

POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN BURMA & CHINA
Perspective of the Ethnic Nationalities
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First, I would like to state that it is not really possible to discuss “Political Relations Between Burma & China” from the “Perspective of the Ethnic Nationalities”. This is because when we talk about the ethnic nationalities, we have a very divergent group of people with very different perspectives, and very different needs.

For example, Arakan State and Chin State have no interest in China. They are more interested in relations with India and Bangladesh. Karen State, Karenni state and Mon State are also more interested in relations with Thailand. Of the seven ethnic states, it is only Kachin State and Shan State that are affected by relations with China.

Therefore, we cannot talk about the “Perspective of the Ethnic Nationalities” by itself. There can only be a “Perspective of the Ethnic Nationalities” if we are talking about it within the context of the Union of Burma. I say this because some people get worried when we talk about the ‘Ethnic Nationalities’. They think the ethnic nationalities want to divide the democracy movement, or the Union of Burma.

In other words, within the context of the Union of Burma, different organizations can have different view points. For example, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) or the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) can have very different perspectives but their policies must benefit the whole of Burma. It cannot benefit only a certain group of people.

Who or what then represents the perspective of the ethnic nationalities? The National Democratic Front (NDF) and the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD) started in 2000 to re-build unity among the seven states. Today we have the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) which includes every group within each state – non-ceasefire as well as ceasefire groups, civil society & women and youth groups.

The basis for the unity on which the ENC was founded is the Panglong Agreement which established the Union of Burma. This is a very important point to note. The Burmese military sees the ethnic nationalities as separatists who want to break up the Union. But the irony is that the ENC was able to unite the seven states based on the concept of the Union of Burma, not as separate and independent ethnic states.

What then is the policy of the ENC towards China and Burma’s other neighbours?

But before I talk about the ENC’s policy, I should clarify that I do not represent the ENC. I am one of many advisors to the ENC. I will speak about what I know about the ENC so that we can have a meaningful discussion. The Joint-Secretary of the ENC Executive Committee, Saw David Taw, is in the audience. He has agreed to correct me if I am wrong.

The main thrust of the ENC's policy is national reconciliation and dialogue. This means that, while the ENC is firmly committed to democracy and human rights like the National League for Democracy, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) and the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), the ENC would prefer not to have a confrontation with the SPDC.

In other words, if possible, the ENC wants the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Shan State Army – North (SSA-N), United Wa State Army (UWSA) and others to keep their ceasefire agreements with the SPDC.

If possible, the ENC would also like to see the Chin National Front (CNF), Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP), Karen National Union (KNU), Shan State Army – South (SSA-S), and others to enter into peace talks with the SPDC.

This is not appeasement. The ENC knows exactly what it wants for a future Burma and it will not compromise its position but it believes that political problems should be resolved by political means. It is willing to enter into a dialogue with the SPDC.

However, if the SPDC will not enter into a dialogue but tries to use force to disarm the ceasefire groups, or attacks the non-ceasefire groups, the ENC will not hesitate to use force to defend the people in the seven ethnic states.

Thinking along these lines, the ENC is not opposed to the National Convention (NC). If the KIO, NMSP, SSA-N, USWA and others can make the constitution process more meaningful, they are encouraged to do so. The NC process may not lead immediately to democracy and federalism but the ENC is willing to accept the outcome if it leads to a real dialogue between the ceasefire groups and the SPDC.

There are many ways to make the NC process more meaningful and inclusive. But again, if the SPDC does not use the opportunity it is given and tries to use force to get its way, a more violent confrontation with the SPDC cannot be ruled out.

In the same way, the ENC does not look on Burma's neighbours as enemies. Unlike the majority Burman who have been isolated from the neighbouring countries, the Arakan and Chin people have always existed alongside their Bangladeshi neighbours. The Chin and Kachin people have also learnt to live with their Indian neighbours as have the Kachin, Shan and Wa people with their Chinese neighbours. Even to this day, the Shan, Akha, Palaung, Pa-O, Lahu, Wa, Karenni, Karen and Mon people have smoother relations with their Thai neighbours than the Burmans have with the Thais.

Therefore, the ENC's policy towards Burma's neighbours is one of accommodation/give and take, rather than one of confrontation. Some purists may see this as a sell-out with regards to democratic and human rights ideals. But nothing is so black and white.

For example, Burmese refugees and various ethnic nationalities live on the borders of Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. In theory, the ones in India should fare better than most since India is the biggest democracy in the world and the ones in Communist China should fare the worst. But ironically, the reverse is true.

Again in terms of economic development and basic cultural rights, the ethnic nationalities in China fare even better than the ones in Thailand.

Therefore, in crafting its foreign policy, the ENC takes into account many factors especially those prevailing on the ground in areas adjacent to the seven ethnic states. It realizes that in order for the Union of Burma to live peacefully with its neighbours, it needs to take into account the national interests of its neighbours and see how those interests can be accommodated without infringing on Burma's sovereignty and in a way that will benefit all the people of Burma.

For example, the ENC does not see that it is beneficial to keep the Union of Burma isolated from its neighbours. It does not see the need for protective barriers to be raised in terms of trade or economic opportunities. Instead, it sees that if Burma's borders could be opened and people were given the economic freedom, all would benefit, especially the neglected border areas where the ethnic nationalities live.

In other words, India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos are not threats but economic opportunities for development and growth for the Union of Burma. Of course, social safety nets and protection for the disadvantaged must exist but open borders are seen by the ENC as being more positive than negative.

Another example of the ENC's approach to foreign affairs is China's economic development. It has developed at an incredible rate but it is imbalanced. The gap between the developed eastern seaboard and the less developed south western China is growing. To address this imbalance, China needs access to the Indian Ocean via Burma. Some Burmese democrats might see this as a threat to Burma's sovereignty and feel the need to block Chinese access to the ocean. This is a remnant of Cold War thinking. The ENC sees this more as an opportunity for Burma, especially the democracy movement, to build something of mutual interest with China.

The same is true of India. Ever since independence in 1949, India has struggled with the problem of its seven northeastern states. Although the main issue has been political, the problem cannot be solved without better economic opportunities for the people of northeastern India. Access for development to the northeast from the rest of India is restricted to a narrow land corridor between Bangladesh and Bhutan. The only way to solve the problem is if Burma would develop economically. This would not only open up the northeast but give access to India to markets in China and southeast Asia to India. Bangladesh, Laos and Thailand would also benefit.

Therefore, as far as the ENC is concerned, both China and India have a very strong incentive to open up Burma. The main road block or obstacle is the isolationist and anti-reform SPDC. Is it then not possible for the Burmese democracy movement to explore ways to work with India and China to bring about change in Burma? Is bringing about change not the common ground between the east and the west?

Ideally, the ENC would like to see a United Nations initiative backed by China, the USA, and India, to convene a multi-party talk on Burma. The SPDC will be a key participant and it can even bring in Russia as its champion. The talks will explore how the SPDC can bring about change in Burma gradually so that there is a smooth transition to a more open and economically beneficial system of government.

The multi-party talks will not engage in a debate about sanctions or engagement but work out how the people of Burma can best be helped. Health, education, poverty alleviation, and economic and self-development for the people will be the key focus. Based on these issues, the inclusion of various national stakeholders in the many processes identified will be agreed to and brought into a dialogue with the SPDC.

In this way, the SPDC will not need to fear that it will be pushed out prematurely. It can also take credit for having improved the living condition of the people. For the democrats and the ENC, not only will there be change but the possibility of a more democratic system of government in the future.

Thank you.

Note:

The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB)'s representation of the ethnic nationalities is based on the fact that the NDF is one of its four constituent bodies. The other three are the

- Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB),
- Members of Parliament Union (MPU), and
- National League for Democracy – Liberated Area (NLD-LA).

The NDF's membership today consists of 8 groups –

- Karen National Union (KNU),
- New Mon State Party (NMSP),
- Arakan Liberation Party (ALP),
- Chin National Front (CNF),
- Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF),
- Pa-O People's liberation Party (PPLO),
- Lahu Democratic Front (LDF), and the
- Wa National Organization (WNO).

Apart from the KNU and the NMSP, the other groups cannot legitimately represent their respective states. Of the remaining six – one is from Arakan State, one is from Chin State, and four are from Shan State.

The ALP is one of four political groups in Arakan State and it is a member of the Arakan National Council (ANC).

The CNF is also one of several Chin political groups and it is a member of the Chin National Council (CNC).

The PSLF, PPLO, LDF and WNO represent minorities in the Shan State. The main Shan groups are not part of the NDF. In addition, the main Palaung, Pa-O, Lahu and Wa groups are not part of the NDF. They have ceasefire agreements with the SPDC.

None of the Kachin political groups are part of the NDF. Most of the Kachin groups including the main Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) have ceasefire agreements with the Burmese military.

The main Karenni group, the Karenni National Progress Party (KNPP) is not part of the NDF.