

OPENING THE STILLWELL ROAD

Letter – Published in The Nation, Bangkok – 11 May 2007. Headline in The Nation: BURMESE JUNTA UNDERSTANDS FORCE, NOT NEGOTIATION TACTICS.

Re: “Road Links Untapped Region”, Business World, May 9. This article highlights the problem posed by Burma. To make the dream come true, much depends on the Burmese State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) because more than 1,000 kilometres of the 1,700 kilometre Stillwell Road connecting India and China lies in Burma. But unfortunately, experience over the last 19 years has shown that the SPDC is unlikely to deliver, blocking the development of India as well as China.

While both India and China are developing very rapidly, the development is not balanced. Both India’s North-East and China’s South-West are underdeveloped. If this imbalance continues, these regions could destabilize both India and China. The key lies in providing access to China and South East Asia for India’s North-East and access to the Indian sub-continent and the Indian Ocean for China’s South-West.

Although India is trying very hard to please the Burmese generals in order to get them to cooperate, it is not likely to happen any time soon. India needs to learn from the Chinese experience. In 1990, China sold arms and poured in millions of dollars in aid money to upgrade Burma’s highways, railways and waterways, so that the Indian Ocean was accessible. The SPDC took the money, however despite this, no highways, railways, waterways or access to the Indian Ocean have materialized. India’s campaign to woo the generals by selling arms and cooperating in military operations will likely yield similar results.

The generals do not understand friendship except as a target for exploitation. They understand force and power. China began getting more favours from the SPDC, such as the sale of cheap gas, when the Chinese government started pushing the SPDC in 2006 for reforms. The Chinese, despite their veto on a motion to place restrictions on Burma at the UN Security Council, are still continuing to call for the SPDC to reconcile with its people and move towards an ‘inclusive democracy’. This will give China better results than India’s campaign.

It is time both India and China, as well as Burma’s other neighbours realize that their competition for the SPDC’s favours will have an adverse impact on their national interests. Their hand of friendship will only be exploited, and the SPDC will favour those they fear. Instead of competing for the SPDC’s favours, India and China need to cooperate in order to achieve a common goal – access to new markets. A consensus by Burma’s neighbours will enable both ASEAN and the United Nations to better persuade the Burmese generals that they need to open up the country and provide for the needs of the people of Burma, as well as the needs of its neighbours. Such cooperation would benefit everybody. Without a consensus and cooperation, the SPDC will continue to exploit differences and play one country off against another.

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