China–Burma Geopolitical Relations in the Cold War

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical role of geography in the Sino–Burmesa relationship in the context of the Cold War, both before and after the Chinese–American détente and rapprochement in the 1970s. It describes Burma’s fear and distrust of China throughout the Cold War, during which it maintained a policy of neutrality and non-alignment. Burma’s geographic location, sandwiched between its giant neighbours India and China, led it to adopt a realist paradigm and pursue an independent foreign policy. Characterizing China’s threat to Burmese national security as “grave” during its period of revolutionary export, the article notes that Burma was cowed into deference and that it deliberately avoided antagonizing China. It also looks at the history of China’s attempts to break out of U.S. encirclement after the Korean War and its successful establishment of Burma as an important buffer state. After the U.S.–China rapprochement in 1972, however, Burma’s geographical significance for Beijing declined. In this context, Burma’s closed-door policy of isolation further lessened its strategic importance for China. Since 1988, however, Burma’s strategic importance to China has been on the rise once again, as it plays a greater role as China’s land bridge to the Indian Ocean and in its energy security and expansion of trade and exports.

Keywords

PR China; Burma; cold war; foreign policy; geography

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The Cold War came to an end. The Warsaw Pact died a natural death. The collapse of the erstwhile USSR became a reality. The nuclear factor has been a source of a big change in the nature of international relations and the nuclear powers particularly the U.S.A., Russia, Britain, France and China, are in predicament. They have the power, rather the overkill capacity, yet...