

JAPAN'S POLICY TOWARDS MYANMAR (2011-2017): CATCHING UP WITH A CLOSED RELATIONSHIP OR OPENING "NEW ERA"

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Abstract

After 2011, Myanmar-Japan relations promote again and open up new chapter of friendship relations. The "Containment and Engagement" focus on the phenomena of individual approaches to the instruments, regions and targets. Japanese ODA policy was used as a tool for democratic transition of Myanmar and to reduce China's influence on Myanmar as target. The rise of China's influence in Indo-Pacific and political change of Myanmar are push factors for promoting bilateral relations under civilian government. After democratization, Myanmar government continues to practice non-aligned, independent and active foreign policy and promote relations with all countries including Japan to reduce dependent on China. Japanese government used this opportunity to promote relations with Myanmar. Containment of China's effects is more or less effective under the civilian government for opening new historic friendship relationship.

Keywords: Japan, Myanmar, ODA, democratization, China rise, containment and engagement

Introduction

Myanmar-Japan relations significantly improved after 2011, due to political transition in Myanmar. The newly elected USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) government wanted to reduce Chinese influence and rebalance its foreign policy with powerful countries—notably the Western World, Japan and India. Japan was the largest trading partner and close ally for Myanmar before 1988. After 1988, China replaced Japan's role in Myanmar and Japan waited to see if relations would improve with Myanmar. When the USDP government came into power in March 2011, the Japanese government improved economic and political relations with Myanmar and Japanese FDI flowed into Myanmar again. When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe came into power in Japan in 2012, Myanmar-Japan relations had improved because of "Abe's five principle foreign policy" which focused on improving relations with ASEAN countries to rebalance China. The objective of this study is to explore the Japan's policy changes on Myanmar. The main research question for this study is "How did the Japanese policy toward Myanmar re-promote under a new democratic government"? Myanmar's strategic location is importance for China's OBOR initiative to avoid Malacca Straits and energy security for China. Also importance for cotemporary interest of Japan's "Free and open Indo-Pacific Strategy" and new market place in Southeast Asia. Japan tried to improve relations with Myanmar and supports Myanmar's democracy changes as external factors because of China's contemporary interest. This paper discusses about the improved relationship between Myanmar and Japan that has improved from the view of political, economic, and others factors under the USDP and NLD government.

Catching up with a closed relationship or opening a new era

Japan resumed its ODA loans to Myanmar after 2011 (see figure-1). Post 2011 Japanese ODA was changing purpose for Myanmar not only for political but also for economic cooperation to support political reforms, economic development and national reconciliation in

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Myanmar. With consideration of the purpose of Japanese ODA policy changes, Japan-Myanmar relations returned to a friendly situation. Domestic politics and international systems changes; the growth of China's influence are factors for Myanmar-Japan relations. Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the "21st century Maritime Silk Road" policy in 2013 and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pushed forward with a "free and open Indo-Pacific investment Strategy" to assist the development in infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific region to reduce Chinese influence.

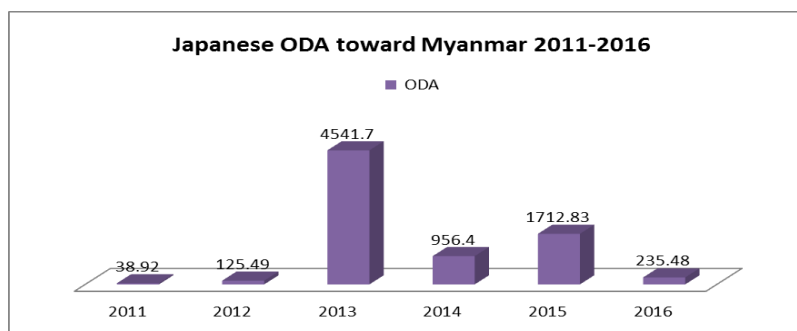
In March 2011, President U Thein Sein initiated a political and economic reforms process to promote a democratization and economic liberalization and national reconciliation process between ethnic minorities. Strategic locations, cheap labor and rich resources were attracting foreign direct investment and a potential big market for investors. President U Thein Sein also initiated an economic liberalization policy of open foreign investment to reduce dependency on China. Myanmar became a potential big consumer market and maritime route to connect the Asia-Pacific region. These factors push forward cooperation between Japan and Myanmar. In June 2011, the Japanese parliamentary vice minister of foreign affairs visited Myanmar, and after his visit Japan resumed its ODA projects in Myanmar. In November 2011, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and President U Thein Sein met at the Japan-ASEAN Summit in Bali and increased bilateral relations again. The Japanese government laid down the "New Economic Cooperation Policy" and resumed assistance in 2012. In April 2012, President U Thein Sein visited Japan and Japan announced the three pillars of support for Myanmar: "(1) assistance for improving people's livelihoods, (2) capacity building and institutional development to sustain the economy and society, (3) development of infrastructure and related systems necessary for sustainable economic development".

After the political change of Myanmar, the state visits between the two countries leaders were promoted. During their visits, the state leaders exchange their views for supporting Myanmar political and economic reforms that showed the promoting bilateral ties and friendly relations. Japanese government plugged to supports the Myanmar democratic transitions and economic reforms through ODA (Official Development Assistance). Japanese Finance Minister Mr. Taro Aso visited Myanmar for his first overseas visit in January 2013 to support private-public partnership (PPP). He also visited the Thilawa SEZs and invested US\$ 12.6 billion, which is a milestone in Myanmar-Japan economic integration. On his visit, he confirmed that Japan would cancel part of the US\$ 5.74 billion debt and gave the new loan of ¥50 billion yen for part construction of the Thilawa SEZs. U Win Aung, who was the head of the Myanmar side of the consortium, said that the integration of the Thilawa SEZs will contribute to the new age of economic development with the help of Japan's technology and creates job opportunities for Myanmar. Japan also invested in the Dawei SEZs situated in the southern part of Myanmar, which will be the largest industrial area in Southeast Asia.

In January 2013, Japan and Myanmar signed the ODA loan agreement of ¥198.9 billion. In May 2013, Myanmar President U Thein Sein visited Japan, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced the new ODA loan, technical cooperation and aid grant of ¥91 billion yen. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Myanmar on 24 May 2013 and established the lasting bilateral friendship based on the mutual interests. Prime Minister Abe said that "his visit will bring Japan-Myanmar cooperation and turned a new page in history". On 15 December 2013, Japan and Myanmar signed an Investment Pact to foster economic relations between the two countries and create a stable legal environment for investment.

The opposition party leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, visited Japan and met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 18 April 2013. Shinzo Abe expressed that Japan would provide for the political reforms process. Japan contributed to the national reconciliation of Myanmar appointing the special government envoy. Through ODA, Japan provided private-sector investment for the job creation of potential economic development. Japan established the good relationship with not only the ruling party, but also the opposition party and military. The Japanese Self-Defense Force and Myanmar military started cooperation and exchange dialogue in 2013 and naval visit was undertaken in Thilawa in September 2013. In 2014, the Japanese chief of staff visited Myanmar and met with President U Thein Sein. In June 2016, the Japanese Defense Minister, General Nakatani, visited Myanmar and discussed the two countries' cooperation in the security field and Japanese Self-Defense Force support for the Myanmar military capacity-building and promoted defense cooperation. State Counselor visits Japan in November 2016, common values between the two countries were shared, and Japan supported "national reconciliations, economic cooperation and promotion of private sectors investment, people exchange and human resource development and role of military in democratic regime". Prime Minister Abe said that the role of the military was very important for the new Myanmar democratic regime and that Japan hoped to expand defense cooperation with the Myanmar military to build closer relationships between the Japanese Self-Defense Force and Myanmar military. Prime Minister Abe expressed that the importance of the ties of bilateral cooperation and the importance of "Free and Open Indian-Pacific Ocean Strategy for regional stability. Japan promoted security cooperation with ASEAN countries in the India Ocean and Pacific Ocean to reduce the rise of China. The defense and security cooperation with Myanmar was therefore intended to reduce Chinese influence on Myanmar. According to Japanese Prime Minister special advisors Mr. Sonouar," Myanmar situated the junction of South and Southeast Asia and importance for Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy".

In March 2016, the NLD party came into power and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited Japan on 1 November 2016 and met with Shinzo Abe to discuss about the economic development and peace process of Myanmar. Japan promised to provide ¥800 billion yen for the public and private sector development within five years and support for the national reconciliation process of Myanmar. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Myanmar State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi met on 14 November 2017 at the ASEAN-related Summit Meeting and the two leaders discussed the bilateral and internal issues. Prime Minister Abe promised 125 billion yen for various development projects related to poverty reduction and rural development and to accelerate the cooperation for the Yangon city development of transportation and electricity. Abe expressed that he was serious in his concern over Rakhine issues and supported Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts for the peace process. Myanmar State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi expressed that she appreciated the Japanese help of various forms of cooperation. Under the NLD government, China-Myanmar relations increased at the same time but Japan-Myanmar relations expanded more in to various sectors including security cooperation.



Unit- US Dollar, million

Figure-1

ODA Contribution on Development and National Reconciliation

Due to the President U Thein Sein Political and Economic Reforms Process, the political and economic relations between Myanmar and Japan were promoted since 2011. The Japanese government supports for Myanmar's Reforms through ODA and promote Foreign Direct Investment for economic development. When the Myanmar civilian government came into power in March 2011 they reopened friendly relations and Japan resumed its ODA loans. In 2013, Japan promised to cancel debt and support aid for the development of the country. Japan announced its economic cooperation and assistance for the Myanmar reform process in April 2012.

The Japanese government announced the policy named "Priority Policy for International Cooperation" in 2012, which included the "Myanmar case". Japan held the "Tokyo Conference on Myanmar" in October 2012 and "Paris Club Meeting" in January 2013 for the cancellation of debt to Myanmar. The bilateral debt cancellation was agreed in April 2012. In January 2013, Japan and Myanmar signed the first cancellation of "Exchange of Notes" and the "Social and Economic Development Program" to contribute to the economic development of macro-economic management, development policy and social sectors and governance.

Japan helps to promote regional peace and stability and economic development of the ethnic minorities area based on the agricultural areas which are the main livelihood of people. The rural development assistance of Japan, including technical cooperation providing alternatives for the eradication of drug crops planting and distribution in the Shan State. The technical cooperation with the Makino Memorial Foundation assists the high value-added plant cultivation in the Chin States. The health care assistance for mental and child health was provided in the Kokang Self-administered Zone of Shan State. Japan also provided the food aid assistance cooperation with UN, WFP and UNHCR for internally displaced people (IDPs) who are living in six States including Rakhine and Shan States. Japan appointed Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, who is the Chairman of the Nippon Foundation, as the special envoy to the National Reconciliation in Myanmar in February 2013.

On 3 January 2013, the Japanese Finance Minister Taro Aso met with President U Thein Sein at Nay Pyi Taw and discussed bilateral economic cooperation. In January 2013, the Japanese government cancelled the debt and helped in the implementation of the Thilawa SEZs in Yangon. Japan provided the US\$ 56.1 million in ODA loans and US\$22.4 million for development of infrastructure in seven States and seven Regions of Myanmar. Japan plugged contributes US\$ 11.2 million for the rehabilitation of existing power plants and US\$ 22.4 million

for the completion of the Thilawa SEZs. According to the DICA, Japanese investment in Myanmar is nearly US\$246 million.

Prime Minister Abe visited Myanmar in May 2013. During his visit, he pledged to provide ¥ 20 billion yen (nearly US\$ 200 million) for Hydropower and port facilities. Japanese and Myanmar businesses collaborated to build an industrial park in SEZs which was opened in 2015. Japan is providing the aid to upgrade the Yangon-Mandalay railroad, power projects, and telecommunications system improvement and irrigation systems throughout Myanmar. Japanese aid for infrastructure will contribute to mutual benefits for the economic development of Myanmar, and also Japanese business growth.

On 30 June 2015, JICA and the Myanmar government signed the second phase of ODA loans of ¥25.888 billion yen for three projects: support for the stable supply of power in the Yangon Region, support for infrastructure in the Thilawa area, and also for the site of Special Economic Zone and financial support to promote small and medium-sized enterprise in Myanmar. After the NLD came to power in 2016, the Abe government provided a ¥ 100 billion yen loan and grant aid to provide electricity improvements and promoting transportation infrastructure in the Yangon area which was requested by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in February while the special advisor of Shinzo Abe's visited to Myanmar. The Japanese Foreign Minister visited Myanmar and pledged US\$ 31.7 million for the help of vulnerable communities in the Rakhine and Chin States of Myanmar after they met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at Nay Pyi Taw on 3 May 2016. The Japanese government also provided a ¥100 billion yen in loans and grants for development assistance which was requested by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in February.

In November 2016, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged ¥800 billion yen (US\$7.73 billion) for peace building and development. Out of that, ¥40 billion yen was used to directly support ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia Nations and the rest of the aid provided for the development of airports and electricity projects. This aid included government and private sectors funds which contributed to the infrastructure development of rural and urban areas. The private sector investments created jobs and human resource development for Myanmar. Under the "Japan-Myanmar Cooperation Program", the Japanese government contributes ¥800 billion yen to support peace, national reconciliation and economic development of private and public level over five years, which PM Abe pledged in November and Japan would provide train cars between Yangon and Taungoo in September 2020 and up to Mandalay in 2023.

Japan provided for a yen loan for "Hydropower Plants Rehabilitation Project" after the meeting between State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo in November 2016. Under this agreement it was promised to renovate the outdated power generation equipment of Baluchaung No.1 Hydroelectric Plant and the Sedawgyi Hydroelectric Plant to supply electricity for the economic and societal development of the Myanmar people. The "Exchange of Notes for five ODA loan Projects" of nearly ¥93.97 billion Yen (US\$ 842 million) was signed between Japan and Myanmar on 18 January 2017 which includes five projects: (1) Regional Development Project for Poverty Reduction Phase II of ¥ 25,000 million yen (US\$ 219 million), (2) Yangon-Mandalay Railway Improvement Project (Phase I & II) of ¥25,000 million yen (US\$ 219 million), (3) Greater Yangon Water Supply Improvement Projects (Phase II) (I) of ¥25,000 million yen (US\$ 219 million), (4) Power Distribution System Improvement Projects in Major Cities of ¥4,856 million yen (US\$ 43 million) and (5) Agricultural and Rural Development Two Step Loan Project of ¥15,135

million yen (US\$ 133 million). The government of Myanmar and JICA signed the ODA loan agreement on 25 April 2017, which provides ¥ 10.787 billion yen (US\$ 97 million) for Hydropower Plants Rehabilitation Projects to improve basic economic infrastructure. When Rakhine issues were escalating international pressure, the Japanese government stood with Myanmar and planned to help with emergency aid of US\$ 1 million for the rehabilitation of internally displaced people. Japan actively participated in the Myanmar National Reconciliation process and supports ODA for peace-building processes and ethnic minority area development and also plays a third party role in the Myanmar peace building process by appointing the special envoy.

Improvement of bilateral Economic Relations

Japan re-promoted investment to Myanmar since 2011 and the Japanese government created the new “Economic Cooperation Policy” in 2012. Japanese FDI flowed into Myanmar after the investment pact was signed between the two countries in 2013. Japan invested in the Thilawa SEZs which is the milestone of Japan-Myanmar economic cooperation and which opened in 2015, and the Dawei SEZs which will become the largest industrial park in Southeast Asia to connect other ports through the Indian Ocean under the “Indo-Pacific Investment Strategy” of Japan contemporary with China’s “Maritime Silk Road”. Most of the Japanese investments to Myanmar are under the ODA projects.

The Japanese government intended to promote economic cooperation with Myanmar. Myanmar has rich natural resources, a low wage workforce and a favorable geostrategic location, which is attractive for Japanese investment. When the USDP government introduced a reform process for economic development and made SEZs to attract foreign direct investment, the Japanese government announced an assistance policy in April 2012 to resume its assistance for supporting the Myanmar reform process. In May 2013, the Japanese government provided about ¥51.1 billion in ODA loans for infrastructure development of Myanmar, including an infrastructure development project in the Thilawa area. The difficulty for foreign investors in Myanmar is the lack of infrastructure and unskilled laborers. Myanmar needs infrastructure development and Japan fulfills these needs through ODA to Myanmar, which leads to sustainable economic development and also fulfills the gap for ASEAN economic integration.

Japan provides yen loans to Myanmar’s infrastructure development for economic growth which will in turn promote the regional network of the Southern Economic Corridor (Dawei to Ho Chi Minh) and the East-West Economic Corridor (Mawlamyine to Danang). The Dawei SEZs is near Thailand and connects directly from Dawei (Myanmar) through to Bangkok (Thailand) and to Chena (India), which is intended to increase Japanese investment in the Bay of Bengal. The Dawei SEZs is a joint venture between the Myanmar government and Japanese-Thai venture of the Rojana Industrial Park Public Company and LNG Plus International Company. After it is completed, it will contribute 5% of the GDP and create a huge amount of jobs for Myanmar. The Japanese government prioritized the need for electricity, ports, roads, railways, water supply, sewerage, telecommunication and IT projects in Myanmar. The public and private sector cooperation of the Thilawa SEZs and Dawei SEZs are growing to achieve Japanese government goal which is mutually beneficial for both countries. According to Japanese state minister of Foreign Affairs the Thilawa SEZ is the milestone of bilateral economic cooperation of public-private partnership which has 88 operating companies from different countries.

Moreover, Japan supports the human resource development of skilled labor for vocational training and other technical cooperation through ODA for economic growth. Japanese banks support local Myanmar banks by offering technical assistance to enhance Japanese investment into Myanmar. Japan opened the “External Trade Relations Organization” in Yangon in September 2012 for promoting Japanese investment. In May 2013, Prime Minister Abe visited Myanmar and 40 business delegations of top Japanese companies accompanied with him, such as Mitsubishi, Mitsui, Marubeni, and Sumitomo in order to pick up investment opportunities in resource rich Myanmar. Japanese companies have increased in Myanmar year by year after 2011. There were 53 companies before 2011, which increased to 133 companies in 2013 and over 200 at the end of 2014. Japanese investors are interested in cheap labor costs for SMEs business. In 2010, Japanese exports to Myanmar was approximately US\$ 237 million, which increased to over US\$ 556 million in 2014, but fell to over US\$ 393 million in 2015, but compared to 2010 this is a little decrease. Japanese imports from Myanmar were over US\$ 256 million in 2010, which increased to US\$ 1738 million in 2014, and then decreased to US\$ 1452 million in 2015, and compared to 2010 the amount is very low. Japanese investment was over US\$7.1 million in 2010, which increased to over US\$ 219 million in 2015 and US\$384 million in 2017.

According to JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization), Japanese investment increased to US\$ 341 million in 2015 and to US\$ 691 million in March 2017 and in Thilawa the investment increased by 6.3 times. In 2016, Japan agreed to provide US\$ 1.5 billion to Yangon International Airport projects, 49% financed by Japan. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on 7 September 2017 at Laos while attending the ASEAN Summit Meeting and discussed the economic development and peace process. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi stated that she would try to approve the investment law to attract foreign investment. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledged to provide approximately 125 billion yen for rural and urban development. Abe said that Japan would contribute not only ODA but also promote private-sector investment to Myanmar. On 1 November 2016, State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited Japan to promote investment in Myanmar. Japan wants to increase investment to promote economic relations with Myanmar and Myanmar needs Japanese investment for the economy of the country and to reduce dependency on China, the largest investor in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Japan rekindled its friendly relationship with Myanmar and had an “open new history for friendly relationships” after 2010. The Japanese government helped with financial and technical cooperation through ODA to Myanmar based on the democratization, economic development and national reconciliation of Myanmar. Japan appointed a special envoy for the national reconciliation process and peace in Myanmar. The Japanese Foreign Minister said that “achieving peace and national reconciliation in Myanmar is important for the Indo-Pacific region.” Under civilian government, most of the economic development assistance is mutual benefit for Myanmar and Japan which promote the livelihood of Myanmar people and also creates a favorable economic environment for Japanese firms. The number of Japanese companies in Myanmar also increased five times more than before 2010. Bilateral state level visits and economic cooperation are increasing and a new cordial relationship has reopened. The significant factors in promoting relations are security cooperation for military sectors and playing a mediator or negotiator role in the peace building process. The political transition of Myanmar improved the Japan-Myanmar relations because of the reforms process of Myanmar the ODA

and investment from Japan increased again into Myanmar. The Japanese government supports for economic development and peace process through multi-level relationships.

Timeline of Japan's Policy toward Myanmar

Timeline	1951-60s	1960s-1988	1989-2010	2011-2017
Relations	“Historically friendly relations”	“Historically friendly relations”	Lost decade or tense relations of low profile	“Re-open new history” or promote relations
Japan Policy on Myanmar	Containment of Communism & strengthen bilateral ties based on historical friendship spirit	Containment of Communism & strengthen bilateral ties based on historical friendship spirit	Constructive Engagement for Democratization and reduce China influence on Myanmar	Value oriented Diplomacy & Indo-Pacific strategy to Contain Rise of China influence & open up new relationship

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