

Myanmar Foreign Policy and its Relations with China and Japan (1988-2015)

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Abstract

Since the time of independence period, Myanmar was set up and formulated independence, active, and non-aligned foreign policy in relations with the outside countries to secure Myanmar national interests _ national security, domestic stability, and economic development. However, the domestic, international, and individual factors influenced on implementing Myanmar's foreign policy and relations with China and Japan. Therefore, Myanmar needs to adjust its policy and relations to secure Myanmar national interests, it can be seen through the different degree of relations with China and Japan along the period.

Introduction

Since the time of independence period, Myanmar set up and formulated independence, active, and non-aligned foreign policy in relations with the outside countries to secure Myanmar national interests _ national security, domestic stability, and economic development. Among the relations with other countries, China and Japan are major partners of Myanmar because of their leading roles within the region, their historical ties with Myanmar, and their particular roles for Myanmar national interests. However, the domestic, international, and individual factors influenced on implementing Myanmar's foreign policy and relations with China and Japan along the period.

Hugh Gibson has defined foreign policy as "a well-rounded, comprehensive plan, based on knowledge and experience, for conducting the business of government with the rest of the world. It aims at promoting and protecting the interests of the nation" (as cited in Adnan, 2014, p. 658). About the different factors that influence the foreign policy of the state, Kaarbo stated that it can be categorized into the multiple factors that influence foreign policy as two_ external and internal factor. External factor means "how the international system is organized, the characteristics of contemporary international relations, and the actions of others". Internal factor means "characteristics of the domestic political system _ citizens and groups within that system, the government organizations, and the individual leaders" (Kaarbo, 2013, p. 7). Therefore, it can examine that the Myanmar Foreign Policy has shaped by both internal and external factors – domestic factor, individual factor, and international factor and Myanmar need to adjust its foreign policy to promote and protect its national interest.

Foreign Policy under SLORC/SPDC government (1990-2010)

After the collapse of BSPP government, SPDC government (later changed to SLORC) formed in September 1988. The military government broke down public demonstration aggressively, and the western governments withdraw economy and military assistance as the result. Therefore, SLORC/SPDC government held general election in May 1990 and National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Su Kyi won landslide victory. However, SLORC/SPDC government denied transferring power by reasoning that the 1947 and 1974 constitutions were not suitable to apply and need to draw new constitution. Under SLORC/SPDC government, Myanmar practice independent and active foreign policy. However, the three different factors shaped on the formulation of Myanmar foreign policy and relations with China and Japan.

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Under SLORC/SPDC government, the influence individual factors were 1) the nationalist and xenophobia of Than Shwe, and 2) liberal stand of Khin Nyunt. As the first individual factor, former Senior General Than Shwe placed the opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, and arrested the party members of NLD, and her supporters. That affected the growing view from the outside countries on Myanmar authoritarian role, and democracy and human right violations. It led to the lack of legitimacy on international arena on the government and outside isolation by using diplomatic and economic sanctions. The second individual factor was the liberal stand of Khin Nyunt although he was also nationalist and secure military role. Khin Nyunt maintained Myanmar legitimate role at least within the region by building good relations with neighboring countries. So, before former General Khin Nyunt was imprisoned with the corruption charges on October 2004, Myanmar's active foreign relations with neighboring countries like ASEAN and China slightly fall down in the later SLORC/SPDC period.

Under SLORC/SPDC government, the domestic factors affected Myanmar foreign policy were 1) rebuilding damaged economy 2) ethnic armed groups problem 3) public demonstration for democracy and the role of DASSK. For the first domestic factor Myanmar only can rely on rich natural resources for economic development and neighboring countries like ASEAN and China for economic and trade relations. The second problem is that SLORC/SPDC government can solve it well because of negotiation skills of General Khin Nyunt and the policy change of China and cut its assistance on BCP. The third one was the public demonstration and the role of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi resisted the military government by bringing international reaction to do sanctions on the government while public demonstrations and government actions on demonstrators weighted more pressure of west and Japan.

The important international factors under SLORC/SPDC government were 1) the end of the cold war and the interest of the United States in Asia was falling down, 2) Japanese new ODA Charter and its carrot and stick diplomacy 3) Chinese foreign policy changing after the Tiananmen Square demonstration. Because of the first international factor, US policy only focused on non-proliferation, economic liberalization, and promotion of democratic values. The second international factor was Japanese ODA charter. Under the new criteria, Japan cut new ODA projects on Myanmar although allowed old ones, and used ODA as stick and carrot for political change. The third significant factor was the changing policy of China. The pressure of the west on China for Tiananmen, China has sympathy on Myanmar experiences with west, and has become the reason to build closer relations. Because of international situations, the west led by US put pressure and did economic and diplomatic sanctions and Japan used ODA as the tool for Myanmar political development while Myanmar needs assistance for infrastructure and economic development. Japanese stick and carrot diplomacy on Myanmar or led to grow the suspicion of military government and the friendly relations reached to the lower point during SLORC/SPDC period.

Under the SLORC/SPDC government, the US more favored on democratic values in Southeast Asia and has no vital interest in Myanmar as mentioned above. Therefore, after the 1988 student demonstration in Myanmar, the US decided to downward relations to charge d' affairs level by not replacing its ambassador (Dalpino, 2014, p.27). Moreover, as the attempt to regime change and political development in Myanmar, the US used diplomatic and economic sanctions and put pressure on other countries to do so. The EU also did sanctions on Myanmar as the US halted any assistance (Andreasson, 2008, p. 19). Apart from sanctions made my outside, the US Commission on Human Rights focused on the human rights situations of Myanmar since 1989 and issued strong resolutions on human rights violations (Silverstin, 2001, p. 123-124). Moreover, in 2007, the US brought a resolution to the Security

Council for censuring Myanmar as a threat to regional peace and security (Steinberg, 2009, p. 348).

Therefore, under SLORC/SPDC government, although Myanmar followed Independence and Active Foreign Policy, the relations with the outside countries was not good, especially with the western countries and was lack the legitimacy in international relations. Under these circumstances, Myanmar had no choice rather than to build better relations with the neighboring countries for economic development, domestic stability, regime survival and political security.

Therefore, under SPDC government, Myanmar followed the reliance policy on China for diplomatic protection and military survival. Myanmar tried to engage with Japanese ODA policy to get assistance and aid and to reduce reliance on China. However, under SLORC/SPDC government, regime security or survival was the first priority in comparison with the reducing of Chinese influence or easing of pressure from Japan, the West, and ASEAN and the relation with Japan reached the lowest point in the history because of the US-Japan alliance and Japanese stand on DASSK and using the stick and carrot diplomacy. During this period, the trade between two countries has the only small amount and Japanese ODA assistance cannot compare with the previous situation. About Japanese policy on Myanmar, Seekins described as Japan stands in the middle between the Western nations and ASEAN and China. It means as no use sanctions and speaks as friends (Seekins, 2015, p. 24). Edstrom stated that the Myanmar government viewed Japanese stick and carrot policy as the attempt of Japan to interfere in the internal affairs of Myanmar so that the relations between two countries became strange (Edstrom, 2009, p. 46-47).

Under these reasons, Myanmar has no choice rather than building good relations with neighboring countries including China. Myanmar became the member of ASEAN in July 1997 and built good relations with China for political and economic reasons. In Myanmar, it can save the two major interests _ politics and the economy by building good relations with China. China has the veto power in the United Nations General Assembly, and stand on the side of Myanmar military government whenever West put pressure on the Myanmar government. Moreover, China became the major supplier of military equipment and training for military strength, supply ODA assistance, and major trade partner. Tin argued that because of Chinese assistance, Myanmar enhanced its military capability to protect the potential external aggression (Tin, 2003, p. 197-198). Apart from political interest, as the development assistance, China provided Myanmar through grants, loans, and debt relief for industrial and infrastructure development.

Therefore, under the SLORC/SPDC government, it seems significant that the three factors influenced on developing Myanmar foreign policy. The SLORC / SPDC managed interestingly its foreign policy for regime survival and national security that are the priority of national interests under their rule by playing well along with the shaping factors or choosing closer relations with China and ASEAN to over outside pressure or to formulate its active foreign policy as least within the region.

Foreign Policy under USDP government (2011-2015)

Under USDP government, Myanmar set up independence, active, and non-aligned foreign policy and tried to normalize and improve bilateral relations with Western countries and Japan. Myanmar readjusted its strategic and economic dependence on China under USDP government. Myanmar was dealing with the Japanese engagement policy with the positive way of escalating its democratization process. Moreover, Myanmar cooperated with Japan not only in economic and social but also in the security field.

The individual factor under USDP government was the liberal thinking of Thein Sein. He initiated political reform that ensured a liberalization of the political system,

socioeconomic and administrative reforms that aimed to improve governance, fight corruption and reform the economy during first three years of his administration. As the democratic government, he allowed NLD to participate in by-election process, and suspended Myitsone Dam project according to public opinion, that reduced the suspicious of the outside countries on Myanmar democratic changes and started to ease their sanctions and supporting assistances.

Under USDP government, among various domestic factors, 1) need for Myanmar economic and infrastructure development, 2) public opinion on Chinese business and rely on natural resources for foreign reserves, and 3) ethnic armed groups problem are mainly related to formulating Myanmar foreign policy. For the first domestic factor, Myanmar economy stayed far left behind in compared with other ASEAN member countries and foreign reserves mostly relied on natural resources. Therefore, USDP government tried to ease the suspicious of western countries and Japan by negotiating with opposition leader ASSK and led her party NLD to participate in by-election process that led to reduce of pressure from outside.

The second one was the public opinion on Chinese FDI, as an example Myitsone Dam project, Letpadaung Copper Mine Project, and Shwe Gas Pipe Line Project. It can be seen in growing intensity of public expression on Myitsone Dam Project to protect the Irrawaddy River (Min, 2012, pg.120-126). Because of public opinion on Chinese business, the investment of China was fall down dramatically and tense on the relations between two countries.

The third one is the ethnic armed groups' problem under USDP government. . Among the fighting, it has some examples like the fighting occurred between Kachin Independent Army (KIA) and Tatmadaw in Kachin State (near Myitsone Dam Project) in 2011, 2012 and early 2013 (Tin, 2014, pg.39), and the conflict between Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Tatmadaw in 2015 in Shan State, kokang region (TNI, 2015, pg.). Because of third factor, Myanmar government cannot neglect the role of China on ethnic armed group problem for domestic stability.

The most significant international factors in shaping Myanmar foreign policy were 1) the rise of China and changing US foreign policy in Southeast Asia especially under Obama administration, and 2) Abe's proactive foreign policy and the new engagement in ASEAN. For the first international factor, since 1990s, Chinese dynamic economic growth reached to the second largest economic power by passing Japan. The US, Japan, and ASEAN started to suspicious on Chinese thirsty on energy and growing assertive action on South China Sea, and the US adjusted its Southeast Asia policy by using smart power and Myanmar became the important player to contain China because of Myanmar strategic location to link with Southeast Asia and South Asia through Indian Ocean.

The second international factor was Abe foreign policy on Asia while the security interest of Japan on Myanmar is 'to unite other major powers to balance China through Myanmar. In 2013, Abe notably visited all ASEAN member countries and emphasized building capacity of maritime states lining the strategic waterways of Southeast Asia. These changing international factors became the favor on Myanmar to take advantage to reduce the over-influence of China, and to ease the western pressure, and to get assistance for economic development.

Under these three different factors, view of democratic countries to Myanmar changed along with Myanmar political and economic reform and was overwhelming for Myanmar's spring. As the historic moment, the US Secretary Clinton visited Myanmar on end of 2011 and President Obama visited Myanmar on Nov 2012. Moreover, because of the by-election result on April 2012, Secretary Clinton outlined several action steps _ to send accredited ambassador, to re-establish in-country USAID mission, to ease financial and investment sanctions (Haacke, 2015, p. 8). Because of the attention of the US to Myanmar and lift on

sanction, the international community started to suspend or lift their sanctions on Myanmar (Kucik, 2016, p. 9-10). Hulova stated that because of Japanese bridge loan of \$ 960 million to repay the multilateral arrears, Myanmar could start to lend from the World Bank and the ADB. In 2013, World Bank approved the first loans of \$440 million and a grant of \$ 80 million for community driven development project while the IMF opened the resident representative office in Myanmar to enhance its capacity-building programme (Hulova, 2013, p. 3). In 2013, Japan carried out 300 billion yen debt relief to Myanmar. Japanese assistance to Myanmar increased significantly under USDP government.

Haacke (2016) mentioned that Japanese has the intention of improving livelihoods, capacity building and infrastructure development in cooperation with Myanmar. Moreover, Japan started to play an important role in the Myanmar peace building process with ethnic groups by supporting _financial assistance, deliver direct humanitarian assistances to the populations of ethnic groups through Nippon Foundation and emerged as the observer to the peace negotiations in 2012 (Haacke, 2016, p. 16-17). Moreover, under Thein Sein government, the political relations also improved by adopting Joint Statement in 2013 _ a new foundation for mutual friendship_ to enhance dialogue on regional issues and security, and to promote cooperation and exchange between the defense authorities (Haacke, 2016, p. 18).

While Myanmar started to promote strong relations with Japan, the relations with China sharply fall down because of the public opinion on Chinese investment in the natural resources sector. About the public expressed on Chinese influence, Min Zin said that the awareness of people of Chinese influence has started since the SLORC/SPDC government. However, under U Thein Sein government, the awareness was growth because of media freedom, and Journals and Articles stressed the Chinese domination on Myanmar political, economic, and social fields (Min, 2012, p. 124-125). Because of public awareness, it started to effect on China-Myanmar relations. Although the public opinion on the Shwe Gas Pipe Line was not nationwide level, the demonstration of Myitsone Dam Project and Letpadaung Copper Mine Project led to the awareness of the whole country. Because of the various protest from the people, media, ethnic group, environmentalists, civil society, and media, finally the government suspended the project under USDP government by recognizing the public concern about the negative impact of the project.

Although the government did not suspend the copper mine project, because of two continuous issues _ myitsone dam and leppadaung copper mine, and the public opinion on Chinese investment, it affected on the two countries' relations and Chinese investment in Myanmar was fall down sharply in 2011. In 2011 and 2012, Chinese export and import percentage was low, and up gradually again since 2013.

Another problem between Myanmar and China was Kokang ethnic group case. Steinberg said that China has influence in the Kokang area in which the Chinese language seems to be principle language in the primary schools and Chinese migration to the area is extensive (Steinberg, 2012, p. 353). Maung (2015) stated that the Kokang conflict started after Myanmar enacted 2008 constitution and tried to transform ethnic armed groups as Border Guard Forces (BGFs). While the ethnic armed groups denied becoming BGFs, Tatmadaw launched an attack on Kokang group based on the information of illegal arms factory in the area in August 2009, and Pheung Kya-Shin went into hiding during the incident (Maung, 2015, p. 42-43).

Chaw described that the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Kokan-led MNDAA have historical ties with China, and it has suspicions from Myanmar side that China provided military equipment and backing over the ethnic armed groups, and the 2014 interview with Pheung Kya-Shin in the Global Times wrote with Yunnan accent (Chow, 2015, p. 6-8). In addition, the citing of MNDAA on the pressure from Beijing in the declaration of the unilateral ceasefire of MNDAA led to the suspicion of Myanmar on Chinese ambition to the

ethnic groups. Moreover, the senior official Min Zaw Oo accused China of encouraging ethnic armed groups in October 2015. The author argued that Myanmar people viewed that “Beijing can turn violence in the border regions on and off like the switch” (Chow, 2015, p. 6-8). Therefore, the relationship with China fell down under Thein Sein government because of democratization and rebuilding good relation with the US and Japan while the public opinion impacted on Chinese investment. As the outcome, the investment from China dropped in 2011 and Myanmar government started to suspect the ambition of China on MNDAA and USWA ethnic armed groups while the border area was unstable because of Kokang crisis. Therefore, although the Myanmar government tried to rebalance the over-reliance on China by building better relations with Japan and the US, it seemed that the role of China in ethnic armed groups cannot neglect while Myanmar attempt to negotiate through the nationwide peace-making process with ethnic armed groups.

Conclusion

Since the time of independence period, Myanmar has followed the independence, active, and non-aligned foreign policy to secure national sovereignty and free from outside influence. However, domestic, international, and individual factors effected on formulating Myanmar foreign policy under the successive governments.

The individual factor as xenophobia of outside influence and ensure of their political role by Than Shwe affected on relations as the isolation of outside world on Myanmar under SLORC/SPDC government. However, the liberal thinking of Khin Nyunt led to formulate active foreign policy at least within the region. Similarity, the liberal stand of U Thein Sein has been changed the view of western countries, so that under U Thein Sein government, Myanmar can rebuild good relations with Japan and the US.

Along the period, the domestic factors as requirement to build economic and infrastructure development and ethnic armed-groups problem are the same although it had the different range under the different governments. Therefore, no governments of Myanmar can neglect the role of China in economic and ethnic affairs, although Myanmar set up non-aligned policy with the fear of Chinese influence. Moreover, the public sector role as the public demonstration and claim for democracy under SLORC/SPDC government led to growth of pressure from the West and Japan, and public opinion on Chinese influence on the Myanmar economy under U Thein Sein government also affected on the relations with China by falling down to the lowest point.

As the international factor, because of the end of the cold war and US policy changed in Asia gave negative impact on Myanmar. In addition, the US policy on China after Tiananmen Square Incident supported to close Myanmar-China relations. Moreover, the rise of China and policy shift from the US and Japan to balance the influence of China on Asia favored Myanmar’s relations with the West and Japan, and to reduce overreliance on China.

According to these situations, it seems clear that the three factors effected on formulating Myanmar foreign policy deeply. Nevertheless, the economic development, domestic stability, and secure national security are the main political, economic, and security interests of Myanmar. Therefore, Myanmar needs to maintain good relations with China and Japan and it has no choice rather than adjust its foreign policy and relations along with the policy of superpower countries to secure Myanmar national interests or nation survival.

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