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Russia and Myanmar: Moscow's Expanding Influence?

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Russia has been strengthening its links with Myanmar, reflecting its increased interest in strengthening its politico-economic and geopolitical interests in Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

IN RECENT years, Russia's relations with Myanmar have strengthened, particularly in the defence sector. Russia is the second largest source of weapons for Myanmar, slightly ahead of China, according to an 18 March 2021 analysis by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute; between 2000 and 2019, Myanmar purchased US\$1.7 billion worth of arms from China and US\$1.44 billion from Russia.

Not surprisingly, links between both countries' military establishments are openly warm. In November 2020, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu held talks via video link with the Myanmar military chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. It was stated that Russia was ready to expand cooperation with Myanmar, including joint work in the framework of the "ADMM-Plus" expert working group on countering terrorism.

Supplying Myanmar with Missiles

Shoigu was quoted as saying that despite the pandemic, "we continue to implement military delegation exchange events, including with your personal participation". Shoigu also congratulated General Min on being awarded an honorary doctorate from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

He was given the title of "Honorary Professor of the Military University" of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, as well as the medal "For distinction" In turn,

General Min noted that despite the geographical distance, “we keep in touch, and you support us in difficult moments”.

Regular visits by high-level Russian defence officials as well as Myanmar military officers to each other’s countries have unsurprisingly taken place. The Irrawaddy, a Myanmar publication reported on 25 January 2021 that Shoigu’s January visit to Myanmar illustrated that both sides planned to expand military cooperation.

Russia agreed to supply Myanmar with Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile systems, Orlan-10E surveillance drones, and radar equipment, the publication added. Noteworthy is the publication’s quoting General Min as saying that “just like a loyal friend, Russia has always supported Myanmar in difficult moments, especially in the last 4 years”.

Mutual Political Support?

General Min reportedly has visited Russia six times, the last having taken place in May 2020, the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany — a very important and symbolic holiday in Russia.

Myanmar sends its officers to Russian military academies for training, as well as to China, India and Japan, and Israel. Its military also participated in some Russian military exercises.

Political support from Russia has not been found wanting. Russia, with China, ensured that the UN Security Council could not issue a statement condemning the military’s assumption of power in Myanmar in February. However, as the situation deteriorated, both countries supported a UNSC resolution in March which condemned the use of force, inter alia.

Nevertheless, the presence of Russia’s Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin at the 27 March Army Day in Naypyidaw was a clear signal of Moscow’s determination to pursue its interests there. Fomin was quoted as saying that Russia “adheres to a strategic line to intensify relations between the two countries”.

He added that Myanmar was considered a reliable ally and strategic partner in Southeast Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific region. Fomin received a medal from General Min during his visit which he stressed was to reciprocate the Myanmar general’s visit to Moscow in May 2020. Myanmar also coincidentally approved Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine in early February.

Russian Motivations

Russia’s most immediate consideration is obviously commercial. Myanmar is a good and welcome customer of Russian weapons. At this point in time, Russian weapons sales constitute the bulk of its economic interaction with Myanmar.

Second, Russia also seeks to raise its geopolitical profile in the region, and to signal to Myanmar (and its ASEAN neighbours) and the world at large, that Russia would not

allow Western pressure on Myanmar to guide, let alone dictate its policy on the country.

In doing so, Russia is fully aware that in the face of Western sanctions and severe criticism of Myanmar's military leadership, its support for Myanmar could become an additional apple of discord between Russia and the West.

Third, Russia wants to add weight to its long-stated stance that there should be no interference into the internal affairs of a sovereign state and in the process, indirectly cock another snook at the West. Syria was the first case in which Russia challenged Western attempts to change the status quo.

Fourth, its strong support for Myanmar also indirectly complements China's backing of that country while ensuring that should Chinese influence wane, Russia's might increase. Having the overall support of at least one of two UN Security Council Permanent Members is important to Myanmar.

Of late, China has become a target of Myanmar's opposition forces. Some of its businesses were subjected to physical attacks in March. Moreover, Myanmar's military itself is reportedly ambivalent about China's growing influence in the country. China is a major investor and trade partner of Myanmar, unlike Russia.

Russia's Southeast Asia Foothold Through Myanmar?

Russia's actions have naturally been welcomed by Myanmar. There must be no doubt that it will remain a leading supplier of weapons as well as a reliable political supporter.

Overall, however, having a foothold in Myanmar does not automatically lead to Russia becoming a major player in the region, until and unless its economic interactions with the rest of ASEAN, including Myanmar itself, rises considerably and outside the military/defence sector.

At the same time, Russia must tread carefully in Myanmar, lest China becomes alarmed at any rapid and considerable increase in its influence, while China's is lessened, for one reason or another.

Moreover, unlike China, Russia's relatively exiguous resources are concentrated in its relations with the former Soviet republics and the West.

Ultimately, whether Russia becomes a major player in Myanmar and Southeast Asia is also dependent on whether it has the will and inclination to move away from its current and entrenched China-centric policy (towards the East) and devotes the necessary resources and energy to that end. As of now, that remains much in doubt.

Chris Cheang is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
