

China's Public Diplomacy on Myanmar - China Relations

Abstract

Taking office on 30 March 2011, the new civilian government in Myanmar has laid down several steps towards democratization. Consequently, Myanmar got some relaxations over the sanctions previously imposed by the US, Japan and the Western European Union. Although Myanmar has been embarking on good relations with China since 1988, the bilateral relations between Myanmar and China has little strains after suspended China's investment in the Myintsone dam project since September 2011 Myanmar appears to be rebalancing its ties with China. The new government demonstrated its new attitude of being responsive to domestic public pressure and maintains the aspiration and wishes of the people. China has practiced public diplomacy on Myanmar in multiple ways. Therefore, this research attempts to explore why China attempted to improve Chinese public diplomacy on Myanmar - China relations. Then it analyzes that the Chinese public diplomacy is successful on Myanmar or not.

Key words: Myanmar, China, foreign relations, public diplomacy

Introduction

The relationship between Myanmar and China has had a series of ups and downs before 1988. After 1988, Myanmar is a vital and strategic importance for China. From Myanmar's point of view, an economic relations with China is aimed to overcome economic sanctions of the US and western European countries. So Myanmar maintained friendly relations with China aiming to support diplomatic protection. From Chinese perspective, China's aims for promoting with Myanmar through investment and trade are development of its western regions. Bilateral relations between two countries has always been focused on five principles of peaceful co-existence

However, difficult challenges for China are deteriorating people-to-people relations because of political reform in Myanmar. Therefore, China has practiced public diplomacy (PD) and people-to-people relations to pacify local anti-Chinese sentiments and to prevent its pipeline projects and other major projects. This is because China does also engagement with Myanmar's ethnic nationalities as well as the political parties such as NLD since 2011. Although few of the reform measures had yet to take effect, it was already apparent that public mobilization around the Myintsone dam project presented a challenge to the new civilian government's commitment to reform. Therefore, the suspension of Myintsone dam project has one of the impacts on Myanmar-China relations.

China's Public Diplomacy

PD and soft power developed a buzz word in world politics. According to Joseph Nye's definition, PD is mostly soft power. Soft power is based on indirect influences through values, ideology, legitimate policies and culture. PD has developed an essential part of Chinese diplomacy and foreign policy. China has practiced PD as a tool of foreign policy.

Chinese PD activities (citizen diplomacy and cultural diplomacy) are academic exchange programs, academic grants, visitor programs, news or social media, establishment of Confucius institutes, organizations of art, strategic communication projects, literature, sports and cultural performance, exhibitions, film festivals, language promotion, information, unofficial discussion by non-governmental actors such as academics, think tanks, activists, journalists about the discussion on the program of formal diplomatic negotiations. Main objectives of China's PD are to promote China's non-interference in domestic affairs and to create a positive perception about those values. China's PD on Myanmar has referred to contacts among people of Myanmar and China or between officials and people of both countries.

China's PD on Myanmar – China Relations

In recent years, however, several Chinese projects have generated local protests because of environmental concerns or because people feel that they do not benefit sufficiently from such projects. For example, local communities in Vietnam have protested against a bauxite-mining project, and people in Myanmar and Cambodia have raised opposition against Chinese joint dam projects. In line with a series of political reform, U Thein Sein government has looked for balancing China's influence on Myanmar by inviting investments from western countries.

The former president U Thein Sein declared the suspension of the Myintsone dam project in September 2011 because of public opinion. But the government founded a commission to assess the dam project and the commission concerning the dam project made little progress. It can be realized that Myanmar - China relations shifts away from close ties. Therefore, the relations between Myanmar and China altered and, public opinion towards China was destructive.

At the APEC Summit in Papua New Guinea, President Xi Jinping said that "China will work with all countries involved with the Belt and Road Initiative according to the principle..." Although the Myintsone dam project is part of the BRI project, anti-Chinese sentiment for a critical debate on the BRI is growing in Myanmar. China has faced challenges of public pressure in Myanmar to accept the project. In response, Chinese ambassador to Myanmar has traveled to Kachin State with the representatives of the State Power Investment Cooperation. He had an effort to encourage to Kachin people and he wanted to get an agreement about the dam project. But public opinion is running high and spreading out the whole Myanmar.

Visiting of Chinese officials were aiming at both operational or working level and high level of bilateral relations. Mr Wu Bangguo, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC, visited Myanmar since the 2010 multiparty elections. Mr Dai Bingguo and one of the Politburo members, Mr Wang Gang visited Myanmar for the purposes of exchange programs and public relations in 2011 and 2012 respectively. By reviewing the high level visits, China has tried to agreed major projects between Myanmar and China and to strength cultural and public contacts and mutual trust between both countries. Public contacts between the two countries demonstrate Chinese public campaigns strategy that aimed at combating anti – Chinese sentiment among Myanmar people. But the trips did not outcome in any key announcements between Myanmar and China.

China has faced many challenges in Myanmar. The challenges are people-to-people relations, nationalism and tradition between Myanmar and China. In addition, China has confronted that democratic government administered by the Hluttaw with responsibility and accountability and opinion or voices of Myanmar people. So China has tried to improve its appearance and relations with local people. In order to improve its relations with Myanmar, China has been inviting with local media, civil society, opposition leaders, ethnic groups, activists, think tanks and researchers, research institutes, and government officials in Myanmar. China is carrying out its new approach to improve relations with all sides in Myanmar rather than China's economic interests. Since 2013, China had emphasized its relations with opposition party, especially NLD party. Therefore, China finds to manage PD and people-to-people relations in response to Myanmar.

The Chinese government has followed up on Chinese and foreign scholars' advice to invest more in cultural diplomacy and people exchange programs in the Asian region. Political change in Myanmar has forced China to rethink and adjust its economic policies and PD. To consolidate the friendship between the two peoples and boost traditional ties since 2012, the Chinese government has launched a mass campaign named "Deep Fraternal Friendship" project in Yangon. The project includes medical assistance program, establishment of a China – Myanmar ophthalmology center, business forum targeting local small businesses, educational and cultural programs, and organized visits to China for Myanmar's political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and groups from private and public media.

Various Chinese state-owned companies have started to develop corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs as part of their operations in Southeast Asia. Therefore, China has also made CSR programs inside Myanmar after the Myitsone dam project suspension.

China National Petroleum Cooperation (CNPC) has committed six million USD to build eight schools, nineteen clinics and one hospital along the pipeline construction sites. It can be shown that the Chinese investor has continued to build roads and schools in Myitsone area even after the dam was suspended.

Myanmar has long been a strategic investment partner for China while Myanmar was largely isolated from the rest of the world. When Myanmar began its reform process, China was faced with increasing competition from other countries and saw its own influence decline. The major role of media played in influencing the public opinion on Myitsone dam project, China has put more efforts into its public outreach inside Myanmar. Not only Chinese Central TV began its broadcasting in Myanmar weeks after the suspension of Myitsone dam project, China also began to invite Myanmar media delegations to visit China. It can be said that these are one of the Chinese PD programs. The PD programs are aimed at promoting a constructive image of China and fostering positive feelings among Myanmar media personnel.

China has attempted to build better relations with Myanmar after the suspension of the Myintsone dam project. Buddhist diplomacy, one of the Chinese PD, seeks to deliver to foreign/target audiences. China believed that Buddhist diplomacy is one of the important diplomacy in Myanmar-China relations. After suspension of the Myintsone dam project, China dispatched Buddhist tooth relics to Myanmar in order to ease tension concerning with Myintsone dam project and pave the way for development of relations between Myanmar and China.

Buddhist culture exchange plays an important part in China-Myanmar friendly exchange, enhancing the understanding and mutual trust between the two peoples. Along with the tooth came a high-level Chinese government official delegation led by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) director, Mr. Wang Zuoan, as well as the president of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). As a consequence of the exhibition of the Buddha's tooth relics, Myanmar and China signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on maintaining friendly relationships between the Beijing Lingguang Temple, where the Buddha's tooth resides, and the Shwedagon Pagoda of Myanmar. Since the acceleration of democratic transition in March 2011, Myanmar society has become increasingly diversified and perceptions of China by different entities have become more complicated. However, Myanmar and China are both trying to guide public opinion by enhancing interaction with directions that would promote less negative views on China by Myanmar society.

While Myanmar has actively sought to diversify its external relations in an attempt to become less dependent on the Chinese government, China reportedly offered Myanmar nearly USD 33 million in technical assistance for its 27th SEA Games in 2013, including for the opening and closing for ceremonies, while accepting Myanmar athletes for training on Chinese soil. It is known that assisting Myanmar in organizing the 27th SEA Games was a very important project for the Chinese government as an attempt to strengthen the two countries' relationship and to secure the business concessions in this resource rich country. Through assistance to Myanmar's SEA Games, China has sought to win back the hearts of the Myanmar people, and to put an end to hostile anti-Chinese sentiment. The government of China's Yunnan Province donated relief aid to Rakhine State and the worst flooding areas in Myanmar in August 2015. In addition, Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Mr Hong Liang donated relief goods to flood victims in these regions.

After 2012 communal riots in Rakhine State, China has supported for infrastructure, agricultural and educational assistance programs in order to improve prosperity and stability in Myanmar especially, Rakhine State and along the pipelines. It can be said that China has tried to improve the relationship between Myanmar and China. China provided USD 150,262 for educational development in Myanmar in 2013. In addition, China has given the Paukphaw Scholarship Project to Myanmar. The project aims to support capacity building and financial assistance for university students in Myanmar. 1300 Myanmar students from universities have been aided since 2015. China supported to develop agriculture and infrastructure sectors in Myanmar. China gave USD 5.31 million for infrastructure development, income-generation, vocational training, technical assistance and capacity-building. It is expected to facilitate transportation of Myanmar agricultural and livestock products to China, enhancing the development of border trade between Myanmar and China.

Cultural exchange between Myanmar and China has a long history. Since the founding the PRC, the Myanmar-China relations has been improving with cultural exchanges also increasing daily. Till now, Myanmar officials and people in the cultural field have exchanged between the two countries. In order to improve good-will delegation exchanged visit between the two countries, Myanmar Films Week Festival and Chinese Week Festival were held in Myanmar and China respectively. In addition, China has celebrated "Myanmar - China Pauk Phaw Friendship Day" in Myanmar since 2016. It can be showed that one of the China's PD on Myanmar and Paukphaw friendship and remarkable event of cultural exchange between them. Since 2011, the high-level visits between two countries are normal, practical cooperation has been increasing, people-to-people relations are multilateral

coordination to the two peoples and making positive contributions to the peace and prosperity of the region.

To involve public participation and media attention, Chinese New Year celebration has developed in Yangon downtown area also known as the Chinatown area since 2017. Moreover, in 2018, China emphasized on PD as a tool of foreign policy in Myanmar. To promote cultural exchanges and cooperation between Myanmar and China, Chinese Cultural Centre was opened in Yangon. It is an appearance stage for Chinese PD influence in Myanmar.

In the early 2019, the Myitsone dam project has been resumed attention by China. Therefore, Chinese Ambassador, Mr. Chen Hai visited to Kachin State. The Ambassador's visit has increased speculation on the possible restart of the Myitsone dam project. Chinese Embassy in Myanmar announced misinformation which local people in Kachin State agreed to continue the Myintsone dam project. In response, CSOs and political parties in Kachin State issued an announcement to stand against the Myitsone dam project.

After the quasi-civilian government of Myanmar took office, the relationships between leaders, peoples, political parties, parliaments and militaries of the two countries have been developed. The government is endeavoring to develop Myanmar-China bilateral cooperation based on relations between the two peoples. China has given Myanmar people for its assistance in education, health, social and rural development, poverty reduction areas and the peace process. In order to promote the political trust and mutual cooperation among them, China has attempted to improve Myanmar-China relations by exchanging high level visits since 2012. People-to-people connections marked little successful outcomes.

Conclusion

The civilian government is leading its people to construct democratic politics, boost the economy, improve livelihoods and expand foreign relations. Many international organizations expressed on Myanmar's transition in 2011, following decades of isolation, and the way it embarked on an unprecedented reform process, rising hopes for a new democracy. These reforms have been welcomed by the international community with the rising levels of aid, grants and loans.

Although Myanmar-China relations based on economic and political ties since 1988, the relations has been unbalanced and has served the interests of both countries. Myanmar has realized after two decades of isolation, it has to open up to the other countries, to ease the Western countries' sanctions and to secure the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014. In order to bring about a more balanced foreign economic presence in the country and re-establish the

economy while regaining international recognition may have been one of the drivers behind the reforms. Myanmar appears to be rebalancing its ties with China. It can be seen that this rebalancing was shown in the suspension of the Myitsone Dam Project. The new government demonstrated its new attitude of being responsive to domestic public pressure and upholds the aspiration and wishes of the people.

In addition, Myanmar will attract international expertise and foreign direct investment. Myanmar - China relations have entered a new era in the context of these potential reforms and change relationship between Myanmar and the United States and western countries. China has utilized realist assumption concerning its own strategic benefits such as border security and energy security. However, on the assumption of non-interference in internal affairs, human rights, freedom and democracy has never been conducted. To protect its strategic interests in Myanmar, China requires maintaining the effectiveness of a new policy toward Myanmar with the advent of the age of democracy. After the suspension of the Myintson Dam Project, Myanmar-China relations have turndown. In response, China has changed inside Myanmar such as decrease of Chinese direct investments, the cooling off of the political relationship, the establishment of relations with the democratic forces and major public relations campaigns.

The relationship between Myanmar and China has been strained by Chinese projects which have led to unease among Chinese investors. The future of Chinese investments in Myanmar depends on their bilateral relations. In order to improve people-to-people relations between Myanmar and China, development or progress of Chinese projects and project documents should be publicized and should be created job opportunities for Myanmar people.

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