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China, Myanmar reaffirm strategic vows

By Clifford McCoy
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Myanmar leader Senior General Than Shwe's visit to China last week won public support from Beijing for his government's planned national elections on November 7. With that backing, Myanmar's generals can now proceed unconcerned by Western criticism of the election process or the results.

Two points stood out from Than Shwe's highly anticipated visit: China's overt and unequivocal support for the elections, and Myanmar's assurance that security would be maintained during and after the polls.

The latter is of special concern to Beijing due to heightened tensions between Myanmar's government and ethnic insurgent groups along their shared and strategically significant border.

Than Shwe's entourage included Prime Minister Thein Sein and junta number three Shwe Mann, both of whom officially retired from the military last month, presumably so that they can run nominally as civilians in the elections. The military's new joint chief of staff, Lieutenant General Min Aung Hlaing, was also part of the visiting group.

Than Shwe's trip followed on Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's high-level visit to Myanmar in June to celebrate 60 years of diplomatic relations.

The New Light of Myanmar, Myanmar's state mouthpiece English daily, said on

September 11 that Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed thanks for the clarification of Myanmar's election plans and progress.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu told reporters on September 7, "We hope that the international community will provide constructive help for Myanmar's upcoming election and avoid bringing negative effect to bear on Myanmar's political course and regional peace and stability."

Two days later, underscoring Beijing's support, she told reporters, "A smooth election in Myanmar is in the fundamental interest of the Myanmar people and conducive to regional peace and stability ... China respects the independently chosen development path of the Myanmar people and hopes that the election can proceed smoothly."

In a gesture that indicated Myanmar's generals clearly still plan to guide government policy after the democratic transition, Than Shwe assured China's leaders of a continued close friendship after the polls. "Myanmar will continue to develop strategic relations with China after the election, and the handover from the military," he said. Than Shwe's visit was likely geared to dispel any concerns in China that a change in government would undermine their significant investment interests in the country.

Many analysts believe that China's overriding concern is whether a new democratic order will be able to guarantee stability along its southern frontier. This is especially important to China given Myanmar's role as an outlet for its exports to the Indian Ocean and more importantly as a gateway for future oil and gas imports destined for its landlocked southern regions.

A planned new 2,380-kilometer crude oil pipeline will extend from a transshipment facility at the western Myanmar port of Kyaukpyu to Kunming in China's southwestern Yunnan province. The pipeline will reportedly carry 22 million tons of crude oil per year.

A similar gas pipeline will stretch longer at 2,806 kilometers and will transport 12 billion cubic meters of gas per year to China's Guizhou province and Guangxi's Zhuang Autonomous Region. The pipelines, as well as a refinery, are expected to be completed by 2013. Construction on the Chinese portion of the pipelines began earlier this month.

Beijing is thus especially concerned about the deteriorating relations between Naypyidaw and ethnic insurgent groups along the Myanmar-China border. Decades-old ceasefires between the groups and the government are in jeopardy over the generals' insistence that they join military-controlled Border Guard Forces.

An outbreak in new fighting would likely shut down trade in many border areas and jeopardize the pipeline routes. A Myanmar Army offensive in August 2009 against the Kokang ethnic group resulted in some 37,000 refugees fleeing across the border into China and drew a rare rebuke from Beijing. A flurry of diplomatic and military meetings followed amid assurances by Myanmar's generals that the violence would not spill into China.

During last week's visit, Than Shwe seemed keen to reassure Hu that stability would be maintained throughout the election-related political transition. He was quoted in Chinese state media on September 8 saying, "Maintaining peace and stability on the border is of the utmost importance to both countries."

Hu reciprocated by saying, "China respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Myanmar, understands and supports the Myanmar government's efforts for national reconciliation." He went on to vow stepped up cooperation with Myanmar on border management, combating cross-border crime, and improving living conditions in the impoverished border regions.

The New Light of Myanmar wrote on September 11 that Hu had also pledged China would not "accept and support any groups who would carry out anti-Myanmar government movements in border areas to damage the bilateral relations".

Divide and rule

China is widely believed to play a double game on the border. It publicly supports the military regime, as apparent during last week's Than Shwe visit, as a major diplomatic ally and [economic](#) patron. Beijing's support and influence also goes some way in preventing the generals from doing anything rash against the ethnic groups that could upset stability along the border.

At the same time, Beijing quietly provides advice and support to the ethnic insurgents, many of whom were former insurgent fighters in the once Chinese-backed Burma Communist Party and still maintain close relations with Chinese military and intelligence officials. Covert support to the insurgents is aimed at providing some leverage vis-a-vis the generals in Naypyidaw.

A new deadline for ceasefire groups to join the Border Guard Force expired on September 1, with none of the groups accepting the scheme. The United Wa State Army (UWSA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Shan State Army (North) (SSA-N), and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) have all declared that they will not participate in the Border Guard Force due to fears that ceding control of their military wings would result in a loss of political influence as well.

Tensions between the army and the militias increased after the deadline passed, with both sides putting their troops on heightened alert and government reinforcements arriving in areas across from ethnic positions. For the second time this year, the Myanmar [government](#) recently ordered its officials and workers with non-governmental organizations to leave areas along the China border controlled by the ceasefire groups.

China, too, has increased security and [surveillance](#) on its side of the border, according to people familiar with the situation. Most observers believe that Myanmar's generals will hold off on any military offensive against the groups until after the polls and the new

elected government is installed. Some observers, however, have not discounted the possibility of small punitive actions as a way of punishing the ceasefire groups for their resistance.

The deadline followed the latest rounds of talks in August between the government and the groups. At those talks, ethnic leaders were urged to cooperate with Election Commission (EC) officials in preparation for the polls. The UWSA and NDAA replied that they will not allow EC officials into their areas since they have decided against participation in the elections.

Several other ethnic groups in Myanmar have organized their own political parties to contest the polls. None of these parties, however, represent the interests of the ceasefire groups. An ethnic Kachin group, the Kachin State Progressive Party, which is tied to the insurgent Kachin Independence Organization, was denied registration rights. Several other parties have complained of government interference and difficulties in meeting campaign requirements as stipulated by new election laws.

The elections have been widely condemned by independent human-rights organizations and Burmese exile groups who believe the junta is bent on rigging the election results in favor of its associated candidates to maintain power. Several Western governments, including the United States, have voiced concern over whether the elections will be free and fair.

China's public show of support for Myanmar's election plan comes at a time when international support is growing for a United Nations-led commission of inquiry into allegations that military-run governments have committed crimes against humanity over the past 20 years.

The call has been backed by US President Barack Obama's administration, which has said it would support any efforts to establish a commission. Obama's administration had earlier signaled moves to engage rather than isolate the junta, and even hinted at possible aid flows in exchange for political concessions, including the release of political prisoners.

In an apparent snub to international opinion, Hu was quoted on state television on September 8 saying, "China pays a great deal of attention to relations with Myanmar. Consolidating and developing Sino-Myanmar cooperation and friendship is our unswerving policy. No matter how the international situation changes, this policy will not alter."

Than Shwe's visit to the Shanghai World Expo 2010 and China's first special [economic](#) zone at Shenzhen could signal a renewed military interest in replicating China's market-driven model for developing Myanmar's backward economy. Significantly, the Myanmar pavilion at the Shanghai trade show was completely paid for by Beijing.

Bilateral [trade](#) between China and Myanmar reached US\$2.9 billion in 2009, making

China Myanmar's third largest trade partner. During Wen's June visit, the two countries signed a series of agreements on aid, energy and hydroelectric [projects](#) worth an estimated \$8.17 billion. As of January this year, Chinese investment in Myanmar totaled \$1.8 billion, or 11.5% of total [foreign investment](#) in the country