

CHINA'S MULTILAYERED RELATIONS APPROACH TOWARDS MYANMAR SINCE 2011

Thi Thi Lwin *

Abstract

Before 2010 general elections, China gained more influence in Myanmar - China bilateral relations. After 2010 general elections, China changed its approach in accordance with the improvement of Myanmar's political situation. The relations between the two countries reached a turning point especially when National League for Democracy (NLD) Party won some seats in Hluttaw in 2012 by-election. Since that time, China reanalyzed their relations and changed its strategy towards Myanmar. In attempting to accommodate Myanmar's political situation, China practiced multilayered approaches. Since 2011, China recognized Myanmar peoples' anti- Chinese sentiment and tried to change this sentiment by emphasizing the opinion of Myanmar people through the strategy of multilayered relations. To improve its image and relations with the local communities, China conducted massive public relations activities inside Myanmar. China believed that the friendly relations with Myanmar will support Chinese interests because Myanmar is also a key component of China's "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI). China aimed to forge closer ties with Myanmar through construction projects and bilateral cooperation in energy and finance. It is assured that China is seeking to control Myanmar and taking advantage of Myanmar's circumstances during development and then it has adjusted its posture and policy toward Myanmar. The research is conducted through a qualitative analysis by means of archival research relying on both primary and secondary sources. This paper intends to highlight China's strategy towards Myanmar since 2011 in the changing situation of Myanmar and examine why China practiced multilayered approach towards Myanmar.

Keywords: multilayered approach, guanxi, anti- Chinese sentiment, China's interests

Introduction

Myanmar and China have a long tradition of bilateral relations, the intensity of which has been changing according to political circumstances. Myanmar's strategic status serves as a paragon of friendship and cooperation in the foreign relations of both countries. Political reforms in Myanmar since general elections in November 2010 have generated unexpected impacts on the once robust bilateral relations, as well as complicated Beijing's policy towards Myanmar. In Myanmar's post-2011 political landscape, China no longer occupies a central position in the minds of policymakers in Myanmar. After a close-knit relationship that lasted from September 1988 to March 2011, political liberalization in Myanmar has imposed new restrictions on Chinese foreign policy and undermined China-Myanmar relations. The decision by President U Thein Sein to suspend the construction of the Myitsone Dam in response to popular local grievances has clearly highlighted to Beijing that it can no longer ignore the non-state actors of host countries in which Chinese strategic and economic interests are at stake.

After 2010 general election, China noticed public opinion of Myanmar people in accordance with the improvement of Myanmar's political situation. Especially when National League for Democracy (NLD) Party won some seats in Hluttaw in 2012 by-election, the relations between the two countries began to change as a turning point. Since that time, China reanalyzed their relations and changed its strategy towards Myanmar and it has been using multilayered relations approach towards Myanmar. China realized Myanmar peoples' emphasis on human rights especially the freedom of speech in the changing situation of authoritarian rule to multi-party democracy. With the NLD, the Chinese government has established a relatively open channel of

* Dr, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Yadanabon University

communication and even hosted a delegation in May 2013 which was the first ever visit to China by Myanmar's main opposition group.

In the China's multilayered relations towards Myanmar, China invited important persons in multilayered - societies in Myanmar politics by using apparent scenarios of excursions, capacity-building, exchange of experiences and etc.,. China invited party leaders, party members and youths from Myanmar under the title of party to party relations. Moreover, China also invited NGOs, civil society organizations, activists, community leaders, monks and journalists from Myanmar in order to understand about China through capacity - building trainings, workshops and excursions. After 2010, China realized Myanmar peoples' anti- Chinese sentiment and tried to change this sentiment by emphasizing the importance of public opinion of Myanmar through the strategy of multilayered relations.

Myanmar's China policy shift, in terms of direction, is by no means to seek to be independent of China, but rather for there to be a mutual interdependence between the two countries. Since 2011, although there have been the issues of China's mega-projects investment and the management of border security between the two countries, both countries have an interest in maintaining security and stability along the border. They also carefully cultivate and nurture their bilateral relations to achieve comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.

Research Questions

The research on “China’s Multilayered Relations Approach towards Myanmar since 2011” tries to examine how China approached towards Myanmar since 2011 for the sake of its interests. It is aimed at explaining:

- (1) How did China approach towards Myanmar since 2011?
- (2) Why did China practice multilayered relations approach towards Myanmar since 2011?

Arguments

This research paper argues that China has changed its approach towards Myanmar through multilayered strategy since 2011. To accommodate with Myanmar's political circumstances, China has adjusted its policy toward Myanmar. It finds out that China practiced multilayered relations strategy towards Myanmar because this strategy will support China's interests. Based on the concept of *guanxi*, China also tried to lessen the anti-Chinese sentiment of Myanmar people by building mutual trust and benefits and to change their image upon China. By using multilayered strategies, China achieved positive outcomes in Myanmar - China relations. Because of this strategy, Myanmar government under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi changed its policy towards China and practiced pragmatic approach towards China in the Myitsone Dam project and Labataung Copper Mine project. Myanmar government carefully refrained from the attitudes that increase the discontents of Beijing government and always tries to maintain the good relations with China. Since 2018, Myanmar's engagement with China has been noticed in Rakhine case and their relations have been improved significantly since then.

The Term “Guanxi”

‘Guanxi’ means building connections and maintaining relationships between people. It also means the fundamental dynamic impersonalized social networks of power and is a crucial system of beliefs in Chinese culture. In particular, there is a focus on mutual commitments, reciprocity, and trust. Basically, *guanxi* is a personal connection between two people in which one is able to prevail upon another to perform a favor or service, or be prevailed upon. It also describes the benefits gained from social connections and usually extends from extended family, school friends,

workmates and members of common clubs or organizations. It is customary for Chinese people to cultivate an intricate web of *guanxi* relationships. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, *guanxi* became an important way to build and maintain trust within communities because families were often encouraged to report on each other to enforce communism. Based on *guanxi*, China practiced multilayered relations approach towards Myanmar in order to promote its interests. By using *guanxi*, China attracted Myanmar government and people to accept China as a good neighbor and turned the anti- Chinese sentiment of Myanmar people into positive thinking.

China- Myanmar Relations since 2011

Geographically China and Myanmar linked with common mountains and rivers, sharing border. Myanmar is China's southern gate and China is Myanmar's home front. The two countries are vital to each other's security and strategic defense. Since 1960s, they promote friendly relations, maintain peace, stability and development of the border region and safeguard the lasting stability of the two countries on the basis of mutual interests and coordination. When Myanmar was under 20 years of sanctions from the West under SLORC/SPDC, China firmed non-interference in the internal affairs. China stood with Myanmar in bold defense of Myanmar's interests on the international stage. After U Thein Sein government came to power, the good neighbor tradition of mutual help and support has been continued and strengthened. Despite Myanmar's increasing outreach to the outside world, Chinese engagement with the military and political elites in the country is still strong.

However, the democratic transition in Myanmar exposed a series of worrisome uncertainties for China. After refusing for two decades, China finally acknowledged the legitimacy of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD at the end of 2011 and started to cultivate a familiar relationship with Myanmar. The Chinese Ambassador met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from December 2011 to June 2012 for several times. Since then, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has openly expressed the importance of China for Myanmar and showed the willingness of working with both Beijing and Washington in and outside Myanmar. Moreover, official visit of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to China in June 2015 resulted in a greater understanding between the two countries, and helping shield Myanmar from international exclusion.

However, China has a negative image problem in Myanmar because of its heavy-handed practices with Myanmar. Most of Myanmar people described that China's contribution for the military government hindered any democratic governance and progress towards democracy. Because of China's strong support for the SLORC/SPDC government at various internal forums, military regime in Myanmar was lasted so long. They also assumed that Chinese companies that owned by State neglected the environmental and social impacts of their business practices in Myanmar. Moreover, contracts are signed in favor of China and the Myanmar government received very little benefits. Chinese firms have exploited natural resources of Myanmar without any proper consultation with the local people, or their consents and local people received little redress for their properties. These behaviors led to stronger anti- China sentiment among Myanmar people. China worries about Myanmar Peoples' anti- China sentiment and negative attitude towards China. So, in order to change this situation, China approached through multilayered means towards Myanmar since 2011.

Since 2011, Myanmar's foreign policy goal towards China has been the Myanmar's intention to open up and unite with the West and reduce Myanmar's dependence on China. However, the Bengali crisis has driven Myanmar back toward China. Whatever it is, China has shielded her regime and the military in the UN. Even the situation of increasing diplomatic pressures and economic sanctions from the West for the humanitarian problem in Rakhine State, Myanmar's engagement with China has been developed significantly in 2018. This kind of

scenario has never been achieved since Myanmar's democratic transition began in 2010 and reached dramatic milestone relations. Myanmar realized that Myanmar's China policy stirring is by no means to search for independent from China, but rather for an advanced interdependence between the two countries. As a sign of improving cooperation, the two countries initiated a number of projects. One of the important projects of China-Myanmar cooperation is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) that will connect Yunnan province in China to the economic hubs of Mandalay, Yangon New City and the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone in Myanmar." In 2019, Myanmar and China signed MOUs in the 2nd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing and expressing strong cooperation and advancing the CMEC. China-Myanmar engagement became closer and deeper under the BRI Projects.

China's Multilayered Relations Approach towards Myanmar

In the China's multilayered relations towards Myanmar, China invited important persons in multilayered - societies in Myanmar politics by using apparent scenarios of excursions, capacity-building, exchange of experiences and etc.. After taking political power of NLD government, International Department of Chinese Communist Party invited party leaders, party members and youths from Myanmar under the title of party to party relations. Moreover, China- Myanmar friendship team and the Network of Non-Governmental Organizations from China also invited NGOs, civil society organizations, activists, community leaders and monks from Myanmar. China also invited Myanmar journalists in order to understand about China through capacity - building trainings, workshops and excursions. After 2010, China realized Myanmar peoples' anti- Chinese sentiment and tried to change this sentiment by emphasizing the importance of mass media that support friendly relations between Myanmar and China. China is seeking to control Myanmar and taking advantage of Myanmar's circumstances and then it has adjusted its posture and policy toward Myanmar.

People to people relations: Because China realized growing anti- China sentiment among Myanmar people, it engaged in public diplomacy. Through its embassy in Yangon, China interacted with local people, including NGOs and media. In May 2012, Beijing started a mass campaign of "Deep Fraternal Friendship" in Yangon to consolidate the friendship and boost traditional ties. On 20 March 2013, the embassy maintained a website and facebook page. Moreover, Ambassador Yang Houlan met with representatives of NGOs, political parties and activist groups. On 6 April 2013, the Chinese embassy in Yangon donated \$1,000 USD for Myanmar health sector development. Beijing intended to improve its image on the ground level and relations with the local community based on public relations, public diplomacy and corporate social responsibility programs (CSR). Regarding public relations, China's target is media. Beijing has made massive efforts for its public outreach inside Myanmar because the media played to influence the public opinion on Myitsone dam. Chinese Central TV program began to broadcast in Myanmar and China invited Myanmar media delegations to visit China after the suspension of Myitsone dam. To promote a appropriative manner for China and insist favorable passion among Myanmar media workers, China formulated these public programs.

Chinese companies have also taken notice to CSR and to participate in public relations exercises. To handle local resentment and to maneuver the problems concerning the oil and gas pipeline, the Chinese National People's Congress (CNPC) established a Pipeline Friendship Association in Myanmar. Chinese companies also paid more compensation for the deprivation of possession of the local people. They conducted social welfare activities, carried out philanthropic works and built schools and dispensaries for villages. After the Myitsone Dam suspension, Beijing has made more (CSR) programs as an integral component of Chinese State-owned Enterprises (SOEs') operation inside Myanmar. The CNPC has promised six million USD to build schools, clinics and hospitals along the pipeline construction areas. Despite the higher costs, Chinese

companies avoided all religious places in the pipeline erection and accommodating technical configuration of the project according to the requests of local peoples.

For engaging with Myanmar, China practiced various ways and means: cultural exchange programs, art exhibitions, scholarship programs for Myanmar students and civil servants, charitable and social welfare initiatives and media campaigns. Since 2017, public participation and media attention have been reached in high in the celebration of Chinese New Year. In 2018, Chinese Cultural Centre was opened in Yangon which was the first public place for enhancing cultural exchanges with Myanmar. Regarding TV programs, MRTV and Guangxi People's Broadcasting Station (GPBS) cooperated to promulgate a Chinese cartoon series with Myanmar since August 2018. China desired Myanmar people to understand its opinion and good will towards Myanmar by using Media and articulates the news that favored for China.

Party to Party Relations: During the SLORC/SPDC rule, the Chinese Government abstained from meeting and building contacts with political parties and opposition politicians. Since the by-elections of 2012, China has engaged political parties, civil society organizations and so on. On 22 May 2012, Vice- President Xi Jinping has showed to develop stronger ties with Myanmar's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). In April 2013, China has cautiously conducted party - to- party relations with other non-ruling parties in Myanmar including a delegation of 12 senior members from All Mom Regional Democracy Party (AMRDP), the National Unity Party (NUP), the National Democratic Force (NDF), the Shan Nationality Democracy Party(SNDP), and Rakhine Nationality Democracy Party (RNDP). The two governments fostered the flourishing of Myanmar - China relations and exchanges between them.

Since the party's entry into parliamentary politics in 2012 in Myanmar, China has been related with the NLD in alert. The party-to-party relations have been cultivated between them. They have pledged to boost bilateral cooperation and party-to-party exchanges. The NLD values its relations with the CPC and appreciates the achievements and rich experiences of the CPC in party and state governance. The visit of State Counselor in June 2015 was the most crucial landmark in the party-to- party relations between them. Both governments are pragmatic and intend to strengthen mutual understanding. Beijing regarded Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as an important person in realizing its strategic partnership with Myanmar, particularly in the changing nature of its domestic political situations. In 2018, during Mr. Song Tao's visit, China opened discussions at the party-to-party level. Mr. Song also met the Vice-President (2) of NLD Dr. Zaw Myint Maung and other Central Executive Committee (CEC) members. Myanmar President U Win Myint and State Counselor respectively met with Mr. Song Tao and they pledged to strengthen party to party relations. Myanmar government emphasized to enhance high-level exchanges, strengthening practical cooperation between the two countries and recognized China's role in Myanmar peace process. China also cherishes China-Myanmar "paukphaw" friendship and is willing to strengthen the alignment of each other's development strategies, deepen party-to-party exchanges between the two countries and further promote bilateral ties.

Relations with parliament and government institutions: China also extended relations to parliament and government institutions of Myanmar. Chinese delegation met with the Hluttaw Speakers in Myanmar and there is the increasing of bilateral visits by parliament Speakers. In June 2018, Amyothar Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than visited China and in September 2018, the Standing Committee of NPC Vice Chairperson Li Zhanshu visited Myanmar vice versa and met Hluttaw Speakers. The two counties emphasized the development direction of bilateral comprehensive strategic cooperation. China also supported Myanmar to explore a development path suited to its national conditions.

At the State as well as Region level, U Phyo Min Thein, Chief Minister of Yangon Region, frequently and actively engaged with Chinese delegation visits. Beijing is a key leader and

supporter for the New Yangon City Development Project. In 2018, Chinese delegations more visited to Nay Pyi Taw than the Myanmar representatives visiting China. Several Communist Party of China (CPC) delegations and diplomatic teams visited Nay Pyi Taw and BRI projects were signed in 2018. It cannot be denied that China's visits in the first half of 2018 had dominance on official accords between them. China participated with eagerness in peace intervention and provided international diplomatic protection for Myanmar. China-Myanmar relations have been keeping a good momentum of development, with frequent high-level exchanges of visits and continuous deepening of mutual political trust. The two countries tried to enhance exchanges of governance experiences, deepen cultural and educational exchanges, consolidate the political foundation and public support for China-Myanmar friendship, and pushed the China-Myanmar comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership to a new level. Although the changing situations in Myanmar impacted on China's interests, China tried to reach the favorable situation and good relations with Myanmar by changing its strategy.

Regarding China's policy towards Myanmar, China practiced the policy of summit diplomacy toward Myanmar before 2011. Between 2009 and 2010, top officials of China and Myanmar were visited vice versa. Since 2011, China adopted the policy of economic cooperation and investment in Myanmar. For China, economic cooperation contributed to access Myanmar's resources and to maintain good relations with Myanmar. Since that time, China's investment in Myanmar has been enhanced to a larger extent. Moreover, to fulfill its strategic interests of border security and energy security, China put into action the engagement policy through which China engaged multi-faceted cooperation with Myanmar since 2011.

China's Interests in Myanmar

China acknowledged that Myanmar is a strategically important country that offers access to the Indian Ocean and possesses rich mineral resources. In a geopolitical perspective, Myanmar is a geopolitical pivot in Southeast Asia. Keeping Myanmar within its strategic orbit is one of the major interests for China. Myanmar is also a strategic buffer or security barrier for China. For China's security, political stability in Myanmar is necessary and important. Any armed conflict on the Myanmar- China border regions is unfavorable condition to China's border security, so it is in Beijing's interest to prevent the escalation of conflicts.

Myanmar is also a major component of China's BRI which aims to increase regional connectivity and forge closer ties through construction projects and bilateral cooperation in energy and finance. China wants a successful peace process of Myanmar that would boost trade with Myanmar and make safer for Chinese investments. However, China's behavior in Myanmar peace process is intricate due to Chinese special interest groups' direct financial support for ethnic armed groups in Myanmar. China's unfavorable policies on the Myanmar peace process are clearly seen in its stronger ties with the United Wa State Army and its support weapons to UWSA. Furthermore, Beijing is taking steps to shift Myanmar's foreign economic and political orientation towards China when the United States, Japan and India are stronger ties with Myanmar's new democratically elected government. Because China tries to improve relations with NLD government, its cooperation in Myanmar's peace process could be forthcoming. Myanmar government may be opened to expand China's economic presence in the country in the future, but Beijing also wants to retain the support of ethnic groups, which have been a major source of China's influence in Myanmar

In Myanmar, China is not only the largest trading partner but also has made a huge investment in the resource- extracted projects. In 2016, China invested \$2.8 billion in Myanmar. The majority of the Chinese investment is in manufacturing, communications, transport, tourism, agriculture, electricity generation, real estate and industrial sectors. It is cleared that China's

interest is to invest in Myanmar. China's renewed interests in Myanmar are the increase in development aid and trade volumes; the increase of FDI both inward and outward; China's need for oil, gas and other energy sources. China is seeking to control Myanmar and taking advantage of Myanmar's circumstances during development. In the future, China and Myanmar may no longer be as close as before, but at least their new partnership will be more sustainable.

Finding and Conclusion

China has practiced "land bridge" strategy that connects China to the Bay of Bengal and supports policy goals in Beijing to improve Chinese economy. Since 2011, China focused multiple approaches towards Myanmar rather than single policy. With the "government-to-government" relations, China attempted to gather new objectives in foreign policy. As the diversity of Chinese approaches, the Chinese government departments, Chinese embassy, Chinese companies and government organized NGOs promoted initiatives to strengthen China's relationship with the Myanmar government, people and other stakeholder organizations in Myanmar. This highlights a major transition from the rhetoric and narratives of the past in China foreign policies towards Myanmar.

Increasing Western pressures pushed Myanmar to closer relations towards China who is becoming important in Myanmar foreign policy under NLD government. Although Myanmar government postponed Myitsone Dam project, it supported disputed Labbataung Copper Mine project as a practical action towards China. Myanmar government always maintains the good relations with China and cautiously abstained from the behaviors that grow the discontents of Beijing government. Moreover, Myanmar accepted "One China Policy", and supported Chinese stand in the cases of Taiwan and Tibet and Chinese BRI. So, it is cleared that Myanmar government is cautiously solving the cases that are pertained to Chinese interests. Myanmar and China exchanged views on matters related to recent development in Rakhine State and Myanmar called for China's continued constructive support in Myanmar's endeavors.

In the China's multilayered relations towards Myanmar, China invited important persons in multilayered - societies in Myanmar politics to acknowledge and favor China's policy and approach towards Myanmar. China developed and maintained its strategic interests in Myanmar. China interested in Myanmar's resources and investment in resource-based projects in Myanmar. China's multilayered relations approach is not only to support China's interests in Myanmar but also to support and formulate China's policy in domestic and international scenario. By inviting the party members, civil society organizations and social media and studying Chinese culture, social standards and economic development, China desires to change Myanmar peoples' negative image towards China. Although Myanmar concerns about China's hunger for raw material and energy, its violation of human rights and increasingly about the deteriorating environment, Myanmar government under NLD always tries to develop good relations with China. For China, to achieve the goals of BRI, it tried to enhance "China-Myanmar connectivity" through the relations between governments, ruling parties and people-to-people on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. With these strategies, China tried to promote prosperity and stability in the border region together.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express her gratitude to Dr Aung Aung Min (Rector, Yadanabon University) for his enthusiastic support to make a contribution to the research. Her special thanks go to Dr Aye Myint Oo (Professor and Head), International Relations Department, Yadanabon University and Dr Moe Yin Yin (Professor), International Relations Department, Yadanabon University for their valuable advice and comments for this paper.

