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rumours and realities in the Indian Ocean**

Working Paper Series

No. 101

November 2008



香港城市大學
City University
of Hong Kong

The Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC) of the City University of Hong Kong publishes SEARC Working Papers Series electronically

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**BURMA'S COCO ISLANDS:
RUMOURS AND REALITIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

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What shall we tell you? Tales, marvellous tales
Of ships and stars and isles where good men rest.

James Elroy Flecker
The Golden Journey to Samarkand (1913)

Introduction

In August 2008, *The Times of India* stated that Indian defence officials were 'concerned, but not alarmed' at reports that China was helping Burma to develop its military facilities on Great Coco Island in the Andaman Sea. The Chinese were said to be constructing two helipads and 'storage systems for arms'. The *Times* also said that China had agreed to 'upgrade' communication facilities on the island.¹ Other regional countries were monitoring these developments closely.

¹ 'China eyeing base in Bay of Bengal?', *The Times of India*, 9 August 2008, found at <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/3343799.cms>>.

For such a small piece of real estate, in such an isolated part of the world, Burma's Coco Island group has had a remarkable ability to generate international interest. Since the early 1990s, these small islands have attracted the attention of numerous activists, journalists and academics, most of who seem convinced that one island at least is the site of a major Chinese intelligence collection station. For many years, the government of India made similar claims, even citing the reported 'base' as evidence of China's aggressive designs in the northern Indian Ocean. From time to time, other claims about the Coco Islands have been heard, relating to their history and legal status.

As these claims proliferated and became more elaborate, they gained credibility, to the extent that they became accepted by many observers as established fact. Yet, none of these claims were based on reliable evidence and at least one was demonstrably false. In 2005, it was established to the satisfaction of the Indian government that there were no Chinese bases in the Coco Islands, and probably never had been. Even so, this myth has developed a life of its own and continues to distort analyses of Burma's foreign relations and the strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific region.

There has long been a dearth of reliable information about Burma, including its defence links with China. This has made it difficult to separate rumour from reality. Given the serious implications of a Chinese military presence in the northern Indian Ocean, however, it would seem timely to take a comprehensive look at the Coco Islands, to determine what former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called the 'known knowns' and the 'known unknowns'.²

Physical Geography

Geographically, the Coco Island group is a northern extension of the Andaman and Nicobar chain.

The group consists of three main islands and several small islets. They lie about 250 kilometres south of Burma's Irrawaddy River delta and are separated from India's North Andaman Island by the 20 kilometre wide Coco

² Press Briefing by the US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, at the Pentagon, Washington DC, 12 February 2002.

Channel. The Bay of Bengal lies to the west of the islands and the Andaman Sea to the east. The largest member of the group is Great Coco Island, which is about 10 kilometres long and 2 kilometres wide. A few kilometres to the north, across the Marshall Channel, lies the much smaller Table Island. Little Coco Island is situated across the Alexandra Channel, approximately 15 kilometres to the southwest of Great Coco Island. Little Coco Island is about 5 kilometres long and one kilometre wide.³

Great Coco Island rises steeply from the sea on its western side, reaching a height of 112 metres, but on the eastern side slopes gradually down to the sea. Table Island rises steeply from the sea on all sides, reaching 44 metres, but as its name implies it has a flat top. Little Coco Island is generally low-lying and is fringed by a coral reef. Large areas of all three islands are covered with tropical evergreen forests. Great Coco and Little Coco islands also have coconut palms on their lower slopes and fringes.⁴ Like mainland Burma, the Coco Islands are subject to the Southwest monsoon, and between May and October experience torrential showers and high winds. As demonstrated in May 2008, when Cyclone Nargis devastated the Irrawaddy River delta, cyclonic storms occasionally develop in the Bay of Bengal.⁵

Colonial History

Before the Chinese ‘bases’ controversy erupted 15 years ago, the Coco Islands rarely appeared in the historical record.

Formerly Indian possessions, they were taken over by the East India Company during the eighteenth century. Being on an ancient trade route between India, Burma and Southeast Asia, however, there were numerous visits by traders, seafarers, pirates and smugglers before and after that time. In 1849, an unsuccessful attempt was made by a pair of British adventurers to establish a

³ This description is taken in large part from Admiralty Chart No.1419, *Bay of Bengal – Andaman Islands: Coco Channel and Northern Approaches to Port Blair*, printed 28 June 1996.

⁴ *Bay of Bengal Pilot, comprising the Southern and Eastern Coasts of Ceylon, the Eastern Coast of India, the Coast of Burma, and the Western Coast of Thailand from Pakchan River to Goh Puket; Also the Andaman and Nicobar Islands* (Hydrographic Department, Admiralty, London, 1940), pp.234–38.

⁵ C.A. Fisher, *South-East Asia: A Social, Economic and Political Geography* (Methuen and Co., London, 1964), pp.420–28. See also *Weather in the Indian Ocean*, Vol.2, Part 7, ‘The Coast of Burma’ (HMSO, London, 1940), p. 100.

small settlement on Great Coco Island.⁶ In 1858, a large prison was built at Port Blair on South Andaman Island, mainly to house the thousands of 'mutineers' sent there after the 1857 Indian rebellion.⁷ The Coco Islands were seen as a source of food for the struggling penal colony, mainly by providing coconuts.⁸ Also, wild pigs roamed Great and Little Coco islands, the legacy of earlier attempts at settlement.

A lighthouse was built on Table Island in 1867 to aid navigation in the area. The British lighthouse keeper was murdered by one of his Indian staff in 1877, after an argument over caste issues. Due to the island's isolation, however, the Chief Commissioner at Port Blair failed to learn of this incident for some weeks.⁹ This lack of close supervision prompted the colonial authorities in Calcutta to transfer jurisdiction over the two Coco islands, Table Island and three small satellite islands, to Rangoon. After the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-6) and Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-3), this small Burmese town had become Britain's administrative capital in Lower Burma. It took a few years for the paperwork to be completed, but in 1882 the Coco Islands formally became part of British Burma.¹⁰

In 1878, the colonial authorities offered a commercial lease on the Coco Islands. It was taken up by a British entrepreneur named Sherlock Hare, who hoped to profit from the islands' dense stands of timber and plentiful coconut palms. However, he met with mixed success and within ten years had been

⁶ N. Iqbal Singh, *The Andaman Story* (Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 1978), pp. 41–42.

⁷ The bricks used to build the infamous cellular jail at Port Blair were brought from Burma.

⁸ The East India Company had attempted to establish a penal colony in the Andaman Islands as early as 1794. Nearly 300 convicts were sent to Port Cornwallis on North Andaman Island, but the colony was abandoned after only three years due to disease. The Port Blair prison continued to be used to house India's political prisoners until 1942. In 1925 it was described as 'the most important [prison] in India'. See, for example, Clare Anderson, *Convicts in the Indian Ocean: Transportation from South Asia to Mauritius, 1815–53* (Palgrave, Houndsmills, 2000), pp.12-13; and *The Indian Year Book 1925* (*The Times of India*, Bombay, 1925), p. 166.

⁹ Andrew Huxley, 'Murder and Madness in *fin de siècle* British Burma', electronic copy of the manuscript provided by the author, 28 October 2008.

¹⁰ The notification order also included Preparis Island, which lies roughly half way between the Coco Island group and the Burmese mainland. See Kiran Dhingra, *The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the 20th Century: A Gazetteer* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006), p.1 and p. 26.

forced to abandon his plans.¹¹ Over the next 50 years the lease passed to a succession of local businessmen, but the islands' remoteness, difficult weather conditions, high transport costs, labour problems, fresh water shortages and disease made such ventures difficult to sustain. A few Burmese settled on the islands, eking out a living between occasional ship visits, and other locals made seasonal visits, but trade was slight and there was no real infrastructure development.¹²

After the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885–6), Britain consolidated its rule over the entire country, but there was widespread resistance. Burma quickly developed a reputation for high levels of dacoity (banditry) and other kinds of violent crime. As a consequence, the colonial prison system came under considerable strain. A number of Burmese convicts were transported to Port Blair in 1907–1908, and another group followed in 1923. Some were later joined by their families and settled there, particularly on South Andaman Island.¹³ However, these transfers did not solve the problem of Burma's overcrowded prisons. In 1925, a Commissioner for Prisons visiting Burma from Britain identified Great Coco Island as a possible site for a new penal colony. At the time, however, this proposal was not pursued.¹⁴

When Burma separated from India in 1937 and became a self-governing Crown Colony, the Coco Islands remained Burmese territory. In 1942, however, along with the rest of the Andaman and Nicobar chain, they were invaded by the Japanese, who valued Port Blair's strategic location near the Malacca Strait. The Andaman and Nicobars also guarded Burma's southern flank, and were within naval striking distance of British-held India and Ceylon. In December 1943, at the urging of the Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, Japan formally handed over political jurisdiction of the Andaman and Nicobar islands (including the Coco group) to the provisional Azad Hind (Free India) government. All the islands remained under the effective control of the

¹¹ Huxley, *op.cit.* Hare only leased the islands; he never 'bought' them. See, however, Renaud Egreteau, *Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy* (Authors Press, Delhi, 2003), p. 52.

¹² Dhingra, p. 71 and p. 283. See also J.L. Christian, *Burma and the Japanese Invader* (Thacker and Co., Bombay, 1945), p. 133.

¹³ Parmanand Lal, *Andaman Islands: A Regional Geography* (Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1976), pp. 55–56.

¹⁴ Ian Brown, 'A Commissioner Calls: Alexander Paterson and Colonial Burma's Prisons', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 2007), p.297.

Japanese Navy, however, until the end of the war.¹⁵

Independent Burma

After Burma regained its independence from the British in 1948, the Coco Islands passed to the new Union of Burma (now the Union of Myanmar).¹⁶ Given the U Nu Government's many other challenges, however, the Coco Islands were a very low priority. Burma even had to ask the Indian government to maintain the lighthouse on Table Island. In 1953, India sought to lease the light, but permission was denied.¹⁷ For many years, the islands were administered as part of Hanthawaddy District, in Pegu Division, but during the 1970s control was passed over to the newly-created Rangoon Division. The statement by Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes to the BBC in 2003, that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had 'donated' the Coco Islands to Burma in the 1950s, and thus surrendered a vital strategic asset, was incorrect.¹⁸

The Coco Island group might have remained shrouded in obscurity, a mere footnote in history, except for two developments which attracted wider attention.

The first development was the creation of a penal colony on Great Coco Island in January 1959 by General Ne Win's interim military administration.¹⁹ It was

¹⁵ G.H. Corr, *The War of the Springing Tigers* (Osprey, London, 1975), 152–53.

¹⁶ In 1989, Burma's new military government changed the country's name to the Union of Myanmar. This change was accepted by the United Nations, but the United States and several other countries continue to use the old forms as a protest against the regime's refusal to acknowledge the result of the 1990 elections, which were won by Burma's opposition parties.

¹⁷ The Burmese were, however, prepared to permit the Indians to service the light. See *Lighthouses of Myanmar (Burma)*, found at <http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/lighthouse/mmr.htm>.

¹⁸ 'Pak will be erased if it uses N-arms: Fernandes', *The Times of India*, 27 January 2003.

¹⁹ Before the penal colony on Great Coco Island was established, Burma had nine Central Jails, 19 District Jails, six Subsidiary Jails and a Borstal Institution for juveniles. The new facility was termed a District Jail in Hanthawaddy District, but it had a special sanction to accept prisoners with sentences of more than five years. *Is Trust Vindicated? A chronicle of the various accomplishments of the*

probably inspired by the old colonial prison at Port Blair, despite the latter's closure immediately after the war.²⁰ Most convicts sent to Great Coco Island were accused of threatening Burma's security or disrupting the country's social stability. After Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962, and the installation of a military government, the prison gained the reputation of being a Burmese 'Devil's Island'. In 1969, it was enlarged to cater for an increased number of political prisoners. They usually served long sentences under terrible conditions, harvesting coconuts and working on 'development projects'. They also had to grow their own food. Of the thousands of prisoners sent there, only three managed to escape.²¹

During the 1960s, many of the prisoners on Great Coco Island sympathised with, or were members of, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Remarkably, they were allowed to hold Party meetings and to celebrate May Day. They also adjusted the prison's radios (which were set only to receive Radio Rangoon) so they could listen to broadcasts from the CPB's clandestine Voice of the People of Burma. In 1969, anger at the harsh conditions on the island reached a crisis point, and the entire camp went on strike for better food. The authorities gave in after seven days. A second hunger strike was held in 1970, and lasted 40 days. A third strike in 1971 was aimed at the entire concept of incarceration on a remote island. It lasted 53 days and resulted in the deaths of eight prisoners. Eventually, the authorities gave in and, in December 1971, all prisoners on the island were transferred to Rangoon's Insein Jail.²²

At some stage after the closure of the penal colony, the facilities on Great Coco Island were handed over to the Burma Navy, which established a small permanent presence there. Before 1988, naval operations in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal were not common, due largely to logistical problems and the poor sea-keeping qualities of the navy's few small patrol vessels. With the expansion and modernisation of the navy after 1988, however, the tempo

Government headed by General Ne Win during the period of tenure from November, 1958 to February 6, 1960 (Director of Information, Rangoon, 1960), p. 65.

²⁰ Bertil Lintner has suggested that the Great Coco Island penal colony was modelled on Indonesia's Buru Island prison, but the latter facility was not opened until 1969. Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Silkworm, Chiang Mai, 1999), p. 272.

²¹ See 'Burma's "Papillon"', *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (May 1999), found at <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=1351&page=1>.

²² The best account of these disturbances is found in Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, pp. 272–74.

of long range patrols increased, and the base on Great Coco Island assumed greater importance. However, there were still no alongside berthing facilities for larger vessels, and the utility of the base for logistical support remained limited.²³ It is currently part of Panmawaddy Naval Region Command.

The 'Chinese Bases' Claim

The second development which attracted attention was the claim, first made by a Japanese wire service in 1992, that China was helping Burma to install radar or upgrade the base on Great Coco Island.²⁴ It was later reported that China was building another base on Little Coco Island.²⁵ As the years passed, stories about these 'bases' proliferated and grew in scale, with activists, journalists and popular pundits making increasingly dramatic claims. The small naval base on Great Coco Island was somehow transmogrified into a large Chinese signals intelligence station, manned by 70 members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and hundreds of Burmese servicemen.²⁶ Ten years after the first stories appeared in the news media, it was routinely being described as a comprehensive electronic intelligence collection facility, China's largest base in Burma, and the PLA's most important listening post outside China itself.²⁷

At first, the main purpose of the Great Coco Island facility was reportedly to monitor regional military activities, especially air and naval movements in the Bay of Bengal.²⁸ Before long, however, journalists and academics began

²³ See, for example, Andrew Selth, 'From Brown Water to Blue Water', *Naval Forces*, Vol.19, No. 6 (1998), pp.30-33. See also Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Maritime Strategy', in Jurgen Schwartz *et al* (eds), *Maritime Strategies in Asia* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 2002), pp. 293-324.

²⁴ 'Burma Queried About Rumoured China-Built Base', *Kyodo News Service*, 17 September 1992.

²⁵ Global Security, 'Coco Islands', found at
<<http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/china/coco.htm>>

²⁶ Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, 'Coco Islands', available at
<<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/china/facilities/coco.htm>>.

²⁷ 'Desmond Ball Unbound', *The Irrawaddy*, 1 June 2004, found at
<http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=3763>. See also Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1998).

²⁸ 'Desmond Ball Unbound'; and Vivek Raghuvanshi, 'Myanmar, China Build Military Ties', *Defense News*, 4-10 July 1994.

claiming that the base was also established to conduct surveillance of India's strategically important tri-service facilities at Port Blair, on South Andaman Island. Some suggested that the Chinese, and their Burmese allies, were monitoring submarine activity around the Indian Navy's base at Visakhapatnam (Vizag) in eastern India.²⁹ In an elaboration of this theme, a number of commentators claimed that the Great Coco Island base was built and equipped by the Chinese to analyse telemetry from Indian missile tests. These included flights by ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles over the Bay of Bengal from ranges in eastern India. The electronic intelligence gathered, it was suggested, was shared with Pakistan to help it develop counter-measures against new Indian weapon systems.³⁰

Reports of a significant Chinese military presence in the Coco Islands also caused concern at the diplomatic level. It was seen by some commentators as an inevitable consequence of Rangoon's foreign policy tilt towards Beijing in 1988, if not evidence that Burma had become a Chinese puppet. After Burma's entry to ASEAN in 1997, the Coco Island 'base' was also cited as proof that Burma had become a Chinese stalking horse in Southeast Asia. Considered alongside China's extensive arms sales to Burma, the new 'base' was viewed as part of a comprehensive plan by Beijing to extend its strategic reach into Burma and the northern Indian Ocean. At a further remove, the reported construction of a military base on Great Coco Island was linked with other developments (such as the modernisation of the PLA), to indicate Beijing's long term expansionist designs in the Asia-Pacific region.³¹

Senior Indian officials joined in the chorus of concern, accusing China of using its facilities in the Coco Island group to 'encircle' and threaten India. In 1998, for example, George Fernandes claimed that China had leased the islands from Burma in 1994, and was planning to turn the 'massive' intelligence

²⁹ Edmond Dantes, 'An In-depth Look at the Asia-Pacific Air Forces and Future Procurement', *Asian Defence Journal* (January 1993), p. 28.

³⁰ 'Chinese "electronic fishing" in the Andamans', *Asian Defence Journal*, December 1994, p. 92.

³¹ See, for example, Brahma Chellaney, 'Promoting Political Freedoms in Burma: International Policy Options', in Johan Lagerkvist (ed), *Between and Isolation and Internationalization: The State of Burma* (Swedish Institute of international Affairs, Stockholm, 2008), p. 67.

collection station on Great Coco Island into a 'major naval base'.³² These fears were shared by other strategic analysts. Some claimed that the Chinese base threatened vital sea lines of communication, including those which passed through the Malacca Strait. In 2005, for example, a firm of US consultants prepared a report for the Pentagon stating that China was constructing naval bases in a wide arc stretching from the South China Sea to the Middle East, to safeguard its energy supplies. This so-called 'string of pearls' included the reported base on Great Coco Island.³³

Yet, despite all the claims made about Chinese military facilities in Burma, very few were based on hard evidence from reliable sources. Most drew on rumours and unverified reports in the news media, recycled on the web by activists and popular pundits. Some stories may have even been deliberately planted by partisan groups pursuing their own policy agendas. A few claims, including at least one made by the Indian Defence Minister, appear simply to have been invented.³⁴ Significantly, at no stage did any government other than India's publicly confirm the existence of any Chinese bases in the Coco Islands. Indeed, in response to George Fernandes' provocative remarks in 1998, the US stated that it had not detected any significant Chinese activity in Burma.³⁵

At one level, the construction of Chinese military bases in Burma seemed logical, given Beijing's strategic interests in the region. Yet, to those with a deeper knowledge of Burma, such a development was inherently improbable. Burma's military leadership only turned to China after the abortive 1988 pro-democracy uprising, when it suffered the sudden withdrawal of Western aid and feared a US invasion to restore democratic rule.³⁶ However, Burma's generals never lost their deep suspicion of the country's largest neighbour, and its long term intentions. It was prepared to accept Chinese arms and aid, but

³² 'China is threat no.1, says Fernandes', *Hindustan Times*, 3 May 1998. See also 'India says China has surveillance base in Myanmar', *Reuters*, 3 May 1998, and Douglas Bakshian, *China-Burma-India Briefing*, 21 May 1998, found at <http://www.fas.org/irp/news/1998/05/980521-prc3.htm>.

³³ Bill Gertz, 'China builds up strategic sea lanes', *Washington Times*, 18 January 2005.

³⁴ This issue is examined at length in Andrew Selth, *Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth*, Regional Outlook No.10 (Griffith Asia Institute, Brisbane, 2007). See also Andrew Selth, 'Chinese whispers: the great Coco Island mystery', *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (January 2007).

³⁵ 'Fernandes: China Using Burma Against India', *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (May 1998).

³⁶ Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?* Regional Outlook No. 17 (Griffith Asia Institute, Brisbane, 2008).

the regime remained intensely nationalistic and sensitive to any perceived challenges to Burma's independence and sovereignty. In these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that it would lease any Burmese territory to a foreign power, let alone permit one to construct military facilities on its soil.

Throughout this entire period, both the Burmese and Chinese governments repeatedly denied that there were any Chinese bases on Great Coco Island, or anywhere else in Burma.³⁷ Yet, such were their records of disinformation, that no-one believed them. Finally, to convince India that it had nothing to fear, the Burmese government invited Indian defence officials to visit the islands, and see for themselves. The regime may have also permitted the Indian Air Force to conduct a surveillance flight over the islands. The Indians found nothing to confirm their earlier suspicions.³⁸ In 2005, Indian government spokesmen conceded that reports of a Chinese intelligence facility on Great Coco Island were incorrect. At the same time, they announced that there were no Chinese naval bases in Burma.³⁹ It was a remarkable about-face on two issues that had preoccupied Indian defence planners for more than a decade.

Rumours and Realities

Given the dearth of reliable information about anything to do with Burma's security, it is difficult to say exactly what facilities do exist on the Coco Islands. On Great Coco Island, commercially available satellite imagery shows an airfield where the old coconut plantation used to be. There is also a small radar dish, a radio aerial, a jetty and a number of buildings, none of which can be considered unusual.⁴⁰ There are no signs of a large base with accommodation for hundreds of servicemen, let alone the radomes, aerial farms and other such installations that characterise major electronic intelligence stations. There are a few buildings on Little Coco Island, and the old lighthouse and its ancillary

³⁷ See, for example, 'Myanmar denies China using its island as a base', *Reuters*, 5 May 1998.

³⁸ 'China eyeing base in Bay of Bengal?', *op.cit.*

³⁹ 'Interview with Admiral Arun Prakash, Chief of the Naval Staff, Indian Navy', *Asian Defence Journal* (October 2005), p. 22. See also 'India says no China defence posts on Myanmar island', *Reuters*, 25 August 2005; and 'No report of anti-India activity at Coco Island', *Indiainfo.com*, 25 August 2005, found at <http://news.indiainfo.com/2005/08/25/2508coco-island-navy.html>.

⁴⁰ Great Coco Island, Google Maps, found at <

<http://maps.google.com/?ie=UTF8&t=k&om=1&ll=14.137117,93.367524&spn=0.03013,0.040169&z=15>>

buildings remain on Table Island, but neither of these islands shows any signs of military activity.

Some Burmese activist groups have suggested that this lack of physical evidence is due to the 26 December 2004 tsunami, which they believe washed away all signs of the Chinese intelligence collection facilities. This claim, however, is simply incredible. It is true that the southern parts of the Andaman and Nicobar chain suffered badly from the tsunami, but the Coco Island group is in the far north and by all reliable reports escaped major damage.⁴¹ Also, the peculiar topographical features of Great Coco Island would ensure that, even if it had been hit by the 2004 tsunami, at least some trace of a major military base would have survived.⁴²

Burma's armed forces continue to operate a small naval base on Great Coco Island. Given its strategic location, it would be surprising if this base did not have a modest intelligence gathering role. If so, the equipment used to perform such a function would probably be Chinese, and it is possible that PLA personnel occasionally visit the island to provide technical assistance. This appears to occur at the other small surveillance and maritime navigation sites dotted around Burma's long coastline. From the latest *Times of India* story, it seems that China is also helping Burma to upgrade its infrastructure on Great Coco Island. However, there is no evidence of a permanent Chinese military presence. Indeed, Burma's new constitution, ostensibly endorsed by a nationwide referendum in May 2008, specifically prohibits the deployment of foreign troops on Burmese territory.⁴³

Nor is there any truth in the claims — still repeated by some observers — that Nehru gave the Coco Islands to Burma, which in turn leased them to China. The islands have been Burmese for more than a century, and remain so.

Given this assessment, the popular perception of an aggressive Chinese thrust

⁴¹ See, for example, Burma Campaign UK, 'Tsunami: Did Burma escape the consequences?', 7 January 2005, found at http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/more.php?id=149_0_1_0_M.

⁴² The best maps to show the physical geography of the Coco Islands were produced by the Surveyor General of India 1943, in preparation for the Allied campaign to retake the islands from the Japanese. See, in particular maps HIND 1023, Sheet No. 86.

⁴³ *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (Ministry of Information, Rangoon, 2008), p. 11.

into the Indian Ocean, supported by a large military facility in Burma's Coco Islands, needs to be reviewed. No-one doubts China's strategic interests in the area, or Beijing's close relations with the generals in Naypyidaw, but claims of a Chinese physical presence in Burma and Beijing's political influence over the regime have been greatly exaggerated.⁴⁴ Similarly, it would seem sensible to reassess Burma's role in China's purported 'string of pearls' strategy. Rather than provide military facilities, it is far more likely that Burma will sell its natural gas to China. Burma's generals also seem attracted to the idea of a pipeline to pump Middle Eastern oil overland, from a deepwater port on the Burmese coast to a terminal in southern China.

Descriptions of Burma as a pawn in China's grand designs are also misplaced. Indeed, Burma has used its critical geo-strategic position between China and India to great advantage. In managing its relations with these two competing powers it has won significant concessions from both.⁴⁵ Despite their enormous strategic weight, neither of Burma's security-conscious and energy-hungry neighbours is likely to do anything which might upset the notoriously prickly military regime in Naypyidaw. This gives Burma's generals considerable diplomatic leverage. It also makes it very difficult for other members of the international community to put pressure on the military government, to make the political and economic reforms that so many Burmese want.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Over the past 20 years, a number of myths have arisen about the Coco Islands. Despite repeated warnings from some Burma-watchers, and attempts by a few scholars to set the record straight in academic publications, these myths have proven remarkably resilient. There are a number of reasons for this. One is simply the lack of verifiable information about the islands, a problem exacerbated by the unreliability of official statements issued by both the

⁴⁴ Andrew Selth, 'Burma, China and the Myth of Military Bases', *Asian Security*, Vol.3, No.3 (2007), pp. 279–307.

⁴⁵ Joshua Kurlantzik, 'Playing us for fools: Burma's government is run by a group of ignorant xenophobes. So how come it keeps outsmarting us?' *The New Republic*, 11 July 2008.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Andrew Selth, 'Burma's "Saffron Revolution" and the Limits of International Influence', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 62, No .3 (September 2008), pp. 281–97.

Burmese and Chinese governments. The issue has been greatly complicated, however, by credulous reporting in the news media and the efforts of activists and others to pursue their own policy agendas. There are several groups of different nationalities which stand to benefit from continuing international concerns about perceived Chinese military expansion into Burma and the Indian Ocean.

The historical record is sketchy, and reliable data is still scarce, but an accurate and balanced assessment of developments in the region is critical for an understanding of Burma's security, and its influence on the strategic environment. Serious consideration of these issues demands careful research and objective analysis, not a reliance on rumours and other 'marvellous tales'.