port of Bassein, where the Burma Navy maintained modest facilities before 1988, suffered from heavy silting. Also, the Hainggyi Island base filled a gap in the Tatmadaw’s capabilities by supporting army deployments to the delta and naval patrols along the nearby coast. The need for such support had increased, as the regime made a concerted effort to counter the insurgencies then being conducted in that part of Burma by ethnic and religious groups.

In late 1991, the regime had been surprised by a fresh outbreak of guerrilla warfare in the Irrawaddy delta, led by about 1,000 insurgents from the Karen National Liberation Army. The fighting was fierce and a number of population centres, like Bassein and Bogale, were affected. These towns were less than 150 kilometres from the capital.⁶¹ Tensions had also increased in nearby Arakan State, where a campaign by the Burmese armed forces was driving thousands of Muslim Rohingyas across the border into Bangladesh. Partly in response, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation tried to obtain additional arms from foreign suppliers in order to mount a more effective resistance.⁶² The SLORC feared that all these insurgent groups might try to coordinate their operations. Even worse for the regime, the Karens could link up with dissidents in Rangoon in an attempt to spark another popular uprising, like the one that had shaken the foundations of the military government in 1988.

A few early news stories also described the Hainggyi Island base as a “deep water port”, capable of acting as an outlet to the Indian Ocean for exports from landlocked southern China. These claims seem to have been based on the rapid growth of bilateral trade between China and Burma, following the SLORC’s 1989 decisions to introduce an “open door” economic policy and relax controls along Burma’s northern border.⁶³ A “Burma Road” to the south had long been sought by successive regimes in Beijing.⁶⁴ China had already undertaken the large-scale development of towns and transport infrastructure in southern Yunnan and after 1989 began upgrading the road from Ruili on the China–Burma border to Bhamo in Burma’s Kachin State. It was hoped that Chinese goods could be moved by road through northern Burmese towns like Muse and Lashio to Mandalay and Rangoon. Another possible route was by barge down the Irrawaddy River from Bhamo to Minhla, and thence by road across the Arakan Yoma mountains to An and a new deep water port at Kyaukpyu on Burma’s west coast.⁶⁵

There have also been recurring claims of a “maritime surveillance facility” on Hainggyi Island. Some references to “surveillance” activity seem to be allusions to the Burma Navy’s routine patrols along the nearby coastline and its efforts to monitor riverine traffic in the

Irrawaddy delta. The facility has, however, been described as a Chinese “radar base” or, more often, a Burmese intelligence collection station fitted out with Chinese electronic equipment.⁶⁶ It has also been included in lists of places in Burma where Chinese military personnel were said to be posted, either temporarily or on long term assignments.⁶⁷ All these explanations for the Hainggyi Island base, however, have been overshadowed by speculation about China’s wider relationship with Burma, and the potential benefits of military bases there to a rising China with expansionist tendencies. Several reports dealing with these issues have highlighted the potential value of the Hainggyi Island facility in providing refuelling and maintenance facilities for visiting Chinese warships, including “submarines on extended voyages in the Indian Ocean”.⁶⁸

Few journalists or academics, however, have yet matched the description of the Hainggyi Island base published in an Indian defence publication in 1993. According to *SP’s Military Yearbook*, the base at “Huang Thai” (apparently the Chinese version of “Hainggyi”) was a massive tri-service facility known to the Chinese as O-13:

Its size will definitely exceed 1000 acres in terms of area. The inter-services base encompasses the features of a large air base to support all types of operations including second echelon repairs, support infrastructure for at least a corps size ground troops formation and a large naval base. The naval base incorporates full infrastructure for nuclear submarines, and some types of ships.⁶⁹

The *Yearbook* suggested that Chinese JH-7 “Flounder” fighter bombers or Su-27 “Flanker” multi-role combat aircraft would probably be based at Hainggyi Island, as would some of China’s *Xia*-class nuclear submarines, with their nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. The author of this extraordinary feat of imagination also stated that the Chinese military forces based on the island “could be bolstered at short notice”.⁷⁰

Further in this vein, *SP’s Yearbook* claimed that the primary purpose of the Hainggyi Island base was to “exercise an indirect control over the ASEAN region and the international shipping lanes”.⁷¹ It would “allow China to access all of the Indian Ocean, and aggressively pursue its economic policies dictated through the barrel of a gun”.⁷² In return for access to the base, and to the intelligence facilities on Great Coco Island, China was reported to have eased its assistance to Burmese insurgents and supplied arms and equipment to the SLORC valued at almost \$2.5 billion.⁷³ According to the *Yearbook*, these moves not only strengthened the military government in Rangoon but also made it a willing actor in Beijing’s master plan to encircle India with client states in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Burma. The most surprising aspect of the *Yearbook’s* analysis, however, was that it failed to attract any serious criticism.

Over the past 15 years, the Burma Navy station on Hainggyi Island, and China’s reported access to it, has featured in numerous strategic analyses of the Asia–Pacific region. Like the purported Great Coco Island base, it has been cited as evidence of a drive by Beijing to encircle India with compliant states prepared to permit access to PLA naval vessels, either now or in the years to come.⁷⁴ These vessels were reputed to be increasingly frequent visitors to the northern Indian Ocean. There were also believed to be wider strategic aims:

The Chinese actions are not aimed at India alone, but are part of a regional strategy ... China wants access to the Indian Ocean and surrounding waters because the region provides a key oil supply route to east Asia – and area that is booming economically and will play a key role in the 21st century.⁷⁵

According to several analysts, the Chinese base on Hainggyi Island was part of “an overall strategic game plan”, which could lead to a conflict of interests and possible future confrontation between China and India.⁷⁶ This “plan” was said also to involve other Chinese bases in Burma.

5. Other Chinese “Bases” in Burma

Since stories began to appear in the news media about the “bases” on Great Coco and Hainggyi islands, a number of other sites in Burma have been named, where Chinese facilities have reportedly been constructed or where Chinese military personnel were believed to be working. Some of these sites were described as “naval bases”, while others were identified as intelligence collection stations.

Naval Bases

In early 1993, *The Economist* sensibly reported that:

The port of Bassein, close to the capital Yangon (Rangoon) is being developed, probably with Chinese assistance. Myanmar is also thought to have accepted Chinese help in building naval facilities on nearby Hainggyi Island, as well as naval shelters and lighthouses on islands near the borders with Bangladesh and Thailand. The extent of Chinese involvement is not clear, but the possibility of China acquiring rights to use them is troubling other countries in the region.⁷⁷

The projects to upgrade Burma’s naval facilities at Sittwe and Mergui, first noted by *Jane’s Defence Weekly* in 1992, were soon linked with China, which was also helping to develop the port of Kyaukpyu on the Arakan coast. One Thai newspaper has referred to “the town of One Pagoda Point, located near the mouth of the Irrawaddy” that was “emerging as the main logistic point for the Chinese”.⁷⁸ As with the construction of the Hainggyi Island base, all these projects were portrayed as part of an effort by China to modernise and gain access to Burma’s naval bases, with a view to supporting future deployments by the PLA Navy (PLAN). From there it was only a short leap to describing them as Chinese naval bases.⁷⁹

Despite the repeated denials of the Burmese and Chinese governments, claims of Chinese “naval bases”, or “replenishment facilities” in Burma persisted.⁸⁰ According to one report in mid-1994, “An agreement has reportedly been reached with Burma that will allow PLA naval vessels ‘facilities’ at Burmese ports”.⁸¹ By the late 1990s, the existence of “Chinese bases” in Burma, or at least arrangements for the Chinese navy to use Burmese ports for logistical support, was an accepted part of strategic analyses of the region. Predictably, Indian commentators and academics cited these bases as another part of China’s grand strategy to threaten India’s eastern flank. Other analysts saw the bases as part of China’s plans to dominate the Malacca Strait and protect its vital SLOCs through the northern Indian Ocean.⁸²

The latter interpretation was given some high profile support in 2005. In January that year, Bill Gertz published a story in the *Washington Times* describing China’s attempts to establish a series of bases along the SLOCs from the Middle East “to project its power overseas and protect its oil shipments”.⁸³ Chinese-built naval bases in Burma were seen as an integral part of this “string of pearls”, which would eventually include ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Cambodia and the South China Sea. The *Washington Times* story was said to be based on “a previously undisclosed report”, entitled *Energy Futures in Asia*, prepared for United States (US) Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld by a firm of private consultants and sponsored by the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment. The Gertz story received a boost in 2006 with the publication of a paper by the US Army War College on the “string of pearls” strategy. It named the upgraded port at Sittwe as one of China’s “pearls”, capable of supporting deployed PLAN vessels.⁸⁴

These two reports, however, were contradicted by a statement from the Indian CNS in October 2005 that “to the best of our knowledge there are no Chinese bases in Myanmar”.

Questioned by reporters at the time, Admiral Prakash also said that the Chinese had “not acquired any bases recently”.⁸⁵ Even allowing for India’s wish not to offend its new friends in Burma, these observations by India’s most senior serving military officer turned on its head more than a decade of press reporting and commentary about the Chinese presence in Burma. They also undercut the widely published view that China was seeking bases in Burma in order to dominate Indian Ocean sea lanes and threaten India.

Admiral Prakash had already ruled out any Chinese intelligence base on Great Coco Island, but he seemed to allow for the possibility that there may be some smaller facilities around Burma’s coastline that were built, and possibly still maintained, with Chinese assistance.

Intelligence Collection Stations

Once again, reporting about these smaller facilities is marked by inconsistencies and a lack of verifiable information. For example, in 1993 it was claimed in an Australian newspaper that Chinese technicians had assisted with the construction of a number of “electronic surveillance stations along Burma’s Bay of Bengal coastline”, which would “allow the People’s Liberation Army to monitor shipping in the region, particularly traffic between the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca”.⁸⁶ Writing in the *International Defense Review* a year later, Bertil Lintner stated that, according to “recent intelligence reports”, China was pressing Burma to allow them access to a number of major, strategically located “listening islands” along Burma’s coast.⁸⁷ In 1998 Desmond Ball referred to “six or seven smaller listening stations which the Chinese have provided down the Burmese coastline, on the Andaman Sea side”.⁸⁸ He later assessed that, by 1997, “the joint Chinese–Burmese SIGINT facilities would have been operational for three or four years”.⁸⁹

Published lists of these sites vary considerably but, in addition to Great Coco Island and Hainggyi Island, they usually include Zadetkyi Kyun (or St Matthew’s Island), near Kawthaung at the northern end of the Malacca Strait.⁹⁰ Bertil Lintner has also identified a station at Man-aung (or Cheduba) on Cheduba Island, off the coast of Arakan State. Other sites named from time to time are Ramree Island, also near the Arakan coast, and the naval base at Monkey Point, on the Rangoon River. There was reportedly a Chinese-built radar station on Saganthit (or Sellore) Island near Mergui in south-eastern Burma which was sometimes described as a “Chinese listening post”.⁹¹ According to a story by the journalists Bruce Hawke and Ethan Casey, of the first four “bases” listed above, the one on Zadetkyi Kyun (and not the more widely publicised Great Coco Island site) was the largest facility and “has the direct satellite link with China”.⁹²

Other sites of possible interest to the Chinese included Kadan Island near Mergui, and Heinze Island north of Tavoy. It has been suggested that China wished to build new facilities or improve old Burmese facilities on these islands, with a view to conducting SIGINT operations against other regional countries.⁹³

There has also been considerable speculation about the level of past and present involvement by China at all these facilities. In the 1990s, most observers saw the Chinese as playing a direct and major role, but this view has been modified over the past few years. As already noted in connection with the Great Coco Island base, recent descriptions of the Chinese presence in Burma refer to a mix of assignments. For example, Desmond Ball has claimed:

In the case of the smaller listening stations, they are entirely operated by Burmese military and in particular by the Burmese Navy. There are only Chinese at those stations whenever they are providing new equipment or repairing equipment or providing some technical assistance. But basically they are Burmese stations.⁹⁴

Elsewhere, he has stated that “Chinese personnel have evidently been stationed at these sites, but probably in technical support and intelligence liaison roles”.⁹⁵ In any case, as Ball

and others have pointed out, by the turn of the century “the cooperative arrangements and working relationships should have matured”.⁹⁶

During a visit to Burma in December 1994, Chinese Premier Li Peng emphasised the close relationship between the two countries but gave his personal guarantee that no Chinese instructors were operating in Burma.⁹⁷ Strictly speaking, this may have been true, but it would not rule out periodic visits by Chinese technicians and specialists to help the Burmese with the arms and equipment acquired from China since 1989. Indeed, it was claimed in 1998 that, since the early 1990s, there had been around 400 Chinese technical and training staff in Burma at any time.⁹⁸ According to Bertil Lintner, Chinese technicians have been seen at the Monkey Point naval base in Rangoon, and the Kyaikkami naval facility south of Moulmein.⁹⁹ The American Foreign Policy Council has stated that there are “Chinese operations” at “Mergui Kyunsu naval base”, Tannintharyi naval headquarters, Sittwe naval base and Irrawaddy regional naval headquarters.¹⁰⁰ It is not clear, however, what these “operations” are.

To help support all these claims, observers have cited reports of bilateral military agreements between China and Burma. The most recent appears to have been negotiated in October 1996, and finalised in early 1997. According to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the agreement specifically covers the exchange of intelligence on “threats to their respective countries” and Chinese training for Burmese personnel in “signals intelligence in coastal areas”.¹⁰¹

Despite all the reports published on the subject over the past 15 years, it is not possible to reach a definitive judgement about the existence of small “listening stations” in Burma, or their role. Even if some have been built, either by the Burmese alone or with Chinese assistance, they could simply be the kind of coastal surveillance facilities operated by most countries, for legitimate security and navigational reasons. The level of Chinese involvement in running and maintaining these facilities, and the extent to which China’s intelligence services might benefit from their operations, is impossible to determine with any confidence. It is not even clear whether all these facilities are formally the responsibility of the Burma Navy or the much larger and more powerful Burma Army. Indeed, given the many questions now hanging over the entire 15-year history of reporting on China’s presence in Burma, it would seem prudent not to draw any firm conclusions about these smaller facilities until more reliable evidence becomes available.

6. Analytical Issues

As news reports of Chinese bases and intelligence collection stations in Burma proliferated during the mid-1990s, they were picked up by a number of respected commentators and academics, and given fresh life in serious studies of the regional strategic environment. Each time the reports were cited in books and reputable journals they gained credibility, and the existence of Chinese bases or “listening posts” on Great Coco Island, Haingyi Island and elsewhere in Burma became widely accepted as an established fact. Yet the statements by the Indian CNS in 2005 raise a number of questions, not only about the credibility of the original press reports but also about much of the commentary and analysis which has followed.

There was a certain logic to the initial reports about the Great Coco Island SIGINT station and other “listening posts” in Burma. China was already a major power in the Asia–Pacific region, with a booming economy, enormous political influence and expanding armed forces. China’s defence ties with Burma developed rapidly after 1988, giving Beijing new opportunities to protect its strategic interests in the south. China’s historical concerns about India, and its interest in protecting its SLOCs from the Middle East, would have argued for an intelligence collection effort in the northern Indian Ocean region, even if Beijing did not enjoy such close relations with Rangoon. Beijing was also engaged in an aggressive campaign to build facilities on small islands in the South China Sea. Viewed from this perspective, reports of a Chinese station on one of Burma’s offshore islands and other SIGINT collection sites, operated either independently or jointly with the Burmese armed forces, were not surprising.

This view was strengthened in August 1994, when the Indian Coast Guard apprehended three boats “fishing” close to the Andaman Islands, where the Indian navy had established a new Naval Command, partly in response to China’s increased influence in Burma. According to news reports at the time, the trawlers were flying Burmese flags, but the 55 crew members were Chinese. There was no fishing equipment on board the boats, only radio-communication and depth-sounding equipment. The crews were released after the intervention of the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, but the incident seemed a timely reminder of China’s strategic interests in the north east Indian Ocean, and its readiness to collect electronic intelligence in the region.¹⁰² India’s fears of repeated ventures of this kind increased in March 1997, when Rangoon signed a 30-year fishing agreement with Beijing, which permitted 225 Chinese fishing boats to operate freely in Burmese waters.¹⁰³

By the same reasoning, a case could be made that China needed to secure naval facilities in Burma. Whether or not Beijing was “expansionist”, or had aggressive designs on India, was open to debate. China’s dependence on the Middle Eastern oil fields, however, and the vulnerability of its SLOCs were widely recognised. If China ever hoped to protect these routes by sending naval vessels into the Indian Ocean, it would clearly benefit from access to ports in friendly countries. These need not be full naval bases, or even require the presence of large numbers of Chinese military personnel on shore. For China’s purposes, it would be sufficient to have guaranteed access to ports in places like Burma for re-fuelling and other forms of logistical support. Any improvements made to Burma’s maritime infrastructure, to assist in the replenishment of PLA naval vessels, would also be of benefit to China in the event that an overland trade route was established from Yunnan to an outlet on the Burmese coast.

For other reasons too, the journalists and scholars who have written about this subject could be forgiven for thinking they were on solid ground. Until last year, senior members of the Indian security establishment were clearly convinced that the Chinese had established a major presence in Burma.¹⁰⁴ In Rangoon and New Delhi, and probably in Beijing as well, Indian officials made repeated representations about this perceived challenge to India’s

national interests. In 1998 George Fernandes, then India's Defence Minister, caused a public furore when he named China as India's "number one" threat, and publicly accused China of helping Burma install surveillance and communications equipment on Great Coco Island. Some reports quoted the Minister as also saying that there were plans to turn the facility into a major naval base, and that Hainggyi Island was already a "joint Sino-Burmese base".¹⁰⁵ It seemed highly unlikely that such a senior government figure, in such a sensitive portfolio, could be mistaken about an issue of such importance.¹⁰⁶

Over the past 15 years, however, a number of warnings have been sounded, suggesting that many news stories about China's presence in Burma should not be taken at face value, even if they seemed to quote authoritative sources. As one Burma-watcher wrote in *Jane's Intelligence Review* in 1995:

For all the reports on this subject which have appeared over the past two years, few appear to draw on firm evidence or can be traced to reliable sources. Many seem to be based on rumours, speculation or even deliberate misinformation. There has also been considerable confusion over particular places, developments and military capabilities, which has then been recycled by journalists and academics in subsequent articles.¹⁰⁷

Articles published in 1997 and 1998 also urged caution.¹⁰⁸ A few analysts pointed out Rangoon's extreme sensitivity to any perceived challenges to Burma's sovereignty, the military regime's strong sense of independence and its continuing suspicions of China's long-term aims in the region. There were also practical objections to some of the claims made, and a number of related issues that demanded more careful research.¹⁰⁹

From the beginning, there was a notable absence of hard evidence for the existence of Chinese bases in Burma. Few of the journalists and commentators writing on this subject gave specific sources to support their claims. Of those that did, most quoted other newspaper stories or members of Burma's opposition movement.¹¹⁰ A few authors cited "intelligence" contacts, but these were always un-named and their claims could never be verified. For example, there were references to satellite imagery, suggesting that at least one great power had confirmed the existence of the Chinese bases, using national technical means.¹¹¹ One Indian strategic analyst went so far as to claim that:

specific to the Cocos islands there has been a fair amount of evidence, both human, SIGINT (electronic) and certain monitoring facilities as part of China's large SIGINT intelligence. SIGINT, as you know, is signal intelligence (electronic). So that is where it is at the moment, which is that there has been evidence, fairly irrefutable evidence, both of Chinese naval and military presence, personnel, and a certain degree of infrastructure in Hyangyi (port), and in Cocos islands, apart from the overall Chinese presence in Myanmar [sic].¹¹²

Following the 2005 Indian about-face on the Great Coco Island station and other Chinese bases in Burma, such statements (or the intelligence agencies which reportedly provided information) must be considered doubtful.

During this 15-year period, it seems to have escaped the notice of most observers that, at no stage, had the existence of a large Chinese SIGINT station on Great Coco Island been officially confirmed by any government other than India's, which was hardly an objective observer. This includes the US, which has both an interest in China's activities in the Indian Ocean and the means to detect them. As a senior Burmese diplomat reportedly said in 1992, in an apparent reference to the intelligence gathering capabilities of the major powers, "modern facilities are quite open. They cannot be hidden".¹¹³ The US and other Western governments have also been surprisingly reticent about the other reported Chinese facilities in Burma. The relevant intelligence could be too sensitive for public release but, as now seems the case with the reported Great Coco Island facility,

the reason could simply be that the public claims of “Chinese bases” in Burma cannot be sustained.

It is even possible that some news reports have been deliberately planted, to promote particular causes. For example, it would be in India’s strategic interests to exaggerate the potential Chinese threat. By arousing fears about Beijing’s influence in Burma, New Delhi could encourage regional countries to develop closer ties with India, while putting indirect pressure on the Rangoon regime not to be drawn into China’s sphere of influence.¹¹⁴ Some Burmese expatriates may have drawn attention to China’s apparent relationship with Burma in order to win support from conservative groups in the US. At the time of his 1998 outburst about the Chinese threat, George Fernandes was well known for his support to Burmese opposition groups in India. A series of stories emphasising China’s interest in the Indian Ocean, published by *The Pioneer* newspaper in the late 1990s, was probably designed to increase domestic support for India’s nuclear tests.¹¹⁵ Also, there have been suggestions that some Indian analysts writing about this subject were keen to see an increase in India’s budget allocation to the navy, which has traditionally been given a lower priority for funding than the other Services.

There were also a number of practical arguments against the construction of any major installations on Great Coco Island or Hainggyi Island. For example, as the Burmese government has acknowledged, in both cases access was difficult.¹¹⁶ Great Coco Island has no sheltered harbour capable of handling a ship of any size. There was only a small pier there until 2002, when the berthing facilities on the island were expanded. The airstrip, while apparently extended some time after 1988, was also vulnerable to the region’s poor weather. Similarly, neither the hydrography nor the topography of Hainggyi Island lent themselves to the construction of a maritime facility of any size. According to Admiralty charts, the area around the island suffers from strong tides, shifting mud banks and silting. Furthermore, the surrounding districts are predominantly rural and lack even the basic infrastructure necessary to support a large naval base or commercial trading port.¹¹⁷

In broad strategic terms too, it is difficult to see what a new base on Hainggyi Island might offer China over other alternatives. It may extend China’s strategic reach, but access to the more established facilities in Rangoon or a developed Burmese port on the coast would do the same. In the event of armed conflict, a naval base on Hainggyi Island would be vulnerable to mining and attack from the sea. Also, any “Chinese base” in Burma would be hostage to the country’s notoriously unpredictable political leadership, and there could be no guarantee that China would be permitted free access to Burmese ports or intelligence facilities when it was most needed. Even if relations with India deteriorated again, it is highly unlikely that the PLA Navy (PLAN) would wish, or even be able, to conduct significant military operations so far from home. While China has given a relatively high priority to the development of a blue water navy, this capability is still some years away and Burma is highly unlikely to assist China by providing essential air cover for PLAN vessels in the Indian Ocean.¹¹⁸

In this regard, questions should have also been raised about the repeated assertions of an increased Chinese naval presence in the waters around Burma. Two PLAN vessels visited the region in late 1985, to visit allies like Pakistan and to assert the principle of freedom of navigation.¹¹⁹ PLAN vessels rarely made deployments into the Indian Ocean after that, however, and even these few ventures were conducted with some difficulty.¹²⁰ As the Indian CNS noted in 2005, “we have not seen more than a token Chinese Naval presence in the Indian Ocean”.¹²¹ Despite the claims in *SP’s Yearbook*, China’s one nuclear submarine is still under development and has probably never been on an extended, long range deployment. It is possible that some of the *Hainan* class patrol boats acquired by the Burma Navy in early 1992 were seen operating near Hainggyi and Great Coco islands, adding to perceptions that Chinese naval vessels were paying more frequent visits to the region. A more likely explanation, however, is that the original reports were simply fabricated to add substance to a thin story.

7. Strategic Fears

If there are so few reliable sources on all these issues, and so many gaps in our knowledge about the true nature of China's presence in Burma, then questions must be raised about the strategic analyses that have been published over the past 15 years, relying heavily on news reports of "Chinese bases". In particular, the conclusions that have been drawn about China's broad relationship with Burma and its strategic implications for the north east Indian Ocean region seem worthy of closer examination. On these matters, three schools of thought can be identified. For the sake of argument, they can be called the domination school, the partnership school and the rejectionist school.¹²² There are many points of agreement between them, but they are distinguished by some key differences of view. For example, each school has taken a different approach to the question of Chinese bases in Burma and their strategic significance.

The Domination School

The domination school is particularly strong in India, but also has a number of followers in the US and Australia. It harks back to the great power politics and strategic balances of the Cold War. Its members argue that small, isolated and economically troubled Burma must inevitably succumb to the pressures of its much larger neighbour, and effectively become a pawn in China's bid to achieve world power status.¹²³ The members of this school cite China's apparent "stranglehold" over Burma, as exercised through its loans, arms sales, trade and influence along Burma's northern borders. In these circumstances, it is felt, the SPDC would have little choice but to conform to Beijing's wishes. This school discounts Burma's ability to manage its own affairs in the face of China's overwhelming strategic weight. In the mid-1990s, its members were predicting that, by the turn of the century, Burma would have become a "satellite" or "client state" of an expansionist China.¹²⁴

Burma is thus seen as an ally in China's attempts to surround and threaten India.¹²⁵ Burma's new and improved roads, part of a major infrastructure development plan implemented by the SLORC after 1988, are interpreted as essential supply lines, able to be used for the movement of PLA troops and materiel. The country's upgraded ports and harbours are potentially support bases for Chinese warships intent on dominating the Straits of Malacca, and controlling the SLOCs through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. Burma's new airfields, built as part of the regime's defence modernisation and expansion program, are future bases for Chinese combat aircraft intent on threatening eastern India. The intelligence links developed between Rangoon and Beijing (including the reported "listening posts" in Burma) are seen as an integral part of this wider Chinese design. Looking further afield, the Rangoon regime has been characterised as an agent of the Chinese government, able and willing to subvert regional councils like ASEAN on behalf of its larger patron.¹²⁶

The Partnership School

The second, or partnership, school broadly accepts the main arguments of the domination school, but is much more cautious in its predictions of how and when China will come to draw Burma into its sphere of influence. The members of this school see China's massive arms sales to the Rangoon regime, improvements to strategic lines of communication between China and Burma, and the reported construction of Chinese intelligence collection facilities in Burma, as part of a much longer term strategy. They argue that the China-Burma military relationship;

constitutes an important pattern of gradually expanding Chinese military activity in the Indian Ocean region. Taken together, this pattern suggests that China's leaders see that region as an area of substantial Chinese

interests and that they aspire to *eventual* establishment of a permanent and effective military presence in the Indian Ocean.¹²⁷

This school rejects the idea that China will simply impose its wishes on a reluctant Burma, and sees this process gradually developing along the lines of a more even-handed strategic alliance.

The partnership school acknowledges Rangoon's strong sense of national identity, and the difficulties that have been experienced by the Chinese in developing their relationship with Burma over the past 15 years. Yet members of this school feel that, while Burma may not be prepared to agree to a significant Chinese military presence now, the Rangoon government will ultimately come to recognise the benefits of a deeper strategic partnership with Beijing, "founded on mutual trust and common interests".¹²⁸ It is argued that Burma has much to gain from an alliance of this kind. Under these circumstances, the SPDC may one day grant the PLA permanent facilities in Burma, which Beijing can use to extend its strategic influence into the Indian Ocean region. It is implied, if not specifically stated, that this outcome will be sooner rather than later, if the US and like-minded countries continue to apply pressures against the military government, in an attempt to bring about regime change in Burma.¹²⁹

The Rejectionist School

The third, or rejectionist, school seems to consist mainly of scholars with a specialised knowledge of Burma, and Sinologists sceptical of China's purportedly expansionist designs.¹³⁰ Their arguments consist of three main points.

Firstly, they argue that, throughout history, Burma has always been very suspicious of China, and only turned to Beijing in 1989 out of dire necessity after it was ostracised by the West and made to suffer a range of sanctions. This change of policy was adopted reluctantly and by no means represented a permanent shift in focus or allegiance. The members of this school recognise the diplomatic, military and economic benefits that China currently offers Burma, and the pressure that China could exert on Rangoon if it chose to do so. They are more confident than the members of the other two schools, however, that Burma will be able to manage the complexities of the bilateral relationship, and resist becoming a major player in the strategic competition between China and other powers, like India or the US. To support their case, they cite Burma's fierce national pride and its preparedness over the years to bear enormous costs to maintain its independence and territorial sovereignty.¹³¹ They have been suspicious of claims regarding Chinese intelligence collection stations and accept the military regime's repeated assurances that permanent Chinese military bases will never be permitted in Burma. Also, the members of this school believe that Burma is looking first to Southeast Asia for its models of government and economy, not to China.

Secondly, followers of the rejectionist school point out that China has not been as successful in winning Burma's confidence as is often reported. Despite their unprecedented closeness at present, Beijing has not always been able to get its own way with Rangoon, nor seems likely to win everything it wants. For example, the Irrawaddy River transport corridor scheme, once a high priority for the Chinese government, has struck numerous problems in recent years. First the SLORC, and since 1997 the SPDC, has been dragging its feet over the scheme, apparently troubled by the economic and political leverage it will give China. Also, there is considerable unhappiness in the Tatmadaw over the standard of workmanship and capabilities of the Chinese military materiel that has been acquired by Burma. To China's reported annoyance, the regime is now turning to Russia and other countries (like India, the Ukraine and even North Korea) for its latest arms acquisitions.¹³² Chinese officials in Burma have kept a low public profile, and learned to tread warily in contacts with their local counterparts. This seems to be out of concern that they will upset the notoriously volatile and unpredictable military leadership, and lose the gains China has made since 1989.¹³³ Beijing may even fear a recurrence of the violent anti-Chinese demonstrations that led to a break in diplomatic relations with Rangoon in 1967.

Thirdly, while it suits Burma to develop its relationship with China now, it will always retain the option of drawing back from China's close embrace. China casts such a long shadow, that the very thought of a small, weak country like Burma being able to resist its advances or to reduce its level of engagement seems far-fetched. Yet there are already a number of precedents for this to occur. Vietnam, for example, was able to detach itself from a close relationship with China, and even went on to resist an invasion by Chinese military forces. Similarly, North Korea was once beholden to China for its continued existence, but never surrendered its sovereignty. Even Pakistan, which is often quoted in this context as another creature of China, has been able to develop independent relations with countries like the US. Should the Rangoon regime wish to escape China's embrace, the rejectionist school argues, then there is little chance that the SPDC would be left to manage the process alone. India has already won back an important place in the regime's strategic thinking and other regional countries would doubtless see it in their interests to do so as well. If Burma could resolve its key differences with the Western democracies, even they would be prepared to offer the Rangoon regime a range of other options.

Indeed, it can be argued that, in some respects, it is not Beijing but Rangoon that has the whip hand in this relationship. The military government has been quick to recognise Burma's growing importance in the more fluid Asia–Pacific strategic environment. It knows how its relationship with China is viewed by other countries. Over the past 15 years, the Rangoon regime has become adept at exploiting Burma's geo-strategic position and manipulating the concerns of its regional neighbours. For example, it has been quite comfortable about using its close relationship with Beijing, and the fear that it might become an ally of an expansionist China, to attract support from influential countries like India, and to gain attention in important councils like ASEAN. The SPDC would no doubt be prepared to play the China card again, if it felt the need. Since the discovery of extensive natural gas fields off the western coast of Burma, the regime has another lever it can use to keep its more powerful, but energy-hungry, neighbours on side.¹³⁴ Burma's rapidly developing links with India, its continuing, albeit patchy, relationship with ASEAN and its arms deals with Russia and other suppliers, can all be seen as part of Rangoon's continuing efforts to balance China's influence and to keep open other foreign policy options.

8. Conclusion

On the scant evidence available, it would appear that claims of China's influence in Burma over the past 15 years have been greatly exaggerated. The Indian government has categorically ruled out a Chinese SIGINT station on Great Coco Island, and denied the existence of any other "Chinese bases". New Delhi could be lying or confused but, given its long term strategic interests and apparently improved access to the main sites in question, this seems unlikely.

There are probably a number of small maritime surveillance sites scattered around the Burmese coastline, and some may have discreet intelligence functions. Much of the equipment at these sites is likely to have been provided by China, as part of the deals struck between Rangoon and Beijing after 1988. While there is little firm evidence to support the claim, Chinese specialists probably installed this equipment and for some years helped maintain it. They may still be providing some technical advice. It is unlikely that any Chinese military personnel are permanently based in Burma or directly operate any intelligence collection stations there. They may, however, receive some intelligence from the Burmese, derived from these installations. Similarly, China may have helped to build or upgrade a number of ports in Burma but these are, and always have been, Burmese facilities. As is customary, access by Chinese vessels, whether civil or military, will be subject to the agreement of the Burmese government at the time.¹³⁵

To a large extent, the behaviour of Burma and China over the past 15 years has encouraged speculative reporting in the news media and elsewhere. Beyond the usual bland press releases, neither government has made any real effort to inform the international community about important aspects of their developing relationship. Few details are available about China's frequent high level exchanges with Burma, the terms of their economic deals, or the exact nature of their defence links. In addition, little is known about the Rangoon regime's own strategic thinking, beyond its abiding fear of foreign military intervention to restore democratic rule.¹³⁶ While some observers have managed to discover useful information and publish thoughtful analyses, these gaps in the public record have often been filled by speculation, guesswork and at times even pure invention. Claims that should have been dismissed out of hand, as tendentious or plainly incorrect, have been accepted without sufficient scrutiny and repeated in articles and monographs. Once they have appeared in print, such claims have in turn been cited by other authors, giving them a respectability they do not deserve.

The story of the "Chinese bases" is perhaps best viewed as a cautionary tale. Accurate information about security developments in Burma has always been difficult to obtain. Such issues are invariably cloaked in official secrecy and confused by countless rumours. Also, Burma occupies a critical geostrategic position and is at the centre of a heated international debate about the best policy approach to take towards the military regime. Both of these characteristics tend to encourage emotionally charged analyses and fearful predictions. There is also ample scope for policy advocacy disguised as strategic analysis. This makes it all the more important that, in any investigation of Burma's strategic environment, a premium is placed on the verification of sources and care is taken to avoid circular reporting. Even then, it would seem wise to exercise a degree of caution about any conclusions reached.¹³⁷ Burma will always have its fair share of mysteries, but its secrets will only be discovered through an analysis of hard facts, and the avoidance of myths and misconceptions.

Notes

- 1 Bertil Lintner, "Allies in isolation: Burma and China move closer", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (15 September 1990), p. 475.
- 2 Details of this program can be found in Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power without glory* (Norwalk: EastBridge, 2002).
- 3 Bertil Lintner, "Hidden Reserves", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 (June 1991), p. 12.
- 4 See, for example, "Myanmar in large arms barter deal with China", *Asian Aviation* (February 1991), pp. 88–9; Bertil Lintner, "Arms for Eyes", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (16 December 1992), p. 26; Bertil Lintner, "Chinese arms bolster Burmese forces", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (27 November 1993), p. 11; and Bertil Lintner, "\$400m deal signed by China and Myanmar", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (3 December 1994), p. 1.
- 5 It has been estimated that, between 1988 and 1998, Burma received about US\$3 billion worth of arms from China. See Stephen McCarthy, "Ten years of chaos in Burma: Foreign investment and economic liberalisation under the SLORC–SPDC (1988–1998)", *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (Summer 2000), p. 250.
- 6 Subhaj Chakrabhati, "Spokesman Discusses Burmese-Initiated Group Visit to India", BBC Burmese Service, 13 August 1992.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Robert Karniol, "New base is boost to naval power", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (12 September 1992), p. 31. This report incorrectly places Mergui in Mon State.
- 9 There are reasons to believe that Kyodo's source was a member of the Indian embassy. Personal communication with Dr Sandy Gordon, 27 September 2006.
- 10 "Government said helping to build naval base in Burma", *Kyodo News Agency* (17 September 1992).
- 11 "China: Govt allegedly helping Burma to build naval base", *Reuter* (18 September 1992); and "Is China building an Indian Ocean base?", *The Estimate* (8 October 1992).
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- 13 Edward Neilan, "China's influence in Burma causes fear in Southeast Asia", *San Francisco Chronicle* (27 February 1993).
- 14 "The south-east front", *Vayu*, no. 4 (1992), p. 2.
- 15 "Is China building an Indian Ocean base?", Australian National University, Thai–Yunnan Project, *Newsletter*, no. 18 (September 1992), p. 8.
- 16 "Burma builds new navy base, India concerned", *Reuter* (2 December 1992).
- 17 Sridhar Krishnaswami, "Myanmar denies grant of bases to China", *The Hindu* (7 October 1994).
- 18 Dinesh Kumar, "Sino–Myanmar ties irk Delhi", *The Times of India* (20 November 1992). See also "A dragon at the gate?", *Asiaweek* (14 April 1993), p. 36.
- 19 "China naval base off Andaman a threat", *Patriot* (6 May 1993).
- 20 Dipankar Banerjee, "Burma–PRC naval contacts", *Bangkok Post* (18 July 1994). See also "The South–east front", p. 2.
- 21 "Beijing seeking defence base close to the Andaman islands", *The Observer* (3 May 1993). See also Clare Hollingworth, "Japan's defence worries grow", *Asia–Pacific Defence Reporter*, vol. 20, no. 10/11 (April–May 1994), p. 9; and Neilan, "China's Influence in Burma Causes Fear in Southeast Asia".
- 22 Yossef Bodansky, "The PRC surge for the Strait of Malacca and Spratleys confronts India and the US", *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy* (30 September 1995), pp. 6–12.
- 23 There had long been a small naval station on Great Coco Island, and an airstrip, to support occasional deployments to the area by Burmese patrol vessels. The island had also achieved notoriety as a penal colony. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and insurgency since 1948* (Chieng Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), p. 273; and "Burma's papillon", *The Irrawaddy* (May 1999).
- 24 "Concern at Chinese build-up", *Asian Defence Journal* (February 1993), p. 88. See also "A dragon at the gate?", p. 36.
- 25 "China helping Myanmar build defence base", *Hindustan Times* (1 May 1993); and M. Shahidul Islam, "Sino–Indian rapprochement: Impact on Bangladesh", *The Daily Star* (3 July 2003). See also "PRC reportedly building bases on Burmese islands", *Sankei Shimbun* (28 June 1994).
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- 27 "PRC reportedly building bases on Burmese islands".
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 See, for example, "Chinese team in Burma to set up surveillance systems", *Indian Express* (1 July 1994).
- 30 Robert Karniol, "Chinese puzzle over Burma's SIGINT base", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (9 January 1994), p. 14. See also Bertil Lintner, "Myanmar's Chinese connection", *International Defence Review* (November 1994), p. 24; and Renaud Egreteau, *Wooing The Generals: India's new Burma policy* (New Delhi: Authors Press, 2003), p. 93.
- 31 Federation of American Scientists, "Coco Islands"; and C.S. Kuppuswamy, "Myanmar–China cooperation: Its implications for India", Independent Media Center India (3 February 2003). See also R.S. Ehrlich, "Burma US military", *The Free Press* (18 August 2006).
- 32 Kumar, "Sino–Myanmar ties irk Delhi".
- 33 "Desmond Ball unbound", *The Irrawaddy* (June 2004); and Vivek Raghuvanshi, "Myanmar, China build military ties", *Defense News* (4–10 July 1994).
- 34 Edmond Dantes, "An in-depth look at the Asia–Pacific air forces and future procurement", *Asian Defence Journal* (January 1993), p. 28.
- 35 Two facilities named were the Indian Defence Research and Development Laboratory in Hyderabad and the Wheeler Island missile test facility south of Chandipur, in Orissa. See, for example, Karniol, "Chinese puzzle over Burma's SIGINT base"; and "Desmond Ball unbound".
- 36 "Chinese team in Burma to set up surveillance systems". See also "Chinese 'electronic fishing' in the Andamans", *Asian Defence Journal* (December 1994), p. 92.
- 37 Lintner, "Arms for eyes", p. 26.
- 38 "Desmond Ball unbound".
- 39 See Democratic Voice of Burma, "Tsunami – did Burma escape the consequences?" (6 January 2005), available at: <[http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/PDFs/ Tsunami_Damage_\(DVB\).pdf](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/PDFs/ Tsunami_Damage_(DVB).pdf)>.
- 40 Federation of American Scientists, "Coco Islands". The reference to 70 Chinese technicians seems to be a mis-reading of a comment in Lintner, "Arms for eyes", p. 26.
- 41 Egreteau, *Wooing the Generals*, p. 94.
- 42 See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Burma road", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (6 November 1997), p. 16.
- 43 Federation of American Scientists, "Coco Islands".
- 44 "Desmond Ball unbound".
- 45 Bill Gertz, "China builds up strategic sea lanes", *The Washington Times* (18 January 2005).
- 46 Egreteau, *Wooing The Generals*, pp. 132ff. See also Sudha Ramachandran, "India embraces Myanmar on its own terms", *Asia Times* (28 June 2006).
- 47 Sudha Ramachandran, "Indian troops poised to enter Myanmar", *Asia Times* (21 July 2005); and Smita Mishra Brahma, "Doing India's dirty work", *The Irrawaddy* (November 2006).
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- 54 See Andrew Selth, "Burma's maritime strategy", in Jurgen Schwarz, W.A. Herrmann and Hanns-Frank Seller (eds), *Maritime Strategies in Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2002), pp. 293–323.
- 55 The Burmese government seems to have credited the Coco Island group with some strategic significance. Before the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, Burma was rumoured to have offered the US a base on Great Coco Island, in return for financial assistance. Later, the regime reportedly accused the US of wanting to build its own naval base on the island so that "it can launch a blitzkrieg against the eastern or western hemisphere". R.E. Harkavy, *Bases Abroad: The global foreign military presence* (Oxford: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 5; and Ehrlich, "Burma US military".
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- 57 Andrew Selth, "Chinese whispers: The great Coco Island mystery", *The Irrawaddy* (January 2007).
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- 59 Andrew Selth, "The Burma Navy Under the SLORC", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1999), pp. 227–47.
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- 61 Bertil Lintner, "Return to the delta", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (14 November 1991), p. 26; and "Burma's rebels in advance", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (7 December 1991), p. 1104.
- 62 Bertil Lintner, "Tension mounts in Arakan State", *Jane's Defence Weekly* (19 October 1991), p. 717.
- 63 See, for example, Mya Maung, "On the road to Mandalay: A case study of the sinization of upper Burma", *Asian Survey*, vol. 34, no. 5 (May 1994), pp. 447–59.
- 64 See, for example, Pan Qi, "Opening the south-west: An expert opinion", *Beijing Review*, vol. 28, no. 35 (2 September 1985), pp. 22–3.
- 65 Bertil Lintner, "Enter the dragon", *Far Eastern Economic Review* (22 December 1994), pp. 22–4. See also Lintner, "Burma road", p. 16; and Bertil Lintner, "Perspective: China and South Asia's east", *Himal South Asia* (October 2002), available at: <http://www.himalmag.com/2002/october/burma_perspective.htm>.
- 66 Desmond Ball, "SIGINT strengths form a vital part of Burma's military muscle", *Jane's Intelligence Review* (March 1998), p. 38. See also Bruce Hawke and Ethan Casey, "Circle of suspicion", *Outlook* (25 May 1998).
- 67 The American Foreign Policy Council, "Chinese naval officials, spy vessels operate from nine sites in Burma", *China Reform Monitor*, no. 74 (2000).
- 68 See, for example, "Myanmar and China: New horizons", *The Economist* (23 January 1993), pp. 27–8; and Banerjee, "Burma–PRC naval contacts".
- 69 Jayant Baranwal (ed.), *SP's Military Yearbook, 1992–93* (New Delhi: Guide Publications, 1993), p. 374.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 *SP's Military Yearbook*, p. 101 and p. 371.
- 73 The only Burmese insurgent group to which China provided substantial assistance was the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), but Beijing withdrew its support after Deng Xiaoping's visit to Rangoon in 1978. The CPB collapsed after a mutiny by ethnic units in March–April 1989.
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- 75 Douglas Bakshian, China–Burma–India Briefing, 21 May 1998, available at: <<http://www.fas.org/irp/news/1998/05/980521-prc3.htm>>
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- 77 "Myanmar and China: New horizons", p. 26.
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- 79 "PRC Reportedly building bases on Burmese islands". See also Kumar, "Sino–Myanmar ties irk Delhi".
- 80 Krishnaswami, "Myanmar denies grant of bases to China".
- 81 Hollingworth, "Japan's defence worries grow", p. 9.
- 82 Mohan Malik, "Burma's Role in Regional Security – Pawn or Pivot?", in R.I. Rotberg (ed.), *Burma: Prospects for a democratic future* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), pp. 115–6.
- 83 Bill Gertz, "China builds up strategic sea lanes", *Washington Times* (18 January 2005).
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- 85 "Interview with Admiral Arun Prakash", p. 22–3.
- 86 David Lague, "China says military expansion no threat to regional stability", *Weekend Australian* (18–19 December 1993).
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- 89 Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals intelligence (SIGINT) from the second world war to civil war and cyber warfare* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998), p. 224.

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- 91 Bertil Lintner, "China's ambitions in Myanmar", *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, Strategic Comments (July 2000).
- 92 Hawke and Casey, "Circle of suspicion".
- 93 These claims are canvassed in Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces*, pp. 118–9. See also Lintner, "Arms for eyes", p. 26.
- 94 "Desmond Ball unbound".
- 95 Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets*, p. 224.
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- 100 Sittwe is the headquarters of the Danyawaddy Naval Region Command. Tanintharyi Naval Region Command has its headquarters at Mergui. The Irrawaddy (or Ayeyarwady) Naval Region headquarters is at Monkey Point in Rangoon. "Chinese naval officials, spy vessels operate from nine sites in Burma". See also Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces*, p. 191.
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- 103 Hawke and Casey, "Circle of suspicion".
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- 122 This structure was first proposed in Merrill, "Myanmar's China connection: A cause for alarm?". It was further developed in Andrew Selth, "Burma's China connection and the Indian Ocean region", *Indian Ocean Survey*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January–June 2005), pp. 29–48.
- 123 See, for example, Kanwal, "Countering China's strategic encirclement of India".
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