Beijing and the Myanmar problem

Ian Holliday

Abstract  The re-emergence of China as a major economic and political power has drawn attention to the role it might play in solving regional problems. Prominent among many Asian issues on Beijing’s agenda is its southwestern neighbour, Myanmar, and in particular the military machine that has long ruled the country with an iron fist. The junta in place today is both acknowledged as problematic by policymakers in Beijing, and seen by the wider world as a regional challenge on which China should take the lead. However, there is little agreement on ways forward. To determine how Beijing might handle the Myanmar problem, this article first examines the concept of intervention, reviewing the manifold modes found in the contemporary world and drawing up a typology. Then it surveys arguments about intervention, focusing on perspectives that are relevant in this context. Next it presents arguments about intervention in Myanmar, and follows up by looking in some detail at China’s current low-level engagement. Finally it considers where Beijing might go from here in dealing with Myanmar. The argument pulled together in the conclusion is that while nobody has a full solution to the Myanmar problem, a case for enhancement of China’s role can be grounded not only in its global obligations, but also in precepts found deep in its national tradition. It is here that efforts to boost Beijing’s engagement should be directed.

Keywords  Burma; China; Confucianism; intervention; Myanmar; realpolitik.

The dramatic rise of China in three decades of open door policy has stimulated widespread academic debate. Internally, important issues are whether the economic advance of the past 30 years is sustainable, and how it is likely to shape social and political development in an authoritarian state. Externally, key concerns are how peaceful China’s rise will turn out to be, and what impact it will have on world politics through bilateral ties with regional and global powers and multilateral engagement with international organizations and forums. Within these broad debates, a practical interest

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in the role Beijing might play in resolving Asian problems is also visible. Indeed, pointing to China as the key player has become standard practice in much analysis of Asian economic and political development.

Among many regional problems confronting China is Myanmar, with which it shares a border of more than 2000 kilometres.1 Governed by an entrenched military junta, Myanmar has been publicly acknowledged as problematic by Chinese leaders, and is increasingly seen by the wider world as a regional challenge on which Beijing should take the lead. Indeed, when the junta opted in September 2007 for brutal repression of economic and political protests led by revered Buddhist monks, and was seen in May 2008 to make an inept and callous response to devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis in the country’s southern delta, the global community looked above all to China to mitigate its worst excesses. Furthermore, as the governing generals push relentlessly forward with plans for a discipline-flourishing democracy, expected by observers to be little more than a façade for ongoing army control, it is to Beijing that many turn for guidance.

Within the welter of China debate, however, the Myanmar problem has received scant academic attention. While there is a broad feeling that Beijing holds the key to reform, few have examined how it might handle a notably recalcitrant regime. This article seeks to redress the balance somewhat. It begins by focusing on the concept of intervention, briefly reviewing the manifold modes found in the contemporary world and drawing up a typology. In this way it ensures that the array of options facing Beijing is present from the start. Next it surveys arguments about intervention, focusing on perspectives that are relevant in this context. Then it considers arguments about intervention in Myanmar, and follows up by looking in detail at China’s current low-level engagement. Finally it thinks through where Beijing might go from here in dealing with Myanmar. The argument pulled together in the conclusion is that while nobody has a full solution to the Myanmar problem, a case for enhancement of China’s role can be grounded not only in its global obligations, but also in precepts found deep in its national tradition. It is here that efforts to boost Beijing’s engagement should be directed.

**Intervention**

When the issue is how a regional power like China might engage with a difficult neighbour like Myanmar, attention necessarily turns to the concept of intervention. All the interest is in how agents from one state might reach across an international frontier with the intention of shaping political development inside a separate target state. Put like this, several matters need to be sorted and clarified at the outset.

If given a political twist and expressed in terms of crossing an international border, the concept of intervention clearly depends on a global system of states. The Westphalian principle of state sovereignty, long
formally established as the normative foundation of international society, is essential (Bull 1977). In that society, sovereignty may sometimes be organized hypocrisy (Krasner 1999). Nevertheless, when non-intervention is the default position (Vincent 1974), even quasi-states possess the negative sovereignty of freedom from outside interference (Jackson 1990). As understood here, intervention is premised on states.

Despite this, however, debate is not limited to states and their agents. While intervention is often cast as something that one state does to another, a Westphalian approach requires only that states appear on one side of the equation. They must feature as the object of intervention, as the intervenees so to speak, for this is a conceptualization that sets up states as protected domains and classifies any violation as intervention. However, they do not need to feature as the subject of intervention. The work of the intervener can be accomplished by any individual or organization that is alien to the target state.

Put like this, intervention assumes many guises, including warfare, sanctions, covert action, peacekeeping efforts and diplomatic arm-twisting undertaken by states and their agents. All are types of political intervention aimed at forcing small or medium powers to fall in line with big power agendas. Furthermore, additional forms can be found in the complex and shadowy world of non-states. The 9/11 attacks on New York City and Washington DC, boycotts of aid, trade and investment led by activists, non-state political action inside poor and distressed countries, and unofficial rallies and campaigns designed to shape political development within target countries are all types of non-state intervention.

Pulling all this together, it is apparent that contemporary instances of political intervention are manifold. Garrett argues that they ‘stretch out almost endlessly’, making the core concept ‘inherently broad and protean’ (Garrett 1999: 3). To anchor examination of China’s interventionist options in Myanmar, it is thus necessary to impose some analytical rigour on this protean concept. Here, a dual-track approach is taken. First, intervention is given the broad, inclusive and ordinary-language definition already alluded to. Intervention of the political kind addressed by this article is interference in the political affairs of an alien or ‘other’ society. Moreover, because the two key protagonists in this case are both states accorded full recognition by international society, intervention is here understood yet more simply as interference in the political affairs of another state. Second, since this definition is so broad and inclusive, a typology of interventionist forms is created to impose a degree of order on the many modes intervention can take.

The typology presented in Figure 1 is articulated around three major dimensions of contemporary intervention. The first is the nature of the intervening agency. Is it a state or a non-state? This dimension is not always clear-cut, for intervention can be undertaken by coalitions of actors within either the state or non-state sector, as well as across both sectors.
Nevertheless, for analytical purposes there is here an important distinction. The second is the mode of intervention. Is it coercive or non-coercive? The significant difference between intervention conducted against the wishes of power holders in the target state, and that undertaken with their consent, needs to be registered analytically. The third is the realm of intervention. Is it internal or external to the target society? Here it must be noted that the notion of reaching across an established frontier hitherto employed in this analysis is figurative rather than literal. As is obvious from some previous examples, a great deal of intervention can take place beyond the physical borders of a target state. This too needs to be captured. Together, these three dimensions cover the major issues that characterize any form of intervention cast as political interference in another state (Holliday 2003: 120).

The cells in the final two columns of Figure 1 present eight distinct types of intervention generated by a three-tier matrix, together with illustrative examples. The first four types fall in the broad sphere of state action. The paradigm case of belligerent state engagement is war. The premier form of aggressive state pressure is sanctions, latterly turned by the US into a major foreign policy instrument (Chan and Drury 2000). The predominant type of consensual state engagement is peacekeeping, commonly undertaken by United Nations (UN) forces with target state consent (Ratner 1977). The leading form of discursive state pressure is diplomatic pressure.

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*Figure 1* Typology of intervention.
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final four types fall in the realm of non-state action. Classic forms of bellicose civil engagement are cross-border military-style attacks launched by freedom fighters or terrorists (Hoffman 1998). Key kinds of aggressive civil pressure are boycotts of aid, trade and investment directed by political activists and humanitarian agencies (Seidman 2007). The clearest type of consensual civil engagement is political work undertaken by humanitarian agencies inside a target state (Médecins Sans Frontières 1977). The premier form of discursive civil pressure is lobbying by humanitarian agencies aimed at fomenting political change inside a target country (Risse et al. 1999). In a rough and ready way, these eight types constitute two parallel ladders of intervention in the state and non-state sectors. The most substantial forms are coercive and internal to the target society. Less substantial forms are non-coercive and external to the target society (Holliday 2003: 124–5).

Arguing about intervention

The parallel ladders of interventionist types sketched here describe policy options that escalate from non-coercive external forms to coercive internal forms. How, then, might arguments about proposed real-world interventions unfold? Specifically, on what terms might Chinese intervention in Myanmar be debated?

To this day, global argument about intervention takes place chiefly within traditions of thought originally developed in the West. The classic case is war, about which debate is typically framed within the just war tradition that first took shape in Europe (Walzer 2004, 2006). However, it is also true of parallel debates about humanitarian intervention (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1996; Holzgrefe and Keohane 2003). Indeed, even when attempts are made to range more widely in, for instance, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) project, analysis is still structured chiefly by just war themes (ICISS 2001). Such arguments both are and are not relevant to Chinese intervention in Myanmar.

They are relevant because China is a signatory to many of the international resolutions and conventions that give effect to global commitments inspired by just war thinking. In the R2P domain, for example, the UN General Assembly endorsed a series of key positions at its 2005 World Summit (UN General Assembly 2005: paras 138–9), and the UN Security Council reaffirmed them in April 2006 through Resolution 1674 on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (UN Security Council 2006: para 4). The fact that the Security Council was able to pass this resolution is evidence that China is in many respects defying expectations that its insular and defensive character would make it difficult to integrate into international society (Shambaugh 1996). It further suggests that China’s socialization, now visible in many global forums (Johnston 2008), could one day open the door to Chinese intervention in Myanmar driven by these kinds of commitments.
They are not relevant, however, because China’s socialization process remains at an early stage, and does not yet come close to trumping indigenous understandings formed over decades and even centuries. In particular, the core attachment to sovereignty that has long animated Chinese foreign policy, and that finds expression above all in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence drawn up by Chinese leaders during negotiations with India in 1954, retains its fundamental importance today. Carlson shows that on issues of sovereignty and intervention in the post-Tiananmen era Chinese policy has been ‘more than just saying no’ (Carlson 2006). Indeed, he charts an evolution from limited approval and reluctant acquiescence in the early 1990s to tentative involvement in multilateral intervention by the end of the decade, and thereby demonstrates that the Chinese foreign policy elite has largely accepted intervention as part of the great power package in the post-Cold War order. Kim similarly argues that the underlying premises of China’s sovereignty focus are gradually being chipped away (Kim 2006). At the same time, however, Carlson stresses that collective memories of past sovereignty violations remain vibrant, and concludes that Beijing’s willingness to go along with the current intervention agenda is tenuous and contingent. Thus, while China’s Myanmar policy may evolve over time, it does not make sense to begin with the expectation that it will buy fully into established global commitments (Chan et al. 2008).

Arguments about China’s intervention in Myanmar therefore need to be made chiefly within the framework of its indigenous strategic culture, shaped both by continuity and change during a long and turbulent history. The starting point is the Chinese world order formed in antiquity (Fairbank 1968). Although contemporary scholars look in the Confucian texts that distil the public philosophy of that order for perspectives on intervention (Bell 2006), there is a sense in which the point is moot. While the Chinese world order comprised a set of concentric circles with the Sinic zone at the core, the really important divide was binary. There was civilization and there was barbarism. Under the mandate of heaven, the Chinese emperor was entrusted with administration of civilized society in its entirety. What the barbarians got up to was essentially of no concern. If this was then ’an empire without neighbours’, the issue of intervention did not arise (Mancall 1968: 63).

Nevertheless, there did emerge within this world order a persistent strategic culture. Indeed, from Johnston’s analysis of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), it is apparent that two such cultures developed from interpretations of China’s Seven Military Classics. The dominant operational paradigm was a *parabellum* or hard realpolitik culture. In modern debate, this is closely aligned with the hard-core realist position fashioned by Carr, Morgenthau and Kissinger. The recessive symbolic paradigm was a Confucian-Mencian culture which, though assigned a backseat, performed an important legitimating role through the creation of approved symbols (Johnston 1995). In modern debate, this has something in common with liberal analyses and
their interest in ethics of intervention, though the precepts formed within each tradition differ.

Johnston is careful to note that his argument is not timeless, but rather focuses on the socialization of Chinese decision makers in a particular historical era. There is nonetheless a clear sense in which the two Ming strategic cultures remain visible today. In an increasingly pluralistic and competitive policy environment characterized by an array of important think tanks (Glaser and Saunders 2002; Shambaugh 2002), both cultures are present. More than a decade ago, Christensen argued that ‘China may well be the high church of realpolitik in the post-Cold War world’ (Christensen 1996: 37), and few would dispute that a *parabellum* strategic culture remains vibrant in China now. Alongside it, however, is an emergent Confucian-Mencian strategic culture. Though at least as recessive as its Ming counterpart, and in truth still at a developmental stage in its modern incarnation, this culture can be glimpsed in appeals to Confucianism designed to counter China threat theory and bolster the self-esteem of cultural nationalists (Deng 2006; Gries 2006). Yet more significantly, it can be seen in neo-Confucian debates about China’s place in the global order (Bell 2008: 19–37).

Examining the work of both early and contemporary Confucian scholars, Bell makes a point that also surfaces in Johnston’s survey of Ming strategic culture: Mencius is the ‘normative reference point’ for Confucian analysis of warfare (Bell 2006: 41). In his writings, Bell finds several precepts that relate to debate of humanitarian intervention. One is that ‘punitive expeditions’ are acceptable, provided they seek to liberate a people oppressed by tyrants and succeed in retaining the support of the subject people. Here, the underlying belief is that the primary obligation of government is to secure the peace if individuals are not well fed. By contrast, many human rights violations stressed by Western thinkers are not seen by Confucians as grounds for intervention. A second is that citizens of the target society must welcome the intervening power. A third is that rulers who launch any form of humanitarian intervention must be at least potentially virtuous. A fourth is that the intervening power must have some moral claim to support from the wider world (Bell 2006: 37–40).

Arguments about Chinese intervention in Myanmar can therefore proceed down two main tracks. One is a straightforward realist line about China’s strategic interests. The other is a Confucian-Mencian line about precepts governing intervention in the contemporary world. Feeding this perspective into global debate, three points arise as critically important. The first is that there is no irreconcilable conflict here. Contemporary Confucianism does not stand in firm opposition to intervention. The second is that differences do arise when justifications for humanitarian intervention are examined. Broadly, a Western focus on human rights confronts a Chinese focus on human welfare. The third is that the Confucian requirement for an intervening power to secure global backing generates a
presumption in favour not simply of a coalition of the willing, but of a UN mandate.

Finally, in an analysis of potential Chinese intervention in Myanmar it is important to gain some idea of how arguments proceed on the side not only of the intervener, but also of the intervenee. While little work has been done on Myanmar’s foreign policy elite, there is every reason to believe that hard realpolitik became the settled strategic culture soon after independence from Britain in 1948. Internally, civil war quickly spread across much of the country, generating a stark militarization of social relations. Externally, knock-on effects from the Chinese Revolution saw defeated Nationalist contingents take up positions in eastern parts of Burma and prompt a classic Cold War response as CIA operatives also staked out positions inside Burma. Together, these developments enabled the army by the late 1950s to emerge as the essential institution within the state, and from the early 1960s to establish a blanket control that has not been broken to this day. Moreover, from the early years of postcolonial Burma there is clear evidence that hard realpolitik was the predominant elite culture (Callahan 2003). Today, the junta balances soft regional economic diplomacy with a hard strategic posture, investing heavily in an army that is now the second largest force in Southeast Asia after its Vietnamese counterpart (Tow 2001).

At the same time, there are hints that in recent years the junta has sought to mimic the harmony talk now resurgent in China. For Myanmar’s autocracy, as for China’s, harmony can be a helpful notion when the core task is to build forceful national bonds (Holliday 2007). This is not to say that in Myanmar there is a deep well of Confucianism, which historically has East Asian roots, nor that the harmonious discourse sometimes visible in contemporary Myanmar is anything other than opportunistic. Nevertheless, at a time of ‘Burmese bandwagoning with China’ (Johnston and Ross 1999: 284), neo-Confucian themes may have some resonance. Furthermore, in relief and recovery efforts in regions affected by Cyclone Nargis there has been some accommodation between government officials and external agencies (Tripartite Core Group 2008). However, it is too early to say whether this presages a fresh era in junta relations with the outside world.

**Arguing about intervention in Myanmar**

For more than 20 years, the issue of external engagement with Myanmar’s internal affairs has been widely debated by both state and non-state actors. The key triggering events were the crushing of student-led 8-8-88 democracy protests and the installation of a formal military junta in September 1988 (Lintner 1989), plus that junta’s subsequent failure to implement the results of a May 1990 general election, won in a landslide by the democratic opposition. Behind these headline stories, many further forms of human rights abuse have long fuelled global concern (Amnesty International 2009;
US Department of State 2009), as has fragmentation of political control in border areas peopled mainly by minority ethnic groups (Callahan 2007; South 2008). In recent memory, September 2007 saw democracy protests led by Buddhist monks forcibly suppressed by the military machine (Human Rights Watch 2007), the early months of 2008 found the junta launching a campaign of political intimidation in support of a Yes vote for its constitutional referendum (Human Rights Watch 2008), May 2008 witnessed a feeble and cynical initial response to the destruction wrought by Cyclone Nargis, and May 2009 saw the regime initiate widely-derided judicial proceedings against democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi for violation of her house arrest. Throughout, the Myanmar junta has been viewed by many as an ‘outlaw’ regime in Rawlsian terms (Rawls 1999).

Nevertheless, from an examination of the course of debate since the late 1980s, it is evident that the most aggressive positions on intervention in Myanmar are rarely taken. In the aftermath of the brutal defeat administered to democracy protesters in September 2007 there was a flurry of interest in armed intervention. The Irrawaddy carried a piece under the headline ‘Apocalypse Naypyidaw!’ (Yeni and Aung Zaw 2007), and the junta reportedly issued a 20-page rebuttal (Yeni 2007). Similarly, in the immediate wake of Cyclone Nargis intense global frustration with the junta generated talk of forcible humanitarian intervention, led by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner (2008). However, in the state sector no figure in a position of real power seriously proposes launching military action, and in the non-state sector no known group is able to take out the junta by military means. The practical significance of this strand of thinking is therefore close to zero.

By contrast, the somewhat less extreme positions found one rung down the parallel ladders of interventionist types have many exponents. Aggressive state pressure is most visibly promoted by the US and its allies in the form of sanctions. Since the late 1980s, many nations have imposed political sanctions, and since the late 1990s the US has incrementally applied broad economic sanctions. Recently the EU has also imposed targeted economic sanctions. Bans on humanitarian aid channelled through governmental and supra-governmental agencies are also extensive. In the non-state sector, formal government action is mirrored, and in many ways led, by action undertaken by corporations, consumers, humanitarian agencies and activists. For most leading brands, at least in the West, Myanmar is now too toxic to figure as an investment destination or trading partner. Scarcely any major global corporations have dealt with Myanmar for more than a decade, and many Western consumer groups instinctively reject economic links with the country (Holliday 2005a). To a lesser but still significant extent, many major humanitarian agencies have for years declined to operate inside the country. Again, their policies are often shaped by public sentiment that, in turn, is guided chiefly by a small number of activist groups.

Moving into the realm of non-coercion, consensual state engagement has been promoted by many key powers. Indeed, this is the best
characterization for the ongoing mission of the UN, which has sought through two visits by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and a series of trips by his Special Adviser, Ibrahim Gambari, to stimulate dialogue between major political forces. That neither the Secretary-General nor his envoy registered anything more than limited success does not alter the fact that the UN focuses its efforts on consensual state engagement. In the non-state sector, consensual civil engagement is less easy to identify, chiefly because it is hard for humanitarian agencies seeking to facilitate political change to enter the country. Nonetheless, some action has been taken, notably in the border country that is home to many of Myanmar’s ethnic minorities (Callahan 2007; South 2008).

Finally, discursive state pressure has been the main mode of intervention promoted in Asia. At intervals throughout the past 20 years, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has sought not merely to talk to the junta, but also to put pressure on it to speed up the pace of political reform. This was a major motivation behind the decision to admit Myanmar in 1997, and it has formed a central plank of ASEAN strategy ever since (Acharya 2001). Again, the fact that little success has been registered is irrelevant. In the non-state sector, only limited use has been made of discursive civil pressure. Many global corporations and humanitarian agencies take the view that Myanmar is a black-and-white case. So long as the country is mired in autocracy and destitution, they want nothing to do with it. Should it shift from impoverishing its people and trampling on their human rights to something more decent and civilized, they would be happy to engage fully. Few organizations adopt more nuanced positions.

**Chinese intervention in Myanmar**

The 2000 kilometre border that separates southwest China from eastern Myanmar ensures that the peoples of what are now two countries have long had significant relations. Reaching back into history to a time when sovereignty resided in the person of a supreme ruler, both China and Burma operated tribute systems. Fairbank reports that in 1818 Burma was required to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor once in every 10 years, with missions advised to travel through Yunnan (Fairbank 1968). In the middle of the nineteenth century, however, Britain’s colonial intervention generated major social and political change, establishing frontiers with the world beyond that remain familiar to this day, and prompting ‘the birth of modern Burma’ (Thant Myint-U 2001: 10). Once Burma secured independence from Britain and China made its revolution, formal state-to-state ties developed. Burma was the first non-communist country to recognize the People’s Republic in 1949.

Relations became more fraught when China chose to support the rebel Communist Party of Burma in the 1950s. Moreover, during the most
intense phase of the Cultural Revolution, anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon in 1967 marked a period of mutual hostility. Only in the late 1980s, when military repression of democracy protests in Rangoon in September 1988 was mirrored by the Beijing massacre in June 1989, did the two states decisively overcome their difficulties and present a common face to global criticism. Thereafter, ties between the two, while never entirely cordial, were by and large strong, with leaders finding themselves on the same page on many questions. In defiance of much Western opinion, but in conformity with most Asian thought, they particularly agreed for many years that the core realist principle of national sovereignty trumped almost any other in the global arena, and that matters like democracy protests and treatment of ethnic minorities were of strictly domestic concern. Furthermore, through trade, investment and large-scale infrastructure projects undertaken by major Chinese state-owned enterprises to build dams and transport natural resources, the two countries worked together ever more closely. However, cracks in the façade of unity started to become visible in the middle of the present decade. The causes were partly internal to Myanmar, partly internal to China, and partly generated by outsiders.

Inside Myanmar, a junta purge and dismantling of the Military Intelligence apparatus in October 2004 abruptly removed a key Chinese communication network (Egreteau and Jagan 2008: 62–3). Soon thereafter, the leadership’s decision in November 2005 to relocate the capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw, and to do so without notifying Beijing in advance, was symbolically important. Indeed, for China, long the main provider of diplomatic cover and de facto security guarantees for Myanmar, it was unacceptable. Little more than a year later, in January 2007, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN Wang Guangya told the Security Council that China believed the Myanmar situation to be problematic. ‘It cannot be denied that Myanmar is now facing many political, economic and social challenges and that some of its problems are quite serious’, he said. He held that, in relation to suggestions made by ASEAN, ‘China sincerely hopes and expects that the Myanmar Government will give due consideration to those recommendations, listen to the call of its own people, learn from the good practices of others and speed up the process of dialogue and reform’ (UN Security Council 2007a: 2). Although much of Wang’s speech argued that the Myanmar issue was chiefly the domestic concern of a sovereign state, this was a key shift in Beijing’s policy.

Furthermore, later in the year China publicly broke ranks with Myanmar by allowing the UN Security Council on 11 October 2007 to issue a critical presidential statement promoted by the US and UK (UN Security Council 2007b). A follow-up press statement was issued on 14 November 2007, and on 2 May 2008 a further presidential statement was released (UN Security Council 2007c, 2008). When enhanced Security Council engagement was debated in early May 2008 in the immediate wake of Cyclone Nargis, China’s position was that Myanmar should be encouraged to cooperate
with the international community to facilitate emergency relief efforts in its southern delta.

Also informing this shift were, however, broader changes within China. Conscious that three decades of economic growth had propelled the nation to a position of regional prominence and strength, officials became actively engaged in ‘linking up with the international track’ (Wang 2007). Without in any way rejecting the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, top leaders started to debate how China might refine its global role (Wen 2004). While many different interests and perspectives fed into this debate, and no unified position has yet been reached across Beijing’s bureaucratic fiefdoms, things have clearly started to change (Glaser and Medeiros 2007).

Throughout the developing world, China has become more active (Eisenman et al. 2007), even though in many of the world’s trouble spots, notably Africa, its charm offensive frequently combines economic support and cultural ties with a strategy of strict non-interference (Wild and Mepham 2006; Kurlantzick 2007; Alden et al. 2008). Nevertheless, there have also been occasions on which China has adopted a more flexible line, and its evolving Myanmar policy is one such case.

That China made some of its first political moves in relation to Myanmar was, moreover, driven by political pressures in the wider world beyond the bilateral relationship. Despite substantial pressure from Western powers, Myanmar by the middle of the present decade had done little to fall in line with their policy prescriptions. Following brief periods of freedom at the end of the 1990s and the start of the present decade, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was again under house arrest. Despite some signals that it might reach out to other political forces, the junta was apparently as determined as ever to impose a narrow conception of political development on the nation. In these circumstances, Western powers sought to reach an accommodation with Beijing on policy towards what they saw as a pariah state. By November 2006, this issue was said to be ‘front and center’ in the US relationship with China (Washington Post 2006).

The result was the October 2007 presidential statement in which the UN Security Council ‘strongly deplor[ed] the use of violence against peaceful demonstrations in Myanmar’, and ‘call[ed] on the Government of Myanmar and all other parties concerned to work together towards a de-escalation of the situation and a peaceful solution’ (UN Security Council 2007b). The November 2007 press statement also used the term ‘deplor’ with regard to high numbers of arrests and detentions, and expressed ‘concern’ for prisoners’ welfare. The May 2008 presidential statement reaffirmed ‘all the expectations expressed in those statements’ (UN Security Council 2008).

Throughout, it was widely assumed that Beijing was playing a key role in facilitating trips by UN envoy Gambari to Myanmar, first by persuading the junta to issue him a visa, and second by leaning on the generals to accord him at least a minimal level of access and assistance (Egreteau and Jagan 2008: 66). None of this diplomatic activity, conducted mostly behind the
scenes, generated a political breakthrough, and for many months Gambari looked to be achieving little. Nevertheless, the light it threw on China’s role was important. Beyond the state sphere, China has long had a deep economic and social engagement with Myanmar, and its explosive recent growth and global hunt for energy intensified it (Zweig and Bi 2005). More generally, the role of foreign trade and investment in China’s economic transformation (Lardy 1995), and the expansion of Chinese business networks (Redding 1990), have affected Myanmar just as much as the rest of Asia. Bachman notes that most of the states on China’s periphery are less dynamic economically, more disorganized socially, and less entrepreneurial. ‘Into these vacuums, Chinese traders have moved’ (Bachman 2000: 49). Today, many parts of southwest China’s hinterland, from the city of Mandalay in Myanmar’s core up to Kachin State in the north and across to Shan State in the east, are dominated by Chinese businesspeople and traders. However, Chinese entrepreneurs rarely view investment in political terms (Hong and Sun 2006), and in contrast to the situation in the West neither corporate executives nor consumers attempt to read politics into Myanmar business. Indeed, the market-liberal contention that the business of business finds no more devoted exponents than Chinese entrepreneurs in Myanmar.

China is, then, a low-level interventionist power in Myanmar. In the non-state sector Chinese are by and large off the scale of intervention, taking no interest in politics. In the state sector things are different, though movement up the ladder of intervention has been limited. On the whole, Beijing remains committed to nudging the junta in a reformist direction, hoping that in time it can institute a durable political settlement, and staying all the while in the background as a mainly benevolent big brother. Nevertheless, recent policy changes, as well as shifts in its wider strategic culture, suggest that arguments about China’s intervention are more complex and nuanced than would have been the case only a few years ago.

**Arguing about Chinese intervention in Myanmar**

In Myanmar, China operates at or near the bottom of the parallel ladders of intervention. The linked questions for this article are whether, at a time of ‘power shift’ in Asia (Shambaugh 2005), Chinese officials should enhance their intervention, and Chinese outside the official realm should add a political dimension to their economic and social engagement. In both domains, the range of policy instruments possessed by China and the Chinese is far greater than for any other state or people. The option of military action, practically inconceivable for most states, is real for Beijing. Trading links and social ties also generate many policy tools. Since the dominant strategic culture in China remains hard realpolitik, it is in this context that the Myanmar problem must first be considered (Lee et al. 2009). At the same
time, however, attention can be paid to the recessive Confucian-Mencian paradigm.

Acknowledging the hard-nosed realism of China’s predominant strategic culture, efforts are periodically made to paint Myanmar under the thumb of its junta as unstable and dangerous, and to draw Beijing into enhanced intervention by this route. Notably, Threat to the Peace, commissioned by Nobel laureates Václav Havel and Desmond Tutu and released in September 2005, presented low-grade civil war, refugee problems, human rights violations, drug production and trafficking, health scares and potential instability as regional issues demanding intervention (DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary 2005). Similarly, claims that military action against minority groups constitutes a slow genocide have been used to anchor pleas for forceful intervention (Rogers 2004; Horton 2005). In the event, however, none of these initiatives provoked large-scale Chinese action.

Nevertheless, there are other grounds on which Beijing might in future find realpolitik reasons for intervening in Myanmar. Looking at recent trajectories, it is clear that while China in the reform period has become a fair approximation of the developmental state, Myanmar in the phase of maximal repression since 1988 has exhibited features of the predatory state (Evans 1995). Moreover, Myanmar is caught in many of the traps identified by Collier as key constraints on development (Collier 2007). It fell into the conflict trap soon after independence in 1948, and is still scarred by civil war and by a situation in which ‘Political power is in the hands of specialists in violence’ (Callahan 2007: 3; also see Callahan 2003). It has fallen into the natural resource trap through exploitation of large oil and gas reserves since the late 1980s. Although it is not landlocked with bad neighbours, there are clearly aspects of its neighbourhood that constrain development. Finally, while this is not a case of bad governance in a small country, for Myanmar has some 54 million citizens, the political and administrative record is abysmal. In all this, there are reasons why Beijing might want to turn Myanmar from a predatory to a developmental state, characterized by bureaucratic rationalism even if still under military control.

Offsetting the many aspects of the Myanmar problem that could trigger forceful Chinese intervention are, however, larger considerations. Mostly these relate to how other regional powers might react if China were significantly to enhance its intervention. In the immediate sub-region, ASEAN has always sought to become an effective instrument for managing relations with Beijing (Acharya 2001). Overt Chinese intervention in Myanmar would upset regional norms and understandings fine-tuned over decades. Similarly, Japan has used its large overseas development aid budget both to socialize China, and to maintain strong links with ASEAN states, including Myanmar (Holliday 2005b). It too would react negatively to a ratcheting up of China’s Myanmar policy. India also has no desire to witness a boosting of Chinese engagement (Egreteau and Jagan 2008). For overarching considerations of regional balance that weigh heavily in the scales of any realist
assessment, Beijing has strong reasons to maintain its restrained stance on Myanmar.

From a realist perspective, Beijing’s strategic calculations are then hard to second guess. It is unlikely that the wealth of analysis produced by officials and think tanks has fundamentally miscast China’s Myanmar policy. However, there are two other possible ways to address the issue. One derives from China’s recessive, but slowly re-emerging, Confucian-Mencian strategic culture, and the approved symbols it generates. The other can be found in the platform now being built by Chinese socialization into international institutions.

The key Confucian precepts about intervention are first that material wellbeing is paramount, second that local people must be comfortable with foreign engagement, third that those who operate politically across a border should do so for virtuous reasons, and fourth that the wider world should be supportive. On the first issue, there is real human need and suffering in Myanmar. Isolated reports hold that the economic situation inside the country is not too bad with, for instance, Myat Thein arguing that the sheer fertility of a nation in which many people still live on and off the land ensures that few fall below subsistence levels (Myat Thein 2006). Against this, however, due consideration must be given to voluminous reports issued by international agencies that point in a very different direction, documenting high rates of poverty, disease and mortality (UNDP 2009).

On the second issue, Chinese engagement in Myanmar clearly provokes a wide range of reactions. For many ordinary citizens, the sheer weight of Chinese economic control comes close to informal colonization. In a context of official xenophobia, visible in 1962 coup-leader General Ne Win’s decision to drive out many foreigners, and sustained in overt and covert ways by his successors, such emotions are substantially reinforced. There is also, however, a broad popular desire for release from army control that has pushed the country into penury over the past half-century. This was publicly displayed in the opposition’s landslide election victory in 1990, and is apparent in many reports released by humanitarian agencies. It seems likely that many citizens would welcome Chinese intervention aimed at tackling some of the worst official corruption and abuse and, more generally, at promoting reform.

On the third issue, an intervening agent need not act wholly virtuously, with no regard for self-interest. It is therefore acceptable for Chinese state leaders to have mixed motives for intervening in Myanmar, provided there is a reasonable degree of virtue in what they seek to do. Their action could be undertaken partly to stabilize a nation on their southwestern border, partly to boost Chinese influence in a strategic state, and partly to protect Chinese economic interests. At an important level, it will need to secure internal political support (Shirk 2007). However, provided it is also undertaken at least in part for the benefit of the people of Myanmar, it passes the virtue test. A similar point applies to the non-state sector. Pursuit of a
range of business interests can be fully endorsed from a virtue perspective, provided it also benefits local people.

On the fourth issue, there would certainly be mixed feelings in the wider world about enhanced Chinese intervention in Myanmar. At a time when many are pondering the impact of China’s rise on the balance of influence in Asia (Heller and Rawski 2007), ASEAN states would raise strategic concerns and look first and foremost to the impact on their own national interests (Percival 2007). More distant states could well share those forebodings. However, the point that has already been made is powerful in the Myanmar case. This is a country subject to authoritarian control of a particularly intractable and inept kind. Although much has been tried, little sways the regime from its chosen path. Indeed, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged as much in February 2009, when she noted in Jakarta that neither sanctions nor engagement have influenced the junta. In these circumstances, the outside world is now anxious to seize any form of political leverage that can be found. If that leverage is most obviously Chinese, then UN support is conceivable.

Neo-Confucian strategic culture thus generates arguments for a more expansive Chinese intervention in Myanmar on the part of both state and non-state actors. Furthermore, through socialization processes that are currently drawing China ever more into international organizations and attendant shared understandings and responsibilities, those arguments can be readily linked up with global calls for something to be done about the military machine that has ruled Myanmar with an iron first for close to 50 years. While coercive action is not on the cards, almost any non-coercive intervention could garner support from neo-Confucian precepts inside China and acquired understandings in the wider world.

In practical terms, this means that Chinese officials should be encouraged to increase the diplomatic pressure placed on the Myanmar junta, using the many economic, social and political levers at their disposal to generate full cooperation with the UN Security Council and, more widely, the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar. In the short term, the aim should be to increase the junta’s respect for agreed international initiatives and its willingness to heed global demands for meaningful dialogue with opposition and minority groups on an agenda of national reconciliation and political reform. In the medium term, multiparty talks convened by the UN and brokered mainly by Beijing are a possibility. In the long term, China may need to participate in peacekeeping efforts if political change leads to violence in the Myanmar case (Holliday 2008).

It also means that Chinese working on the margins of the state sector in state-owned enterprises and private corporations should be encouraged to reflect on the political consequences of their Myanmar engagement. Although the socializing effects of participation in international organizations do not apply to these individuals, they are not totally divorced from the foreign policy process. Indeed, Bachman speculates that socioeconomic sources are likely to have the largest impact on Chinese foreign policy in
years to come (Bachman 2000). In turn, it is therefore possible that the foreign policy elite will one day exercise a reverse influence on the corporate world. At the same time, Confucian precepts do have meaning for many of these individuals, and should be made to resonate more fully with them. There is no reason to expect Chinese economic engagement to move into campaigning mode or take on overtly political stances. More responsible business practices would, however, generate a large increase in human welfare inside Myanmar, and would enable China to play an important leadership role in the sphere of corporate social responsibility (Holliday 2005a).

Conclusion

It is widely understood that contemporary China has a dominant hard re-alpolitik strategic culture, and will brook no challenge or criticism when its core interests are at stake. In this context, the Taiwan issue is often cited. However, as the Myanmar problem does not look to be that kind of case, wider considerations can apply. Then two platforms for enhanced intervention become visible. One is China’s own Confucian-Mencian strategic culture which, though recessive, is re-emergent. The other is Beijing’s recent willingness to accommodate other viewpoints on issues that do not threaten its core interests. It is on these twin platforms that global debate with China should focus, not in the naïve hope that the Myanmar problem will be in some sense solved, but rather in an attempt to generate some meaningful progress in a very difficult context.

In the foreseeable future, the key political event inside Myanmar will be the 2010 general election. If the junta succeeds in holding a nationwide poll and in constructing a discipline-flourishing democracy, it will partially civilianize a polity that for more than 20 years has been controlled solely by generals. It could thereby stabilize a regime that, despite its monopoly of force and willingness to use it, has sometimes looked tenuous and fragile. All of this would be greatly welcomed by China, and would occasion no change in its Myanmar policy. By contrast, if the junta proves unable to deliver a more inclusive and stable polity in 2010, Beijing may have to consider enhancing its intervention.

Then the wider world should be prepared to rethink the demands it places on China. Sanctions are of no interest to Beijing or other Asian powers, and in any case have manifestly failed to deliver on their stated objectives. Aung San Suu Kyi is by no means as central a figure for China as she is for much of the Western world, and democracy itself is of no real concern. All of this needs to be acknowledged by outsiders looking into China and insisting that it do more to promote change in Myanmar. Nevertheless, there are grounds for a convergence of views on the Myanmar problem. China is interested above all in stability and development, which may one day generate realist reasons for intervention. Even if this does not happen, however, Beijing can be reminded not only of its global obligations, but also
of precepts that lie deep in its national tradition and point to enhanced intervention in a country that for too long has been subjected to incompetent and brutal rule.

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Notes

1 Myanmar is the country formerly known as Burma. The change was decreed by the military junta in June 1989, when many states, divisions, towns, streets, mountains and rivers were also given new English names. Rangoon, for instance, became Yangon. This article falls in line with the junta’s changes. For the period up to 1989 it uses Burma and associated names. For the period after 1989 it uses Myanmar and associated names.

2 The Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar comprises 14 countries. At its first meeting in December 2007, representatives came from Australia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, UK, USA, and Vietnam. The EU’s rotating presidency has subsequently generated marginal membership changes.

References


