Chinese President Xi Jinping Visits Myanmar

Chinese President Xi Jinping became the first high-level official from the PRC to pay an official visit to Myanmar in 20 years. He had been invited by President Win Myin and was in the Southeast Asian nation from 17 to 18 January of this year. And although the focus of the talks between the Chinese Head of State and Myanmar’s true leaders was on economic cooperation, it was the political implications of the visit that garnered most attention from commentators.

Political and economic aspects of cross-border relations have always been closely interwoven together, which is particularly true of China’s key global strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Based on preliminary analysis of the outcomes of President Xi Jinping’s visit to Myanmar, yet another crucial breakthrough had been made in this project’s implementation.

First of all, let us focus on the timing (from a political perspective) of the official visit by the leader of the second most powerful nation in the world to a country that is de facto in a state of almost complete “political isolation”. This state of affairs is the “work” of the global human rights movement, which is an integral part of the political system in the West (as a whole), an increasingly ephemeral in nature entity.

Myanmar (the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma until 1988) has pretty much always been in the West’s bad books for many reasons, including the military’s control over the country’s political system for many decades. Still, such a system allowed the nation to overcome various internal political crises (which threatened Myanmar’s integrity on more than one occasion) and to make positive socio-economic changes.
For a short period of time, Myanmar’s negative image (in the eyes of the West) transformed into a positive one after the National League for Democracy (NLD) had won the 2012 by-election. Its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, had been held under house arrest by the military for a long time. In 1990, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, thus becoming an idol for the rest of the world thanks to the global “human rights” movement.

However, soon “human rights activists” felt sorely disappointed because it became clear that Aung San Suu Kyi’s position on key internal political issues was de facto similar to that of the military once she has taken on a role in government (vs. the opposition). It is also worth noting that, in the meantime, the military continues (but, of course, not as visibly) to play the role of the guarantor of stability in the nation.

Defenders of “human rights” became completely enraged by Aung San Suu Kyi’s refusal to “play nice” in relation to Rohingya issues that had begun many decades ago and then turned into a fully fledged crisis for the nation as a whole. And the consequences for two thirds of this ethnic minority group in Myanmar (there are a little over 1 million Rohingya people altogether there) were tragic.

Still, it should be noted that according to a dedicated research study published by the nation’s government in January of this year, Rohingya people were the victims of war, not genocide.

In fact, on 11 December 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi said as much at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, where she had travelled voluntarily.

In the current climate (we reiterate) of almost complete political isolation and stigmatization of Myanmar, the meeting between President Xi Jinping and Aung San Suu Kyi as well as General Min Aung Hlaing (the Commander-in-Chief of the nation’s Armed Forces) took on a symbolic significance. But then again, both of these government officials had met with the Chinese leader earlier, during their visits to the PRC.

Incidentally, Beijing has its own human rights-related issues that plague its relationship with the West. We are referring here to the ongoing and varied attacks on the PRC because of the situations in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and Hong Kong.

The key political outcome of the recent visit by President Xi Jinping to Myanmar was the fact that the second most powerful player in the world offered assistance to the Southeast Asian nation and its leadership. In fact, during the meeting between PRC’s leader and President Win Myin, the high-level visitor directly stated (among other things) that China firmly supported Myanmar in pursuing a development path suited to its national conditions.

Such support is especially timely considering the fact that “human rights” bodies within the United Nations are becoming increasingly active with regards to the Rohingya issues.

Still, another fundamental point in the joint statement (issued at the end of the visit) may become of an even greater significance in the long-term, i.e. the deepening of the “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” between the PRC and Myanmar and the acceleration of “the construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a crucial part of their cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

At this point, some degree of clarification is required. In fact, this critically important section of the BRI had, for a long time, been viewed as part of an even more ambitious initiative: the (“Multi-Modal”) Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM). The BCIM was meant to connect the city of Kunming (in China’s southwestern Yunnan province) with one of India’s largest cities, Kolkata (on the coast of the Bay of Bengal). And the CMEC could have potentially (but not necessarily) become only a branch to the BCIM.

The Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor would have provided China with a quick land-based route to the Indian Ocean not only via Kolkata but also Chittagong, Bangladesh’s main port. In other words, the BCIM would have become as important (not only from an economic but also a political and strategic perspective) as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is being constructed right now and aims to link PRC’s western provinces with the port of Gwadar on the coast of the Arabian Sea.

All the nations agreed on the need for the BCIM with the exception of India for fairly obvious reasons (political in nature), which the New Eastern Outlook has discussed on more than one occasion.

And now, the CMEC has become a critically important part of the BRI. It will connect Kunming in China with Kyaukpyu, a major town in the Rakhine State of Myanmar where Rohingya people had lived earlier. Just as Chittagong and Kolkata, Kyaukpyu is situated on the coast of the Bay of Bengal, and will also, therefore, provide the
PRC with access by land to the Indian Ocean.

It will cost approximately $1.3 billion to transform the fairly run down town (with a population of around 45,000 people) into a fully functional sea port. Kyaukpyu will be connected to China’s Yunnan province (where President Xi Jinping stopped on his way back from Myanmar) by a network of roads and railways as well as commercial and industrial infrastructure.

Perhaps as a consequence of implementing this large-scale project, living conditions (in terms of housing and work places) in the region will improve, thus encouraging the return of approximately 700,000 Rohingya people who had fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar’s Rakhine State in autumn 2017. However, if this does come to pass, the obstinate ethnic minority will then definitely have to give up their hope of achieving independence from the government.

As a result of the political situation shaping up in the region at present, India’s reaction towards Chinese leader’s visit to Myanmar itself and its outcomes was, as expected, negative and guarded. New Delhi has its own plans for this nation, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi clearly indicated during his meetings with the leaders of Myanmar.

However, now India may end up “sandwiched” between two “corridors” (the BCIM and CPEC) originating in the PRC. From a perspective of an outside observer, the aforementioned scenario may be viewed in a very positive light in, of course, the absence of any types of concerns within the framework of relations between New Delhi and Beijing (plus India and Pakistan).

However, New Delhi has its own opinion about the issues plaguing its relationship with the PRC and does not need any “outside” advice on this matter.

There was no official response to President Xi Jinping’s visit to Myanmar from Japan, i.e. another leading player in the region. Still, the Global Times (a daily, published by the official People’s Daily newspaper of China’s ruling Communist Party) has cited the Asahi Shimbun paper in its report saying that a Japanese foreign ministry official spoke of Tokyo’s supposedly anxious reaction towards the visit.

Nowadays, Tokyo is preparing for a truly pivotal event that, surely, the Chinese leader’s visit to Japan (scheduled for the spring of this year) will prove to be. And on 17 January, Minister for Foreign Affairs Toshimitsu Motegi talked about the importance of this trip during a press conference.

All in all, the Chinese leader’s visit to Myanmar (a country of seemingly mediocre standing in the world) has had an effect on a whole range of pressing issues that have arisen in recent years in the Indo Pacific region.

*Vladimir Terekhov, expert on issues relating to the Asia-Pacific region, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”*