

Russia's turn to Asia: Myanmar seen from Moscow

Kristian Lundby Gjerde

Russia has made increased engagement with Asian countries a declared priority. This 'turn to the East', marked by the extravagant APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in Vladivostok in 2012, is driven by both internal considerations (developing Russia's huge eastern territories) and external ones (perceived shifts in the global balance of economic and political power). Since the events of 2014, with relations with the West deteriorating into confrontation and sanctions, Russian interest in further developing ties with Asia has only increased.

Russia's 'turn to the East' is often mentioned in the context of Sino-Russian relations, and with good reason. Moscow attaches great importance to these relations: China has become a key actor on the international stage, and Russia's commercial relations with China dwarf those with other Asian countries. Yet, Russia's 'turn to the East' was never intended as a turn to China only: It is about taking advantage of the rapidly developing Asia-Pacific markets in order to develop Russia itself, and also to enhance Russia's role in the wider world. Moreover, Russia does not want to become too dependent on China, so it is seen as imperative to promote relations with other Asian countries as well. One expressed priority is the ASEAN region – Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

This policy brief offers some glimpses into Russia's outlook on Asia by examining Moscow's relations with Myanmar.¹ Since 2000, with the West shunning cooperation with Myanmar's military leadership, citing its abysmal human rights record, Moscow has provided important support to Myanmar. Recently, however, Myanmar has embarked on a transformation from decades of military rule and is now opening up to the outside world, including developing ties with the West. A closer look at Russia-Myanmar relations and Russian interpretations of developments in Myanmar can serve to

illustrate key features of both Russia's outlook on Asia and the limitations to Russian engagement in the region.

The history of Russian-Myanmar bilateral relations

Since the end of World War II, Burma/Myanmar has undergone four regime changes, and those events can serve as a cursory guide to the country's troubled history. In 1948, Burma achieved independence from the British Empire. In 1962, the military took over power in a coup. Widespread demonstrations in 1988 against the military dictatorship ended with a brutal crackdown on the protesters ordered by the 'State Law and Order Restoration Council', a new military government that came to power through a coup during the demonstrations. Elections were held in 1990, but the military leadership chose to ignore the results, which were not to their liking. In the following years, Western countries imposed severe sanctions on Myanmar, citing the military dictatorship, widespread violations of human rights, and reported persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority. In addition came internal conflicts/civil war ongoing ever since independence. In 2006, the government declared its intention of democratizing – followed by a new crackdown on peaceful demonstrations the next year.

Change, however, was about to come. A new constitution was adopted in 2012. In the democratic elections held in November 2015 the opposition party the National Democratic League (NLD) – which had won 59.9 per cent of the vote in the 1990 elections – was supported by 60.3 per cent of the voters. However, the constitution allows the military to retain 25% of the seats in parliament, as well as control of three key ministries: defence, internal affairs, and borders. A new president, Htin Kyaw, was elected by parliament, and a new government was formed in March/April 2016. (Aung San Suu Kyi took on the role of 'State Counsellor' as well as several ministerial posts, becoming the de facto leader of the government.)

As to bilateral Russia–Myanmar relations, the Soviet Union and Burma had cordial but not very extensive relations during the Cold War (Egreteau and Jagan 2013: 104). The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1948, and Nikita Khrushchev visited Burma twice as Soviet leader. However, a close relationship never developed. Burma’s foreign policy in the 1950s was multi-vectored, aimed at balancing the influence of its neighbours, as well as of the USA and the Soviet Union (ibid.: 73). The Burmese leadership tried to keep Moscow at arm’s length, and relations remained fairly superficial. While Russia and Myanmar today refer to Soviet aid in the 1950s as part of the enduring friendship between the two countries (Soviet projects in Burma included the Yangon Technological University and a hospital in the city of Taunggyi), the aid was in fact not very extensive.²

The military coup-makers in 1962 declared the aim of building socialism in Burma, and this initially led the two countries closer together. Subsequent Burmese policy was not conducive to the strengthening of ties with the Soviet Union, however. For one thing, China wanted to curtail Soviet influence in Burma, and the Burmese leadership, not desiring confrontation with its big neighbour, scaled back on contacts with Moscow (Lutz-Auras 2015). In addition came an increasingly isolationist turn in the following decades. As a result, bilateral relations were largely without content, although Moscow today emphasizes that they were *friendly* (Tatarinov 2008).

After 1988, suffering isolation from the West and the risk of over-dependence on China, Myanmar partially opened up to the outside world, hoping to find support elsewhere. In the early post-coup years, Moscow did not play any significant role; then, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, changing priorities in Moscow and lack of resources were among the reasons why Russia did not play an active role in the 1990s.

With the new millennium, however, this was to change. Relations developed to the point where Russia could be considered a ‘key partner for the Burmese regime’, providing ‘crucial support’ (Egreteau and Jagan 2013: 164). Of particular importance was Moscow’s support in international forums. One example of this was the 2007 Russian veto (joined by China) against a draft UN Security Council resolution condemning Myanmar for its human rights record and framing the military leadership as a threat to international security.

More substantial forms of cooperation have also developed, not least as regards the *military sector*. In a situation where Myanmar did not have access to Western markets, Russian military export to Myanmar increased. Only China sells more weapons to Myanmar (albeit significantly more). Together, China and Russia stand for almost all of Myanmar’s military imports (SIPRI 2016).

Education is another important sector. Towards the end of the decade, some 2,500 Myanmar students were studying in Russia (Tatarinov 2008).

Finally, there is *energy*. Myanmar has vast untapped gas reserves; and Russia’s Bashneft is the operator of the EP-4 oil field. However, it is in the sphere of *nuclear* energy Russia–Myanmar cooperation has attracted most international attention – and concern. The intention to develop such cooperation is nothing new. Plans for the construction of a research reactor in Myanmar fell through in 2003 due to lack of financing on Myanmar’s side. A renewed plan in 2007 also failed to materialize. Then, in 2015, the two countries agreed yet again on nuclear energy cooperation. The USA in particular has expressed great concern over the safety of nuclear facilities in Myanmar, but Russia has given assurances that observers from the International Atomic Energy Agency will be an integral element in any development (Cottee 2015; Mizzima 2016).

Trade is still limited, however, and Russian investments in Myanmar are negligible compared to those of China, Thailand, Japan and others. A bilateral trade commission has been established, and a highly ambitious 500 million USD target has been set for bilateral trade in 2017, up from around 130 million USD in 2015.

Thus, although politically significant (military cooperation in particular) the closeness between the two countries should not be exaggerated.

Myanmar seen from Moscow

To understand Russia’s approach to Myanmar more fully, we need to examine how recent changes in Myanmar have been interpreted in Moscow.

First, an important feature of official Russian discourse is that when Moscow talks about Myanmar, it also talks about the West, about the international order, and the conduct of relations between countries. Prior to Myanmar’s rapprochement with the West, Moscow presented the West’s approach in a very negative light indeed. Since then, Moscow has questioned the West’s motives for changing its approach to Myanmar.

A second noteworthy feature is the presentation of Russia and Myanmar as united by a shared outlook on international politics. This is an important point: the idea that most of the world’s countries have more in common with Russia’s visions of international politics than with those of the West is a key intellectual premise for much of the Moscow foreign policy establishment (see e.g. Lukin 2015).

Russian presentations of the development in Myanmar have been characterized by an emphasis on sovereignty, respect for the country’s internal affairs, and criticism of Western

policy – all pointedly summed up by Russia’s ambassador to Myanmar in a 2016 interview: ‘Unlike some other countries, we do not intend to teach Myanmar people how to live, what political system to adopt’ (Mizzima 2016).

In the first decade of the 2000s, before the political transition in Myanmar gained momentum, Russians officials would underline that they recognized the challenges, but also that there was a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable ways of contributing to change in Myanmar. The acceptable ways included the work of the UN special representative and the UN Human Rights Council, as well as through engaging the government of Myanmar. Unacceptable means included the sanctions unilaterally imposed by the West, and various kinds of ‘threats’ and ‘pressure’ – methods that, according to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, were ‘absolutely inadequate’ and which would only worsen the situation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007). Western criticism of the human rights situation in Myanmar was accused of being exaggerated, politicized, and counterproductive (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010).

As Myanmar’s government pursued its plans for a change to a civil government and democratization, Russian officials stressed that they supported this reform agenda. Importantly, however, the West was still portrayed as an obstacle to Myanmar’s development, not least due to what were referred to as ‘wholly unjustified sanctions’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Importantly, Moscow has held that the political changes in Myanmar have *not* come about as a result of Western sanctions.

In an article published in the Russian Foreign Ministry journal *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn’* in 2014, a distinguished Russian diplomat, Gleb Ivashentsov, former ambassador to Myanmar, elaborates on these tenets in the official discourse (Ivashentsov 2014). First, regarding the West, he notes the radical change in the Western approach to Myanmar, from total ostracism to close cooperation. Ivashentsov dismisses the notion that the shift in Western policy was caused by democratic reforms in Myanmar, and that the current engagement involves encouraging this development. Rather, he holds, the reason was the Obama administration’s ‘pivot to Asia’, seen as expressing the desire for US leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. In order to succeed, the United States needed rapprochement with Myanmar, for geopolitical as well as economic reasons. Western – and in particular US – activity in Myanmar is thus seen in the light of geopolitical competition, in particular with China: Washington is trying to cut China off from potential allies and much needed resources. Myanmar thereby becomes an arena for a new ‘great game’ for geopolitical influence in south-eastern Asia.

Second, Ivashentsov offers a resounding indictment of the then-opposition in Myanmar, 18 months before it was to win

an overwhelming victory in the November 2015 elections. According to Ivashentsov, the West was circulating a story where all of Myanmar’s problems would be solved if Aung San Suu Kyi’s National Democratic League came to power. But he compares the NLD to the participants in the 2011–2012 street protests in Moscow, arguing that the ‘democratic opposition’ in fact is far removed from the views of the vast majority of the population and offers no real solutions. In his article, Ivashentsov did not exclude the possibility that the people of Myanmar, tired of the military leadership, might vote the NLD into power. But the real issue here, he argued, was the danger of an impatient, unprofessional, and ultimately unsuccessful process of democratization. What would have happened to today’s successful China, he asks rhetorically, if the government had given in to the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989? The message is clear: for a country in Myanmar’s situation, a firm central power is necessary, even if it means curtailing some rights.

Conclusions

Russia has been providing important support for the military regime in Myanmar. It has consistently criticized Western attempts to isolate and put pressure to bear on the country, while praising its own cooperation with the military leadership. Myanmar’s new government, while focusing on the many pressing domestic issues, including the peace process and economic reforms, is likely to continue the country’s pragmatic foreign policy. Russian officials have stated that they expect the government to seek to develop good relations with Russia, and they encourage Myanmar to pursue an independent foreign policy (Mizzima 2016). Others are less optimistic. Russia’s leading expert on Myanmar, Aida Simonia, warns that after ‘15 years of supporting the military that kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, selling them military planes, and in 2007 blocking the UN resolution against the country’s military leadership’, Russia will have to work hard to earn the trust of the new regime (Korostikov 2015).

For Russia, Myanmar is not the most important country in the region. In ASEAN, relations with Vietnam and Indonesia are far more developed, for instance. However, the case of Myanmar–Russia relations is instructive as regards several of the challenges that Russia faces in its ‘turn to the East’ – including the difficult task of converting political declarations and a comparative advantage in areas like arms exports into more substantial economic cooperation and greater geopolitical influence.

Notes

1 This policy brief follows widespread practice in using the term ‘Burma’ to denote the country before 1989, and ‘Myanmar’ for the period after 1989.

2 In fact, in the period 1954–1979, Eastern European countries contributed an estimated ten times more aid to Burma than did the Soviet Union (Egretau and Jagan 2013: 103).

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About the Authors

Kristian Lundby Gjerde (MPhil, Oxon) is Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs specializing in post-Soviet, in particular Russian, politics. He has studied international relations in Russia and holds a Master degree in Russian studies from St Antony's College, Oxford.

NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
C.J. Hambros plass 2D
PO Box 8159 Dep. NO-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no | info@nupi.no