

Pattern of Myanmar Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The policy of a nation towards other nations is invariably determined by a country's national interests and values. A country's foreign policy or foreign relations or foreign affairs policy consists of self-interest strategies chosen by the state to safeguard its national interests and to achieve goals within the realm of international relations. Each and every independent sovereign state adopts foreign policy to protect and promote the national interests in their relations with other independent countries. There are many kinds of foreign policy such as nationalism, anti-colonialism, neutralism or non-alignment, isolationism, internationalism, imperialism etc. Among them, Myanmar successive governments has been consistently implementing the neutral or non-aligned foreign policy with some variations of internal and external politics on the basis of five principles of peaceful co-existence after gaining independence. This research paper aims to analyze that the motivating factors of foreign policy directions under the successive governments beyond the different situations of domestic and international reflections since independence. It is found that Myanmar successive governments constantly adhered to the neutral or non-aligned policy although some were emphasized on the orientation of regionalism and multilateralism.

Key words: foreign policy, neutralism or non-alignment, successive governments

Introduction

To achieve the country's goal and ambitions, any foreign policy is operated under the national interests in international relations. Foreign policy of every nation is consistently determined by its national interests and values. To safeguard the national interests of the country and to achieve its national goals in the external environment, each and every country formulates foreign policy or foreign relations policy based on its domestic needs and priorities. Both external and domestic considerations also play a part in the formation of foreign policy. Independent sovereign states adopt foreign policy to protect and promote the national interests in their relations with other independent countries. In shaping foreign policy, the importance of geography has been recognized. Similarly, Myanmar foreign policy is unique in its foundation principles based on non-aligned position which derives from its geographical location,

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ideological differences of major powers in international relations and mutual cooperation with all countries. In this context, successive Myanmar governments, in shaping Myanmar foreign policy constantly considered its historical experiences, traditions, geographical location, ideology, domestic situation and international environment. This research is divided into three main parts; nature of foreign policy, foreign policy orientations under successive governments and perceptions of foreign experts on Myanmar foreign policy.

2. Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to examine the motivating factors behind the Myanmar foreign policy orientations under the successive governments since independence and to analyze how does Myanmar successive governments use foreign policy as a political tool with major powers.

3. Materials and Methods

In doing this research, qualitative research method is applied by referring both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include reports, documents, joint declarations and statements, and speeches issued by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Secondary sources include scholarly articles, academic books and journals. Case study design is also applied to examine the Myanmar foreign policy orientations by successive governments under the complex domestic insurrections and international responses.

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For foreign Policy, there is variable principle or no single principle with the passage of time according to the interests of the state. Therefore, states sometime formulate offensive and

sometime defensive foreign policy according to changing conditions. Foreign policy generally meant to those decisions, made within a country that directly affect another.

The main causes of the emergence of Myanmar foreign policy was shaped by the historical background, post war internal situations and the Cold War confrontation. In 1948, Myanmar stood alone with India in adopting a foreign policy of “Non-alignment” as a neutralist member of the United Nations. Due to its significant geographical location, Myanmar stands the strategically importance in its location as the bridge between South, Southeast and East Asia. Therefore, India and China are competing to persuade Myanmar in accordance with their domestic needs and regional standard.

Regarding the foreign policy of Myanmar, it is stated in Section 212 of the 1947 Constitution, that

“The Union of Burma reaffirms its devotion of the ideal of peace and friendly cooperation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality”

Myanmar together with India and China initiated the five principles of peaceful co-existence. These principles are clearly outlined as follows:

- (i) “Mutual respect of each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty;
- (ii) Mutual non-aggression
- (iii) Mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs
- (iv) Equality and mutual benefit; and
- (v) Peaceful co-existence”.

At that time, Myanmar governments had to determine its foreign policy under complex domestic situations and international responses. Internally, the birth of the independence was surrounded with domestic insurrection and externally, there was onset of the Cold War.

Myanmar government led by Prime Minister U Nu committed Myanmar to neutralism or non-alignment in foreign policy in 1948 and sought to evade possible clashes from big power confrontation during the Cold War. The contravention of Myanmar's territorial integrity by US-supported Kuomintang troops (KMT Forces) in the early 1960s and the outbreak of the Korean War of 1950-53 firmed this goal. Therefore, the foreign policy of Myanmar was designated to steer independence and neutrality to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In June 1951, Prime Minister U Nu was quoted as stating that,

“Burma’s Foreign policy is not framed on the basis of the political ideologies therefore, Burma has no intention of taking sides in the struggle between Communists and anti-communist forces”.

U Nu defined his government's foreign policy as “strict neutrality”. The important requirements for pursuance of a policy of neutrality are as follows;

- (a) We must use our own consideration to either support or object to any matter on its own merits.
- (b) We must establish the friendliest relations with all nations whenever possible.
- (c) We must accept from any country any assistance for the creation of the Welfare State provided such assistance is given freely and does not violate our society.
- (d) We must render out utmost assistance to any country which needs it.

Major considerations or priorities for Myanmar foreign policy consisted of three main factors in dealing with the foreign countries:

- (i) friendly relations with all nations,
- (ii) no economic aid with strings attached and
- (iii) no alignments or entanglements with any power blocs.

The first large-scale Asian-African or Afro- Asian Conference known as the Bandung Conference was a meeting of Asian and African states, which took place on 18-24 April 1955 in

Bandung, Indonesia. There were two significant issues of Myanmar's stand at the Bandung Conference. Regarding the China participation in this Conference, Myanmar representatives pointed out to accept China's request according to the China's geographical position although anti- Communist states of other Afro-Asian members denied the participation of China. And then, the invitation to Israel to the Conference was succeed although Myanmar against for inclusion of Israel. Nevertheless, Myanmar representatives only stood on the Bandung principles to find the solutions for China and Israel. In 1961, Myanmar joined Non-Align Movement (NAM) and became a founding member of Bandung Conference in order to maintain its immediate foreign policy goal which was independent policy as well as to achieve the common interest of Asian African countries.

Under U Nu administration, Myanmar-India relations were very smoothly according to the great leaders' friendly relationship and on the contrary, Myanmar-China relations were bumpy for the KMT issues and border problems. However, Myanmar government persuaded Afro-Asian countries to permit China's presence and Israeli request at the Conference. It showed that Myanmar government together with India steadfastly pursued independent and neutral foreign policy even though these were critical ideological confrontation between communist and capitalist blocs.

On 2 March 1962, there was a military coup in Myanmar led by General Ne Win and removed Prime Minister U Nu. Since the 1962 military coup, the policy of "positive neutrality" was pursued in the context of the prevailing world conditions. The military coup suspended the 1947 constitution too. In 1964, the government announced Burmese Way to Socialism and the Burma (Myanmar) Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was established. In 1974, U Ne Win introduced new constitution and declared Myanmar as a country under the title of "the Socialist

Republic of the Union of Burma. In 1964, both Chinese and Indian also felt economic losses for the nationalizing in Myanmar. However, Chinese government pressured on the nationalizing scheme of Myanmar to compensate overseas Chinese that led to anti-Chinese riots in Myanmar. India government urged Indian community in Myanmar to follow the rules and regulations of Myanmar at the same time.

In fact, the policy of “non-alignment” and “positive neutrality” had been practiced in Myanmar foreign policy orientation during the Cold War period. Under the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) periods, Myanmar government under General Ne Win strictly preserved its position on neutralism. In the spirit of Bandung principles, Myanmar conserved friendly relations with all Southeast Asian neighbors although their domestic policies and foreign policy orientations were significantly different. The Myanmar government adjusted at the same distance from both ASEAN and Non-ASEAN countries. Myanmar firmly rooted its foreign policy fairly and squarely on bilateralism.

On 8 August 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government took the power headed by General Saw Maung. It abandoned the former government’s isolationism and introduced the open market system. By its Notification Order No.3/88 of 18 September 1988, it announced that it would continue to adhere to the “independent and active” foreign policy. Regarding this policy, Myanmar affirmed no aligns itself with any blocs on international issues except to consistently stand on its side.

After the Cold War, there were domestic political changes in Myanmar and it recognized that it could no longer practice the foreign policy of bilateralism and neutralism. Based on the idea of realism, it started to participate in regional and multilateral institutions. In fact, there was an necessity for the SLORC government to justify its rule, and it had to find a new foreign policy

direction. At that time, Myanmar had already been attracted by the core principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the member states of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Myanmar's foreign policy towards China and India to improve its security and development prospects significantly, allowing the military government to evade the Western sanctions. When the SLORC came to power in 1988, Myanmar-India relations were essentially cool and disinterested.

Under the SLORC and SPDC, the relations between Myanmar and China were the best condition because of the international sanctions towards Myanmar and interdependent relations between Myanmar and China according to their domestic needs. It was clear that intense pressure and economic sanction imposed by the Western countries pushed Myanmar government to closer relations with China. The visit of Senior General Than Shwe to New Delhi in 2010 had been interpreted as an early demonstration of Myanmar government positive relations to India. Myanmar seeks to balance China with India and New Delhi could profit from this situation if it overcomes its own fixation on China. International sanctions had not been affected for Myanmar because China and India supported to SPDC to survive its regime. According to Beijing government in China, whatever issue in Myanmar was an internal affair of a sovereign state which it did not pose a threat to international or regional peace and security. Indeed, China's policy towards Myanmar derived from its regional attitude, aimed at stabilizing and consolidating its interests and influence of Asia.

After the 2010 General Elections in Myanmar, President U Thein Sein took office in March 2011. Political, economic and social reform and development have been carried out with momentum to have great achievements. However, domestic and international development of

Myanmar could be affected due to the weakness in adopting the new political structure, new challenges to the economic development, the domestic instability that was threatened by the conflict in the Kachin State, and the continuous communal issues in the Rakhine State. Moreover, the suspension of the Myitsone Dam was generally considered as the turning point in the economic relations of Myanmar with China. For Myanmar, Chinese policy towards Myanmar is mainly based on the economy, long-term strategy, and national security. The core of Chinese policy towards Myanmar is to implement comprehensive and Win-Win cooperation. In the inaugural address, President Thein Sein had also clearly formulated his high regard for non-alignment as he also emphasized the fact that Myanmar has never allowed foreign military base in the country. Chinese successive leaders have prioritized developing China's policy of neighborhood diplomacy, including through a series of regional visits. President Xi Jinping visited regional countries to set out China's "neighborhood diplomacy" policy. This had included idea of new Silk Road Economic Belt and the concept of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road. China push for regional integration is an attempt to increase its influence throughout its neighborhood to adopt the "New International Order" model of conducting foreign relations.

China's assumption to Myanmar was that the domestic politics of Myanmar would not undergo drastic changes in the near future, keeping the country isolated and subject to economic sanctions by the West. Myanmar needs economic development to enhance its legitimacy and the lack of foreign investment sources compared to China. However, the rapid improvement of the U.S- Myanmar relations, EU- Myanmar relations since 2011 changed these assumptions. Moreover, the relationship between Myanmar and the United States warmed as the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton paid a visit to Myanmar in December 2011 to encourage further progress. It is the first visit by a US Secretary of State in more than fifty years. The United States restored

relations at ambassadorial level and lifted restrictions on the work of the IMF and the World Bank in Myanmar. The EU lifted most of the sanctions imposed on the country. Furthermore, the EU allowed most top Myanmar government officials to travel within EU countries. The Australian government similarly lifted travel restrictions and encouraged other cooperative steps. Therefore, Myanmar became the friendly relations not only US but also EU and other countries since 2011 although Myanmar-China relations were slightly deteriorated after Myanmar suspending the Myitsone dam in September 2011.

Although major changes occurred in Myanmar's policies, President U Thein Sein's visit to India showed a clear aim to move forward the bilateral relationships to a higher level. Consequently, India brought back its bilateral relations deeply on Myanmar and India's economy because on a fast track as China. China and India have been competing to influence Myanmar's strategically position in every sector.

After Myanmar government led by National League for Democracy (NLD) took office on 1 April, 2016, the State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited a number of countries to improve the bilateral relationships and to boost the economic and political collaboration and investment, especially for EU and US, the flow of aids and assistance. NLD led government has been practicing the Myanmar's foreign policy based on independence, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and international collaboration to maintain peace and stability.

At a meeting with diplomats both from home and abroad in Nay Pyi Taw, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said

“the government would adopt a people centered policy, emphasizing the relations between the peoples of nations, creating friendly and cooperative relations between them. Clarifying the country's foreign policy, she recalled that since the country regained independence in 1948 it had adopted an independent, non-

aligned and active foreign policy direction, dealing closely and warmly with not only neighboring countries but also the nations of the world.”

The State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi deeply emphasized on achieving internal peace and national reconciliation as the “first priority” of her government. According to Maung Aung Myoe, the NLD led government continues to adhere to the “independent, active and nonaligned foreign policy”, the policy will be implemented through multiple tracks in diplomacy with a possibility of stronger focus on people-to people contacts and multilateralism. Therefore, the foreign policy under NLD-led government is not new but the direction is different, as adjustments are made in the realm of diplomacy.

NLD government shows the important relations with China since its inception to Nay Pyi Taw office in 2016. NLD government especially focused on enhancing relations with China, a major trade partner and investor in Myanmar throughout the period of economic sanctions imposed by the West. State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s first visit to China in August 2016, rather than United States, will be a suitable choice for Myanmar’s stability and security. A significant aspect of the visit was the official acknowledgement of China’s “Belt and Road” initiative as well as the initiative of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor and, more importantly, (re)assurance of its adherence to the one- China principle, and expressed its understanding and support of China’s position on Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

China’s stand on Myanmar in the case of conflict in Rakhine State in 2018 is clear when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) through Human Rights Commission attempted to send investigation mission to Myanmar. The UNSC accused Myanmar military of mass killings and rapes of Bengali Muslims and burning their villages that committed to crimes against humanity and possibly ethnic cleansing. In the context, China and Russia blocked a short UNSC

statement on Myanmar. Therefore, China always stand on the side of Myanmar in front of international arena against the UNSC by vetoing as a permanent member of UNSC and maintaining amicable relations with Myanmar.

The Deputy Director General of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, U Ko Ko Shein said that

“Myanmar government's foreign policy is oriented to the protection of national interests, security, economic development, justice, stability and environmental sustainability. The policy also holds in high esteem such virtues as freedom, sovereignty, culture and tradition and national solidarity,”

There has been a dramatic shift of emphasis in Myanmar foreign policy from "bilateral relations" to "regional integration" and "multilateralism". Myanmar's constitution stresses that the country practices independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy.

According to Yun Sun, *“Myanmar will actually have to redress the balance of its relationship with the US, China and other powers and bring its foreign policy to its traditional non-aligned, balanced path.”*

Yoshimatsu expressed that *“It can be assumed that Myanmar will have practiced the soft balancing strategy in response to the rising China.”*

According to Maung Aung Myoe *“The foreign policy under NLD-led government in terms of objectives and principles is not new but it is different, as adjustments are made in the realm of diplomacy”*.

Findings and Conclusion

Major hypothesis based on the above research questions are as follows; it is not clear that Myanmar governments could effectively use foreign policy as a political tool for the increased

protection of the national interests regarding the relations with neighboring countries. However, as mentioned above, China's stand as the UNSC member on the side of Myanmar in international area showed that Myanmar gained political interests in relations with China. According to Trevor Wilson, through Head of the states visits to Russia and North Korea, Myanmar got important military equipments and conventional arms by using foreign policy as a political tool. By the periodically assessment of Myanmar foreign policy, it can be noted that successive Myanmar governments have been pursued domestic and foreign policy according to their internal needs and international responses.

It was seen that the implementation of strict neutrality of Myanmar foreign policy (1948-62) was clear in case of non- intervention in Cold War confrontation between Capitalist and Communist groups like Korean War. Myanmar has stood critical role of founding member at the Bandung Conference. BSPP government took office and conducted bilateral relations with neighboring countries especially China and India according to the nationalizing scheme of Myanmar. Therefore, Myanmar firmly rooted its foreign policy (1962-88) on "bilateralism and neutralism" and then proclaimed as an independent foreign policy. An inward -looking foreign policy focused on domestic affairs has been Myanmar's chosen policy and foreign policy orientation. Therefore, SLORC and SPDC government (1988-2011) introduced the open market system and started to participate in regional and multilateral institutions and adopted the 2008 Constitution. At that time, the relations between Myanmar and China was escalated the highest level because of the Western sanctions. From 2008 to 2011 the SPDC engineered a process of political change and then proceeded with forming a civilian government. In 2011, Myanmar new civilian government (2011-2016) has opened the new chapter with entering into the democratic system. Based on the 2008 Constitution, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar was established.

As Myanmar doesn't want to be China's satellite state, it has used the balance way with the West. Myanmar's domestic development has made a series of diplomatic moves in its foreign relations with major powers during this period. Indeed, the rapprochement between Myanmar and the West has been depending on some conditions such as the release of all political prisoners, inclusive dialogue with all opposition parties and ethnic minorities. State Counselor's first and foremost visit to China in August 2016 was also a pragmatic choice for Myanmar to develop the national interests and her Western countries visit showed that she will drive the country's broader engagement with the rest of the world. Myanmar's foreign policy under the NLD led government, while retaining the national reconciliation, survival and security of the state at its core, has been promoting the best interests of both state and society in Myanmar.

The foreign policy has been interpreted or coined with various phrases by Myanmar leaders, such as "independent neutrality," "active neutrality", "positive neutrality", "strict neutrality", "policy of nonalignment", or "neutralism". Although there were changes on decision making actors, domestic needs and external motivations, successive Myanmar governments has been pursuing independent, active and neutral foreign policy. Its approaches are slightly different according to the domestic needs and external environment in international system. From 1948 to this day, Myanmar successive governments have been following the same principles of foreign policy. Myanmar foreign policy has traditionally been oriented on internal security and stability. Nevertheless, the directions in which it has responded, acted and set to its foreign affairs have varied according to the issues and circumstances.

It can be concluded that although Myanmar had experienced with different political systems, institutions and ways to build national development, successive Myanmar governments constantly and steadfastly have pursued its core objective of foreign policy foundation to

enhance national security, to boost national economic prosperity and to sustain the domestic, regional and international peace. It also attempted to engage not only with China and India but also with regional groups such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi- Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and other international organizations based on its domestic priority concerns.

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