

## **MYANMAR-UNITED STATES RELATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER 2015 ELECTION**

Zin Mar Htwe\*

### **Abstract**

This article analyses Myanmar-US relations before and after 2015 election. After the military government's suppression on the 1988 democracy uprising, Myanmar-US relations were strained for over two decades. This situation gives China better opportunities to expand her political and economic linkages over Myanmar. In the meanwhile, at the regional circumstance, China's growing influence in Asia made greater concern for US to reconsider its role and security interests in the region. In 2009, with President Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy and with the success of Myanmar's democratic transition under the civilian government, Washington reconsider and reviewed its foreign policy towards Myanmar. Under such situation, bilateral relations gradually improved and finally tended to normalized relations. After 2015 election, NLD led by Daw Aung San Su Kyi become a democratically elected civilian government. Therefore, it can be assumed that NLD government will focus on the closer relations with US. However, Daw Aung San Su Kyi as a new Foreign Minister paid the first official state visit to China instead of US. This research will explain why did Myanmar pay first state visit to China? How would it make impact on Myanmar-US relations? What are the effects of US new President Trump's foreign policies on Myanmar and future of Myanmar- US relations? What will be the challenges in improving Myanmar-US relations?

**Key words** : Myanmar, United States, relations, foreign policy

### **Introduction**

Soon after the Myanmar military government came to power in 1988, the United States started to isolate and exert pressure on Myanmar through sanctions, suspension of aid and loans, and bans on trade and investment on the grounds of human rights violations, democratic values and drug problems. Since that time, their relations become strained over two decades. Under US and western countries sanctions, the military government had to relies on

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\*. Assistant Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Yadanabon University

China both for the economic and political matters. Therefore, US sanctions on Myanmar was a great opportunities for Chinese interests.

In 2009, with new President Obama's Asia Pivot policy, the Obama administration changed the old policy towards Myanmar and launched a comprehensive review and engaged with Myanmar government. Within a few years, Myanmar-US relations has changed and opened their new chapter in bi-lateral relations till normalized relations. After 2015 Election, most of the experts and scholar expected that US relations with NLD government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi would be closer than previous President U Thein Sein government. However, in reality, their relations seem to be cool relations than before. Upon this scenario, this research aims to analyze the relation between Myanmar and US before and after 2105 Elections. This research question finds out why Myanmar-US relations seem to be steady and slow under civilian NLD government as unexpected. As external factor, this research also explains Myanmar-US-China relation after 2015 Election with new government's balancing act foreign policy.

### **Myanmar-US relations before 2015 Election**

Obama, as newly elected US President, introduced "Pivot to Asia doctrines" with his Smart Power foreign policy after he took office in 2009. In regards with his smart power policy, he asserted in his speech at the UN general debate in 2009 that the US has entered a "new era of engagement" with the world, based on "mutual respect". It illustrate that the Obama Administration's commitment to smart power, which has significant implications for Southeast Asia and, in particular, the people of Myanmar. The essence of smart power is liberal internationalism, which argues the world is a safer place if it is made up of liberal democratic states. It also posits the use of multiple foreign policy tools to achieve this goal rather than simply coercion through the use of force. These tools include diplomatic, economic as well as military means to achieve strategic ends. Pivot to Asia doctrines of the US is a new strategy to face the new challenges of China growing presence in Asia region. During US Senator Jim Webb 'unofficial visit in Myanmar as part of his five country tour in August 2009, he said that

"We are in a situation where if we do not push some kind of constructive engagement, Burma is going to become a province of China"

Although this visit was not announced as an official visit, it was clearly viewed as an element of the Obama administration's review of policy options towards Myanmar and also undeclared foreign policy of the administration. However, at that time, there was no clear and official announcement of the Obama administration policy towards Myanmar.

The Obama administration's policy on Myanmar was officially announced during US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Indonesia in 2009. She announced that US was reviewing its policy towards Myanmar and she also admitted that sanctions imposed by the US on Myanmar had been ineffective in bringing the democratic changes in Myanmar.

After seven months of policy reviewed, Hillary Clinton announced the Obama administration's engagement policy towards Myanmar at the United Nations general debates on 23 September 2009. She said that

"First, the basic objectives are not changed. We want credible, democratic reform: a government that respond to the need of the Burmese people; immediate, unconditional release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi....."

This shows that Myanmar had re-entered the US foreign policy agenda. This policy of diplomatic engagement policy alongside economic sanctions is the hallmarks of smart power. In Myanmar, under military government, Myanmar had limited legitimacy in international community because of its isolationist policy and imposing sanctions by US and western countries. Therefore, Myanmar had depended on non-democratic countries for its power survival, economic assistance and diplomatic protection as well. China rapidly took its opportunities and seriously influence on Myanmar. Later, military government realized that the growing concern of Chinese interests and anti-Chinese sentiment of the people.

Under such situation, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) implemented for replacing the military law with "discipline-flourishing democracy" in accord with the Seven-Step Roadmap which was

laid down in 2003. Actually, at that time, the motivations of the SPDC government to start and improve relations with the US have been difficult to calculate. However, as undeclared policy, the government has willing to reduce their growing dependence on China both in economically and politically.

In accord with the Seven-Step Roadmap, the SPDC transferred the state power to a new civilian government On 30 March 2011. President U Thein Sein became a new President of the civil government after 2010 election. Newly elected government implemented a serious of reforms with add momentum for a top-down transition. Significant reforms were released of political prisoners, offered to negotiated cease fire agreement to all armed ethnic group, form Myanmar national Human Rights Commission and passed labor Organization and so on.

Concerning with it, Obama recognized about Myanmar's improving democratic reform when he attended East Asia Summit in Indonesia on November 17. He said about Myanmar's reforms and described as "after years of darkness, flickers of progress" in the last few weeks. It mentioned the progress of the bilateral relations depended on Myanmar government's taking more concrete action.

Soon after his statement, Obama announced Hillary Clinton visit to Myanmar for opening a new chapter between two countries by responding the meeting of President U Thein Sein and Daw Aung San Su Kyi. Hillary Clinton's visited on 30 November 2011 was the historic visit and it was a testament to how far the two countries have come together in a short period of time. Since that time, Myanmar-US relations has been normalized with step by step process. Mutual visits between government officials and State leaders have given the ways to improve bi-lateral relations.

According to the Obama administration's actions for action policy, U.S formally eased sanctions on Myanmar in 2012 and allowed US companies to invest in all sectors of the Myanmar economy. Myanmar Economic Forum was also held in New York in September 2014 with the name of Myanmar; Asia's last Frontier.

While going to a deep diplomatic and economic relation with the United States and the West, Myanmar has avoided and handled carefully on sensitive and strategic matters such as the South and East China Sea disputes. Myanmar's successful stands on this issue can be seen at the 49<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2016. As Councillor's first attending to this meeting, it showed that Myanmar's attitudes and neutral foreign policy between major powers.

During Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Washington after Beijing visit in September in 2016, it was announced that economic sanctions against Myanmar would be lifted. Before it, Obama had notified the U.S. Congress that he would be reinstating preferential tariffs for Myanmar under the Generalized System of Preferences, which provides duty-free access for goods from poor and developing countries.

Therefore, her visit was an opportunity to begin laying the groundwork for a "new normal" in bilateral ties. On October 7, 2016, President Obama issued an executive order with sanctions program. This formally concluded US economic sanctions against Myanmar nearly 20 years after their inception. As a result of President Obama's EO on October 7, 2016, the following changes took effect immediately:

- All individuals and entities on OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List) who had been listed under the 'Burma Sanctions Program' were delisted, and all property or interests in property blocked under the program were unblocked.
- The SDN list is a number of individuals and companies, periodically designated by OFAC, whose assets are blocked and with which dealings are prohibited by 'US persons'.
- The ban on the importation into the United States of Myanmar-origin jadeite and rubies, and any jewelry containing them, was revoked.
- OFAC announced it would remove the Burmese Sanctions Regulations, 31 C.F.R., part 537, prohibiting property and certain other transactions related to the country.

- OFAC-administered restrictions regarding financial and banking transactions involving Myanmar have been lifted. The US Department of State's reporting requirements regarding certain new investments in Myanmar by U.S. persons have been made voluntary.

Therefore, when analyzing Myanmar-US relations before 2015 Election, it can be divided into two parts. First three years periods under President U Thein Sein and Obama is the most active and implement the considerable changes by going step by step process. Next two years, they open a new chapter and build the normalization between two countries.

### **Myanmar-US relations after 2105 Elections: Steady and slow?**

Most of the scholars and policy experts regarded and assumed that democratic government of Myanmar and US relations would become more friendly and active from the step of normalization after 2015 Election. However, in reality, it did not become as much as expected by scholars. One of the reasons Myanmar-US relations seem to be steady and slow rather than previous government was that a new government's more pragmatic and balance of power foreign policy.

### **New government's balancing foreign policy after 2015 Election**

The 2015 multi-party general elections were held on 8 November 2015. It was represented as historical landmark in Myanmar's democratic transition. After the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory with 77.1% of the vote, Myanmar's first-ever elected civilian government was formed on 31 March 2016. U Htin Kyaw has been chosen as the president. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi holds two offices and also serves as State Councillor. She became the main person who drives the country's foreign policy. The international community is also keenly interested in the future direction of new government's foreign policy.

After the formation of the government, the key leaders gave inaugural speech and it was regarded as the fundamental principles of Myanmar's foreign policy. Like that, the brief inaugural speech of President U Htin Kyaw

focused on four areas of domestic policy: national reconciliation, internal peace, emergence of a constitution aimed at establishing a democratic federal union, and improving the quality of life of the majority of the people.

Furthermore, during State Councillor's Myanmar New Year message on 18 April, she emphasized on the state domestic factors: national reconciliation, peace, the rule of law and constitutional amendment.

More definitely, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a Foreign Minister met foreign diplomats on 22 April 2016 and laid out a new vision of Myanmar's foreign policy. She asserted that the NLD government will continue to practice "neutrality and non-aligned" principle and will maintain "friendly relations with all countries." By adhering to this long-standing principle of "neutrality" in foreign policy, the government will try to build strong relations with all major global powers. Therefore, this new foreign policy will not focus on one country like US but aims to make multifaceted arrangements in foreign policy.

Therefore, some scholar expected that the foothold of Myanmar's foreign policy has become increasingly pragmatic, shifting from bilateralism to regional integration and multilateralism. For example, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's first pragmatic approach can be seen in inviting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Nay Pyi Taw, only a few days after the new government was formed in April 2016.

### **First priority of the government on the national reconciliation**

Another one is that the NLD government's first priority on the national reconciliation as expressed in the speech. It stated that the new government would need to address immediately the peace negotiation process between ethnic arms groups and Myanmar Tatmataw. It was the basic fundamental needs for the economic development of the country.

As Myanmar's largest neighbor, China has been and will remain a critical player in the Myanmar peace process. A number of major ethnic armed groups operate along the China–Myanmar border area. These include: the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the UWSA, the Myanmar National

Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), otherwise known as the Kokang Army and etc.

China's official position follows the principle of noninterference and its official policy is "persuading for peace and facilitating dialogues." In practice, its attitude has been more ambiguous. Whatever it is, ethnic reconciliation and peace in Myanmar is not only important to the country itself but also vital to security and stability along the China-Myanmar border as well as to the friendly cooperation between two countries.

Therefore, State Counselor's first invitation is the Chinese Foreign Minister and her very visit is also China rather than US after assuming the office in 2016. All of these situations concern in accord with the country's first domestic priority policy in national reconciliation.

### **China's role in Myanmar-US relations with new government's balancing act policy**

When we discuss about Myanmar-US relations, we cannot excuse the role of China because China is Myanmar's largest neighboring country as well as it also important for US in her security and military in the Southeast Asia region. On the other hand, building friendly relations and security cooperation between Myanmar and US could be a strategic problem for China because of Myanmar's geographic and geostrategic position in the region.

However, US government did not admit officially that their Asia Pivot policy and engagement policy towards Myanmar would not concern about the growing influence of China on Myanmar and in the region as experts and scholars expected. Hillary Clinton said about it

"...we are not opposing any other country, we are about supporting this country(Myanmar)...So from our perspective, we are not viewing this in light of any competition with China"

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also confirmed it in her speech to US Institute of Peace during her visit to Washington in 2012. She stated that Myanmar's engagement with the US was not about containing China. Myanmar can work cooperatively both China and US.



As expressed above, new government also clearly addressed that the government would maintain friendly relations with its neighbouring countries and major power as well. As showing her pragmatic approach, she invited Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi after taking office. This invitation linked to the

Moreover, her first visit to China in 2016 was clearly a move to pave the way for building relations between two countries. In another interview to *The Washington Post* during the same period, she said that her country's relationship with China was "good". She refused to give credit to the US alone for the democratization process in Myanmar.

By seeing it, her decision to visit China indicates that she has desire the need to maintain relations with her country's great power neighbor rather than relations with US. She also wants to re-establish the relations with China which was sour because of suspending the Myint Sone Dam project under previous government.

### **US President Trump's nationalist foreign policy and Myanmar**

Newly elected US President Trump's victory and his new administration have caused deep concern about the future of the Myanmar-US relations. According to President Trump, "America First" is an attempt to put American citizen's priority above citizens of foreign countries. Trump has signaling on reduction of US engagement in international stages, and to put national interest above all else.

So America First foreign policy basically a policy of which United States will disengage from any international involvement unless U.S. has a clear financial benefit from such arrangement.

Furthermore, as contrary with Obama's Asia Pivot policy, he is not willing to focus on the Asia region and there would no longer be a counterbalance to China. Instead of it, he seems to be interested in the Middle East region in accord with his very first official visit to this region after taking office in May 2017.

Therefore, Myanmar-US relations can be assumed to be stable and steady in the early 2017. One of the experts Murray Hiebert expressed in his

article on 2 June 2017 that the new US president should call Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. He also said that Trump should invite her to Washington and noted that his administration's lack of contact with Myanmar and also pointed out that more active relations has been seen between Myanmar and China after 2015.

Soon after that, US embassy in Yangon issued that State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and US Secretary of State Tillerson spoke by phone on June 20, 2017 and underscored the ongoing U.S commitment to Southeast Asia and discussed important regional security challenges.

Although it is difficult to predict exactly the Trump's administration policy towards Asia, it can still impact Myanmar and its relations at the international and domestic level. At an international level, the U.S' potential disengagement with Asia would create instability in the region, and more difficulties for Myanmar to hedge against China's strategic position. At the domestic level, Trump's rhetoric hate speech on Islam which further spread hate against Muslims in Myanmar. Trump's anti-Muslim agenda is supported by Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar. It can also impact the context of Rakhine issue.

### **Conclusion**

After Myanmar and U.S had strained relations over two decades, their relations became normalized. US assumed that normalization with Myanmar is the U.S's victory on the symbol of democratic values. In analyzing the Myanmar-U.S relations, it can be seen that US's declared foreign policies and undeclared foreign policies on Myanmar. Declared foreign policies are to be a democratic country, the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and political prisoners and have human rights. Greater concern about the rapid growth of China in the region and counter-balance of Chinese influence are undeclared foreign policies.

The shaping of the foreign policies also depend on the leadership style and personal behaviours. The leaders of country (Myanmar-U.S) personal behaviours, their leadership styles and personally friendships effect on their

bilateral relations. Although the State Counselor is more comfortable and friendly personal relations with the West (US) she realized well and made it clear that Myanmar cannot change its geography and cannot choose the country's neighbours. Therefore, she wants good relations with China as well. For Myanmar's Peace Process and national reconciliation as a country's first Priority.

Myanmar needs close relationship with China, on the other hand, Myanmar also build its relationships with US and try to negotiate to ease the remaining sanctions on Myanmar. Although it seems to have steady and slow relationship with US after 2015, in reality, it was the new government's balancing act foreign policy. It also showed Myanmar's more pragmatic and active foreign policy and foreign relations.

Therefore, Myanmar will balance its foreign policy, but it will not do so between the two countries only. As expressed in the country's foreign policy, it will be expected that Myanmar will make a serious effort to balance Myanmar's relations between China, India, Japan, the rest of Southeast Asia, and the West. Building such multidirectional collaboration can definitely help Myanmar to advance its development and security. It is important for Myanmar to handle carefully its diplomatic strategy to maintain the balance relations among major powers around the world, particularly between U.S and China.

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