

***Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia.* By Thant Myint-U. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. Hardcover: 361pp.**

Thant Myint-U's book is essentially a travelogue. Yet readers who also expect a solid political, economic and strategic analysis of Myanmar's relationship with China and India will not be disappointed. Indeed the author's intricate weaving of the personal, the historical and the political both inform and captivate the audience.

The book is divided into three parts: the first part is devoted to Burma/Myanmar's turbulent modern history; the second focuses on Sino-Burmese relations both past and present; and the third examines the colonial histories and legacies of India and Myanmar. Most current affairs observers tend to characterize Myanmar-China-India dynamics only in terms of the interests of Yangon, Beijing and Delhi. But the book reveals a much more complicated relationship with a detailed analysis of how the rural provinces of China and India are important drivers in national policy planning. Indeed, as the pages turn, it becomes more obvious that the policies dictated by governments in faraway capitals are themselves governed by the need to develop their rural areas and promote cross-border trade.

The very first page of the Prologue posits that since imperial times China has searched for a back-door passage to India through the lands of present-day Myanmar. Chinese policy-makers today have successfully realized the imperial plans of their forebears and are building a direct route to the Indian Ocean via Yunnan and through Myanmar. Additionally, India's north-eastern provinces have always looked to links with northern Burma for mutual prosperity. Both countries harbour an age-old dream of connecting trade and commerce through Myanmar. But history tells us that building these trade links have taken centuries and that they are not yet complete. Colonization and World War II put the otherwise unnoticed and remote areas of Myanmar on the radar of national governments, but they also left behind a succession of armed conflicts, mostly provoked by centuries of migration, racial tensions and geopolitics.

As Thant observes, present-day Myanmar's borderlands are far from peaceful. Although ceasefires have been signed with various ethnic militias, a viable and long-term political solution is yet to be put on the table. Moreover, the northern Chin, Kachin and Shan states each have not one but many armed groups which spill over into neighbouring countries. The Chin National Front, the Kachin

Independence Army, the Shan State Army-South, and the United Wa State Army have significant numbers of men under arms and still control territory where the Myanmar armed forces cannot set foot. These lands are far from the central authorities, and the government is unable to administer or promote development in such remote parts of the country. China faces a similar scenario. Its high national GDP and other economic development indicators apply mostly to the eastern coastal provinces. Unlike Myanmar, the century of internal conflict has passed for China. However, continued national progress can only be assured by equitable development. In part two of the book — “Southwestern Barbarians” — Thant explains in detail how inland provinces such as Sichuan, Guizhou, and particularly Yunnan which border Myanmar lag behind their counterparts on the eastern seaboard. According to Thant, Chinese policy-makers believe that connecting the inland provinces to the Andaman Sea through Myanmar will significantly improve trade and commerce, pushing them to higher levels of economic prosperity. In part three of the book — “The Edge of Hindustan” — the author describes a similar strategy employed by India to develop its north-eastern province of Assam by opening a direct line via north-western Myanmar to the Bay of Bengal. Assam, Thant notes, is also as far away from Delhi as Yunnan is from Beijing, only linked to the rest of the subcontinent by the “chicken neck”, a narrow area of land choked between Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. To complicate matters, unlike Yunnan, it is still a region beset with conflict. Internal conflicts and China’s increasing regional influence have led to suggestions that Delhi isolate north-eastern India from its neighbours. However, some argue that the only viable alternative to lasting peace and development would be for the government in Delhi to transform the north-east into a regional hub similar to Yunnan (p. 291).

Yet as Thant notes, the times are changing, at least for Asia and seemingly for the better. While the “decline” of the West has almost certainly been exaggerated, many would agree that the rise of the East is not. Burgeoning economic growth is invariably accompanied with an increasing thirst for energy and resources and as China and India are well aware, Myanmar possesses the two in abundance. Even after decades of exploitation from colonial rule and resource extraction by Chinese companies over the past two decades, the country still makes neighbours’ eyes sparkle with all its gas, oil, teak, minerals and gems. The author describes several large infrastructure projects underway that are designed to harness Myanmar’s resources. They include the Dawei or Tavoy industrial

zone, which, with an initial investment of \$8.6 billion, will include a deep-sea port, steel, fertilizer and petrochemical plants, and an oil refinery, with highways connected to Bangkok and to the new railway lines linking Yunnan, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. Sea cargo and even oil from the Middle East would pass through Dawei to China and the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, thus bypassing the narrow and congested Straits of Malacca. India is also trying to make progress on the \$400 million Kaladan “multi-modal” project linking Mizoram and Assam through highways and inland waterways to Akyab, a port in south-western Myanmar. With the analyses above, the Epilogue accurately concludes that here too, virtually all trade and commerce with the outside world will be conducted via Myanmar’s sea coast for India’s remote north-eastern province.

After centuries of potential, it appears as though Myanmar is finally set to become the new crossroads of Asia. But the author is fully aware of the unpredictable nature of Myanmar politics and the vagaries of Asian geopolitics, and he is careful not to make firm predictions. Only two scenarios are laid out: first, Myanmar internal affairs continue to be messy and beset with conflict, while natural resources are corruptly exploited with the proceeds lining the pockets of the ruling elite; or second, the new quasi-civilian government enacts reforms, Western sanctions are lifted, the middle class grows larger leading to even more reforms, and a democratic government manages national resources prudently in equal partnership with the neighbours resulting in mutual benefits for all involved. Even hardboiled sceptics would agree that in Myanmar today it is the second scenario that is currently being played out though there is, of course, a long way to go.

Anyone interested in the rapidly evolving landscape of Asia has much to learn from this book. And if the reform process continues in this once isolated country (they are likely to do so), a new Myanmar would indeed be a “game-changer” for all Asia. Thant Myint-U’s book helps us understand some of the rules of this new game.