

Towards a New “Humanitarian Front”? Myanmar and the Geopolitics of Empire

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Myanmar has been gripped by abhorrent ethnic violence in recent weeks – violence which has begun to cast doubt on the democratic future of the country. The sectarian and religious bloodletting between the Buddhist Rakhine people and the Muslim minority known as the Rohingya, has led to an international outcry and a swift military response from the government. This sort of violence, something which is not entirely new in the region, threatens to tarnish the reforms made by the nation in the last twelve months.

However, with the eyes of the world focused on the Southeast Asian country, a much more significant and covert war is taking shape: a proxy war in which the United States and its allies use a variety of violent and non-violent means in their quest to block Chinese economic investment and development in Myanmar. It is against this backdrop that the recent changes, ranging from the ascension of Aung San Suu Kyi to the current ethnic strife in Sittwe, must be understood.

Violent Conflict and Chinese Interests

The armed conflicts in Myanmar correspond directly to large-scale Chinese development projects throughout the country. Essentially, long-standing ethnic and sectarian conflicts are being fomented by international forces which seek to destabilize the country, thereby loosening the grip of Chinese economic investment on the country. This is not to say that the conflicts are entirely fabricated but, as in Syria, Libya, and countless other examples around the world, the issue is spun by corporate-controlled media to obscure the reality that the issue is being manipulated from behind the scenes by the forces of Western imperialism.

The violence that has erupted among the Rakhine and Rohingya groups has shocked the World. However, seen from a more objective perspective, the recent violence serves a vital geopolitical function for the United States. The center of the recent violence has been the city of Sittwe, capital of the Rakhine State on the northwestern coast of the country. This city is at the center of one of China’s most crucial international investments, the Sittwe port and pipeline project. This project, a twin oil and gas pipeline which would traverse Myanmar to link China’s southwestern Yunnan province with the Indian Ocean would, consequently, provide the Chinese land-based access to energy imports from Africa and the Middle East. Because of US naval dominance, not being completely reliant on commercial shipping is an integral aspect of the overall Chinese strategy.

The pipeline itself is not the only issue for the Chinese. Sittwe is the site of the major Chinese-funded port which, aside from being the starting point of the pipeline, is a vital access point to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Imports such as minerals and

other raw materials from Africa as well as oil from the Middle East would be shipped through this port (along with the Pakistani port of Gwadar) for sale on the Chinese market. It is for this reason that Sittwe is of crucial significance to Chinese economic development. Naturally, as Sittwe and the rest of the Rakhine state descends into chaos and the international community clamors for some form of intervention, the port, pipeline and other projects cannot continue as planned.

Sittwe and the Rakhine region are not the only flashpoint in this proxy war against Chinese economic development. The Kachin province in northern Myanmar has seen its own share of violent conflict. The Kachin rebels, fighting the central government, have only recently stepped up their guerilla war against the government. This increased violence is understood to be a serious threat to the stability of the region and, consequently, the viability and security of the Chinese pipeline which must travel through Kachin before terminating in Southwest China. In fact, the Chinese are reportedly paying Burmese soldiers in the North to provide additional security for the project in light of the recent violence. This fact indicates not only the strategic necessity of the project for the Chinese but also their understanding that the violence in the region is aimed as much at them as it is at the government of Myanmar.

Aside from the pipeline, the Chinese are heavily invested in a number of hydroelectric dam projects, none bigger or more economically significant than the Myitsone Dam Project, a large scale investment estimated at upwards of \$4 billion. The dam, which would provide power primarily for Southwest China but also for Myanmar to a lesser extent, is part of a development plan by the Chinese to address the vital issue of energy generation, particularly for interior China. However, due to the violence in the region as well as environmental concerns raised by local residents (as well as the possibility of Western arm-twisting), the project was recently put on hold. Naturally, this is a source of tremendous irritation for Beijing, which sees this as yet another example of Western meddling in the affairs of Chinese economic development.

The armed conflicts throughout the country have made the investment climate in Myanmar very difficult for the Chinese. In spite of this however, the Chinese are still determined to reassert their influence. They remain close allies of the government which, despite recent overtures to the United States and the West more generally, still remains somewhat skeptical of the motivations of Washington.

Western “Soft Power” to Block the Chinese

One might ask how the United States actually fits into these various conflicts in Myanmar. It is true that there are no “boots on the ground” as far as anyone knows, nor is Washington directly intervening in the country. Instead, as with so many other strategically crucial regions of the world, the US employs soft power to achieve its strategic aims. One prime example of this sort of power-projection comes in the form of NGOs operating inside Myanmar with funding from the US government. Additionally, we see India, and other nations traditionally at odds with China, being used as a wedge to pry Myanmar out of the Chinese sphere of influence. However, there is no better example of the use of soft power in Myanmar than the rise of Aung San Suu Kyi to international superstardom.

It would not be fair to argue that Aung San Suu Kyi and the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar is entirely a tool of the West. It certainly has merits and has evolved out of a

genuine desire of much of the population to see democratic reforms and the liberalization of their country. However, it would be intellectually dishonest not to point out the obvious connections between the policies of the US State Department, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the pro-democracy movement embodied by the Nobel Prize winner and darling of the West, Suu Kyi.

For more than a decade, the National Endowment for Democracy has been active inside the country, ostensibly supporting the pro-democracy movement. However, considering the fact that the NED and its various subsidiary organizations are directly funded by the US State Department, it is logical, and indeed correct, to conclude that the groups receiving their funding and support are aligned with US interests. In fact, we've seen this as recently as this week, when Suu Kyi made her public remarks warning against investment with Chinese firms while supporting dealing with Western oil companies such as Chevron and Total. This is a prime example of the way in which Suu Kyi and her supporters represent the interests of the United States as much as they represent those of the people of Myanmar.

Beyond just Suu Kyi and her political influence in the country, the National Endowment for Democracy has a strong grassroots presence in the country, helping to shape discourse by funding dozens of "educational institutions"; naturally these institutions are amenable to US interests in the country. Additionally, the NED uses innocuous phrases such as "freedom of Information", "transparency", and "NGO strengthening" to describe the multitude of activities in which it is engaged. Here, it should be noted that I am not arguing that all of these initiatives are bad. On the contrary, some of them empower local people in various fields or help raise important issues. However, the overall scope of the engagement illustrates not just an interest in the future of Myanmar, but an active participation in shaping the next generation of leaders who will look away from China and towards Washington.

It is important to note that the NED has been active in the Rakhine region for years, working precisely with the Rohingya population now embroiled in this violent conflict. In fact, in a 2006 report funded by the NED, we see clearly the way in which the United States uses the cover of human rights and the rights of children to undermine and otherwise subvert the government. This should not be taken as suggesting that this ethnic minority is irrelevant or that their struggle is without some merit. Rather, it is simply to point out the way in which the US, under the auspices of human rights and children, is able to entrench itself inside the country and its institutions.

As Myanmar undergoes the transition to a more open, democratic society, so too does it open itself to the dangers and fruits of international engagement. While the country has the opportunity to enrich itself and bring economic and social benefits to the people, it also runs the risk of allowing itself to be part of the global strategy of the United States to contain China and prevent its economic expansion. As its geographical location indicates, Myanmar finds itself at the center of a geopolitical and economic proxy war. As the imperialist ruling class of the West desperately clings to power in hopes of extending their hegemony for another century, so too does China seek to gain the status of superpower on the world stage. For Myanmar, this could be an economic boon: the chance for wealth and prosperity for a people who have suffered under the yoke of imperialist domination for the last three centuries. However, equally important, will be the decisions made in the next few years which will have serious implications for Myanmar's present and its future.

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