

MYANMAR'S DILEMMA IN THE UNITED STATES-CHINA RIVALRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the dilemma that Myanmar faces in the United States – China rivalry in Southeast Asia using qualitative methods and constructivism as the conceptual framework. Southeast Asia is emerging to be a playground witnessing the rivalry between China and the United States. This region is rich in natural resources, one of the international trade routes, and has various maritime conflicts. For Myanmar, the rivalry between Washington and Beijing could create a dilemma. This could occur due to various factors, such as the long self-isolation under the military regime, the United States' imposition of various sanctions on Myanmar, and others. Whereas for Beijing, its competition with the United States, can be an event to make friends, like Myanmar. Myanmar has been given various sanctions by the United States, especially back when Myanmar was still under a military junta, and to counter these sanctions, China establish friendly relations with Myanmar thus could moving Myanmar closer to China instead of the United States. Furthermore, China could secure Myanmar's resources and influence Myanmar to become a friend of China and a rival to the United States. This paper contends that Myanmar needs to balance itself between the United States and China's rivalry in Southeast Asia to maximize its objectives, thus could provide benefits and maintain its non-alignment policy.

Keywords: Myanmar, China, the United States, Southeast Asia, Non-Alignment Policy

INTRODUCTION

The topics of power shifts and the rise and fall of great powers have been at the core of the discipline of International Relations since its inception and for the last ten years, it is important to recall that there are rising powers, such as China, India, and Brazil (Destradi, 2018). It is also certain that these occurrences affect the study of the International Relations discipline. The rise of China in recent decades has generated considerable strategic anxiety among the many concerned parties. The strength of China has been proven in Southeast Asia, such as with the various developments it has carried out through the One Belt One Road (OBOR) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the provision of financial assistance to various countries, and even

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strengthening its presence in the South China Sea with the construction of various artificial islands or the addition of naval power in the conflict-ridden region. Many of China's activities have shown its agenda in Southeast Asia. The actions carried out by China in Southeast Asia can certainly be "jarring" throughout the world. These actions could also put the leadership of countries outside the region, particularly the United States, at risk.

As the current major power, the United States will always maintain its primacy in the Asia-Pacific region and it has been shown when President Barack Obama came to power with the policy named 'pivot or rebalancing to Asia' (Shambaugh & Yahuda, 2014). It has shown that the United States sought to strengthen its existing security alliances, particularly in Southeast Asia. The United States policy of pivoting to Asia is a way to prevent the expansion of China in Southeast Asia (Lieberthal, 2011). This deterrence is aiming to protect allies, interests, and especially the image of the United States' leadership in the world. However, the United States' actions to try to "stifle" the development of China in Southeast Asia could lead the countries in Southeast Asia to support both sides and could lead to a dilemma. Member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also have been under growing stress due to the great power rivalry in the region. However, at present, the main focus is on how Myanmar manages itself when it is caught in the United States-Sino rivalry.

In early 2000, Southeast Asia seemed like a backwater. On the other hand, East Asia countries namely China, Japan, and South Korea take the lead in determining what affects the rest of Asia. Nonetheless, this has changed entirely with the subsequent reinvention of ASEAN in 2007 as quoted here:

"The Southeast Asian subsystem is becoming an increasingly important unit of the international system. The result of three interrelated developments. It is derived in part from key regional states' increasing capabilities and national ambitions. It also reflects the interdependencies being established as the ASEAN region is integrated into the global economy. Finally, Southeast Asia has become a stage where great power rivalries and competition for influence are being played out" (Weatherbee, 2009).

As the Southeast Asian subsystem is increasingly important, it is natural to expect competition between the two major powers partaking and promoting their national interests which makes foreign policy decision-making more complicated. As a result, balancing economic and military concerns while juggling challenging domestic and international interests is no easy task. On the other hand, however, challenges apart, such competitive pressure also carries the potential to create more opportunities for these secondary states to optimally achieve their national interests. In the context of this paper, the existence of competition between the United States and China can certainly provide a dilemma for countries in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar. Myanmar already has relations with China because Myanmar is a neighbouring country, and has economic cooperation and mutual agreements. On the other hand, the United States too, often helps Myanmar, as stated in the sub-theme Myanmar and the United States relations. Thus, competition between the United States and China in Southeast Asia brings Myanmar in favour of two parties, specifically the United States and China.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Constructivism Theory is a form of reflectivity critique of a scientific approach to the study of social sciences (Behraves, 2011). Constructivism has a different approach to understanding phenomena in International Relations, one of the differences in Constructivism is in the focus of its analysis which is based on "ideas and beliefs." Constructivism asserts that ideas and beliefs inform the actors on the international scene. Thus, the focus of Constructivism is on human awareness or its consciousness and its place in world affairs (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). Therefore, Constructivism does not emphasize material forces because ideas and beliefs are never in physical form but are in human cognition. With the ideas and beliefs as one of the main analyses, thus the existence of the world is not only formed by one truth alone but also can be formed by various truths. Thus, the world is not a given but is constructed by various ideas and beliefs so as to create the world as it is today. In addition to focusing on ideas and beliefs, the centre of the argument for world formation according to Constructivism occurs because of four things, namely discourses, norms, identity, and socialisation (Behraves, 2011).

These four things came together to form the world today. The presence of these four main arguments of Constructivism is due to international actors whose existence is also "influenced by and influencing to" these four things. Due to the dynamic nature of international relations, each international actor, in dealings with others, will constantly issue various discourses. The existence of various 'discourses' that come out of international actors, helped construct other international actors. The result of the construction of these discourses is the formation of 'norms.' After 'norms' are formed and have lasted for a long time, they eventually become a "truth" and "truth" is the result of norms that becomes 'identity.' The development of 'identity' is not possible because of one discourse alone but must go through various discourses. The spread of this discourse is known as 'socialisation.'

Thus, international actors are "constructing and deconstructing" each actor whose end result is the existence of these four things which Constructivism Theory believes. Therefore, Constructivism believes that the existence of the world now occurs because it has been socially constructed (Theys, 2018). In the context of Myanmar, which is currently facing a dilemma due to the rivalry between the United States and China in Southeast Asia, then the 'dilemma' felt by Myanmar occurs because of the construction of differences between discourses, norms, identity, and socialisation. The existence of two countries with different discourses gives rise to two different truth buildings. Different truths construct different norms and they construct truths that have different forms of identity. This happens because of the different forms of socialisation, in which the United States is a democratic country and China is a socialist country. Thus, the dilemma occurs because Myanmar has been "influenced by and an influence to" the United States and China.

MYANMAR AND THE UNITED STATES RELATIONS

After its independence in 1948, Myanmar's government received multiple assistance from other countries, such as the United States (Britannica, 2021). The United States assistance to Myanmar was the first modern contact between these two countries.

However, due to several events that happened in Myanmar, its relations with the United States stopped. One of the events that led to the temporary halt of relations between Myanmar and the United States was the coup initiated by General Ne Win in 1962 which turned Myanmar into an isolationist military government (Britannica, 2021). Relations between these two countries worsened again with the imposition of various economic sanctions on Myanmar by the United States (State.Gov, 2021).

Myanmar's military rule ended in 2011 with the transfer of military leadership power to a quasi-civilian government headed by former general Thein Sein (State.Gov, 2021). The development of democracy finally led Myanmar in 2012 to elect a pro-democracy leader named Aung San Suu Kyi (State.Gov, 2021). Seeing this, the United States supported Myanmar to become a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic country (State.Gov, 2021). President Obama also supported the development of democracy. In fact, President Obama is said to be one of the leaders of Western countries who helped Myanmar back to regain democracy from isolationist military government rule (Haaretz, 2017).

Under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar and the United States began to have a better relationship, such as the various visits made by Aung San Suu Kyi to the United States and visits from President Barack Obama to Myanmar (Kurlantzick, 2014). One of the meetings between Aung San Suu Kyi and President Barack Obama took place in 2016. At that meeting, Aung San Suu Kyi talked to the United States to lift various sanctions that had been imposed by many presidents of the United States before President Barack Obama (Aranow, 2015). As a result, President Barack Obama offered his support to the development of a democratic Myanmar. He also pledged that the United States would continue supporting Myanmar both diplomatically and through assistance programs (Aranow, 2021). Subsequently, both countries established a new era of bilateral cooperation.

The existence of good relations between the United States and Myanmar in fact did not just happen under the government of Aung San Suu Kyi but had been constructed since the beginning of Myanmar's independence, such as the various aids provided by the United States to Myanmar in 1948-1953 where the United States provided economic assistance to Myanmar. Then, from 1956-1964 the United States provided food assistance and training for Myanmar military officers. In addition, in 1974, the United States provided humanitarian and military program assistance to Myanmar, and in 2008, under President George W. Bush administration, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded a congressional medal because of her commitment to peace, nonviolence, human rights, and democracy (U.S. Congress, 2008). Various aids, statements, and awarding of medals, are the things that construct the relationship between Myanmar and the United States.

MYANMAR AND CHINA RELATIONS

Modern relations between Myanmar and China can be seen in Myanmar's recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In 1949, Myanmar, which at that time was not a socialist country, recognized the existence of China (Samsani, 2021). Recognition of China is also one of the factors that encourage the spread of socialist values in Myanmar. Finally, Myanmar became a socialist or military isolationist

country when General Ne Win staged the coup in 1962. As a socialist country, if viewed from the Constructivism theory, the same identity can bring fellow countries to have closer relations, such as the relationship between Myanmar and China which increasingly reached its peak in the 1980s due to various sanctions imposed by Western countries (Samsani, 2021).

Myanmar and China relations have begun to be constructed by various things, one of which is the agreement signed by these two countries back in 1954. In 1954, Myanmar and China signed the five principles of peaceful coexistence which constitute mutual respect on territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, respect for mutual equality and work for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence (Than, 2003). The existence of this agreement evidently signifies that Myanmar and China do not want a conflict that could occur in the future. This is because Myanmar and China are two countries that are linked by geography, history, ethnicity, culture, and economy (Clapp, 2015). Close ties with China have in many ways benefited Myanmar itself. These advantages can also lighten the burden on Myanmar, which was once a self-isolating country. This can be proven by Myanmar's advantages in cooperating with China in the economic and military fields.

Since the 1980s, China has been Myanmar's major source of military equipment and training, a major investor in Myanmar's economy, and a major export market for Myanmar's wealth and natural resources (Clapp, 2015). Economic cooperation has made China the largest trading partner in Myanmar (Samsani, 2021). The 2019 trade data shows that the bilateral economic trade between Myanmar and China amounted to USD 12 billion out of the approximately USD 36 billion trade it conducts in total which amounts to 1/3rd of the total (Samsani, 2021). Until now, Myanmar's relations with China persisted regardless of the ongoing political turmoil. Even development projects in Myanmar by China continue despite innate resentment towards China that is increasing across Myanmar (Banerjee, 2021). China's effort in building various projects in Myanmar is accelerating the formation of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) (Banerjee & Rajaura, 2021). This development will certainly warm the relations between Myanmar and China. One of the projects that China continues to carry out in Myanmar is the construction of a Mee Lin Gyaing Liquefied Natural Gas generating plant (Tower & Clapp, 2021).

The Mee Lin Gyaing Liquefied Natural Gas generating plant that China wants to build in Myanmar has been agreed to be a USD 2.5 billion project (Tower & Clapp, 2021). The project will provide great benefits for Myanmar because when the project is completed, the generating plant will provide energy to the Kyaukphyu port and special economic zones in Myanmar (Tower & Clapp, 2021). Thus, the signing of the 1952 agreement, various economic cooperation, and training of the Myanmar army by China, generating plant development projects, and others, have built good relations between Myanmar and China. Myanmar's relations with China can be even closer because China is very actively engaging with Myanmar. If China continues engaging with Myanmar, then the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor will be increasingly developed. With the development of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, it will be feasible for China to access the Andaman Sea. By accessing the Andaman Sea, China has easy access to economic markets in South Asia and can even strengthen its presence in the world.

THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS MYANMAR

Barack Obama's administration has strongly argued that its Myanmar policy was fundamentally anchored toward supporting democracy and human rights rather than engaging in competition with China even though there has been some debate regarding that issue. As put by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her visit to Myanmar in November and December of 2011 as follow.

"... We are not about opposing any other country: we are about supporting this country... as I specifically told the President and the two speakers, we welcome positive, constructive relations between China and its neighbours... So, from our perspective, we are not viewing this in light of any competition with China" (Sun, 2014).

Furthermore, it is confirmed that the United States foreign policy toward Myanmar was initially to support human rights and democracy as it can be observed in the United States' statement that "The United States supports a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Myanmar that respects the human rights of all its people (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Myanmar remains a country in "transition" to democracy and faces significant ongoing challenges and deeply troubling human rights issues centred on a powerful military acting with the impunity generally reflected in non-democratic countries (Lee, 2014; Amnesty.org, 2022; Goldman, 2022).

Regardless of the United States government's true intention, strategic thinkers in the United States had been calling for modification of the American sanctions policy because of China's deepening political ties and economic integration with Myanmar. At a 2011 conference at Georgetown University, some Panellists strongly argued that the United States sanctions had the effect of locking Myanmar into a dependent relationship with China: "*(with the Western sanctions) ... Myanmar had no way out [of being] trapped into a dependent relationship with the only country in the world (China) in a position to threaten its core interests*" (Sun, 2014). Considering China's raising power alongside its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), China's geopolitical advantage and its investment in Myanmar and so forth leads to the United States reconsidering its isolation and sanctions policy from a broader regional and strategic perspective. In addition, the United States' approach to Myanmar has been broadly seen as serving Washington's broader strategic goal of strengthening relations with ASEAN rather than with Myanmar itself. In this context, the Barack Obama administration's pragmatic approach toward Myanmar is viewed by many as a key element of its enhanced competition with China in the region. Hence, the United States' new Myanmar policy remains to serve its initial purpose which is to promote democratic governance and national reconciliation, but some additional factors, such as China have been added to the consideration.

Exactly how much the China factor influenced the shift in the United States policy toward Myanmar is difficult to determine, but certainly the deepening of Beijing's ties to Naypyidaw played both direct and indirect roles. China's rising regional influence played a significant role in the Barack Obama Administration's decision to increase its engagement with ASEAN, including the decision to sign the 1976 ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) at the regional body's annual

meeting with its external “dialogue partners” in July 2009, in Phuket, Thailand. It is safe to assume that the United States policy initiatives in Myanmar have been focused on Myanmar itself and the success of its transition to democracy and development. Long opposing human rights abuses to promoting peace and reconciliation, strengthening government institutions, building a market economy and enhancing livelihood and local governance, most of the United States policy initiatives, if not all, have been focused on Myanmar’s domestic political and economic development – with little direct relevance to China. However, because China has had such extensive political and economic linkages with Myanmar, mostly associated with the former military government, it is inevitable for the results of the United States’ reform-facilitating policies to affect and be perceived as undermining China’s interests on the ground. While it would not be accurate to qualify such policies as targeted at China, it is also undeniable that China has suffered considerable damage due to those policies.

CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS MYANMAR

China’s support of the Myanmar military government exposed Beijing to tremendous international criticism. For example, China’s veto of the 2007 Security Council draft resolution sponsored by the United States and the United Kingdom that condemned Myanmar’s human rights situation generated bitter censure from the West for China’s shielding of the military regime. Desire to mitigate the international pressure on China and concern about strained Sino-United States relations led Beijing to play a behind-the-scenes role to facilitate dialogue between the United States and Myanmar, in the hopes of easing the Washington- Naypyidaw tensions.

In 2009, the Barack Obama administration undertook a review of the United States’ Myanmar policy and subsequently announced a new engagement strategy toward Myanmar. This raised concerns in China about the possibility of the United States-Myanmar rapprochement that may go beyond the easing of tensions between Washington and Naypyidaw to something more meaningful – and the impact of this on Sino-Myanmar ties. However, such concern was soon dissipated when Washington criticized Myanmar’s 2010 elections as “neither free nor fair.” China assumed that Myanmar’s new government would not pursue major political reform in the near future, and therefore the policy options for the United States would continue to be constrained by its domestic politics, which would not favour a change of tone with Myanmar. Within this context, China welcomed the pragmatic engagement policy of the Barack Obama administration. In this case, Beijing saw a degree of improvement in relations between the United States and Myanmar as beneficial to China by reducing international criticism of China for supporting the military government, but not reaching a level that would jeopardize China’s existing ties with Myanmar.

However, beginning with President Thein Sein’s historic meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in August 2011, United States-Myanmar relations began to improve at a dazzling pace. As a reward for Myanmar’s political liberalization, the United States lifted most of its financial sanctions on the country. The United States’ recognition of Myanmar’s political progress was also demonstrated with visits by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama in 2011 and 2012 respectively, as well as the appointment of the United States Ambassador to Myanmar for the first time since 1990. The speed and depth of the United States-Myanmar rapprochement

exceeded China's original expectations. In China's perception, the rapid improvement of the United States-Myanmar relations has affected China's existing interests in Myanmar. Most importantly, the warming of the United States' ties with Myanmar is perceived to be a key element of the United States rebalancing to Asia strategy, and as a containment policy toward China. In Beijing's understanding, the United States successfully alienated Myanmar's traditional ties with China and damaged existing Chinese commercial projects in the country.

Then according to Kudo (2012), he said that there are three primary features of China's foreign policy toward Myanmar, namely,

- (i) The first feature of China's policy toward Myanmar is summit diplomacy. During the period from 2009 to 2010, Li Changchun, Xi Jinping, and Wen Jiabao, three of the nine leaders of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party, visited Myanmar;
- (ii) The second feature is the promotion of economic cooperation and investment throughout the period of Myanmar's military administration. When the three leaders of the Communist Party of China visited Myanmar, which was under military rule, they had agreed upon economic cooperation for 35 projects. It is said that China's economic cooperation has two purposes, namely to secure resources and establish friendly relations with neighbouring countries. Since Myanmar has served these two purposes, China's assistance to Myanmar has grown. However, this assistance also faces a wide number of criticisms from an environmental view. One is the exploitation of natural resources by China's economic cooperation projects. Concerning timber, reckless deforestation that ignores sustainability has been particularly criticized. In addition, the assistance to Myanmar's state-run factories has also been criticized because, despite the need to privatize the factories, they have survived through increased funding from China and continue to support Myanmar's military government. China's investment in Myanmar is a tangible benefit of this relationship; and
- (iii) the last feature is realist diplomacy. Diplomacy has been utilized by China to realize its strategic benefits, such as security in the border regions, securing friendly neighbouring countries, and energy security.

CONSTRUCTIVISM THEORY ANALYSIS ON CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES RIVALRY IN INFLUENCING MYANMAR

In analyzing Constructivism Theory, a state can be affected by various things, such as history, state identity, international actors, interests of domestic and foreign state actors, and others. The essence is a state can be affected by four aspects, namely discourses, norms, identity, and socialization (Behraves, 2011). These four aspects affect Myanmar so that it feels a dilemma in the middle of the United States and China rivalry in Southeast Asia. In terms of discourse, Myanmar inevitably must face two different discourses, namely Eastern (Asian) and Western (American) discourses.

Two different discourses certainly have different norms. If analysed in the context of history, culture, and geography, the norms that exist in Myanmar are not different from the norms that exist in China since both countries have many similarities aforementioned in the 'Myanmar and China Relations' subtheme. Meanwhile, the norms shared by the United States and Myanmar are contradictory. This contradicting norm must be "torn down" and new norms must be "constructed" so that it does not contradict, and this is what the United States has done to Myanmar. This step is known as "constructing and deconstructing" in Constructivism Theory (Cristol, 2019). The existence of various aids provided by the United States is one way to be able to break down the wall of contradiction to these norms. If we look at the existence of various aids, even the awarding of medals and the lifting of various economic sanctions, then the wall of norm contradictions has begun to crumble and may even collapse. This is what the United States does in constructing relations with Myanmar.

After the norm is "equalized", then identity can be formed because the output of the norm is 'identity.' Unquestionably, Myanmar and China, appear to have the same identity. This can be proven by the form of government in former Myanmar under the leadership of Ne Win which was supported by the Myanmar socialist party (Britannica, 2022). In short, Ne Win supports the spread of socialist values in Myanmar through his party. As a socialist country, it has the same identity as China, thus could make relations between the two countries to be more smoothly. In addition, the isolationist government of Myanmar can also bring Myanmar to be more dependent on China because they are neighboring countries. In the context of identity between the United States and Myanmar, geographically, these two countries are far away from each other. However, the United States managed to equate Myanmar's identity with itself when democracy began to grow after the fall of the military isolationist leadership seat to Thein Sein (Fisher, 2016). Even democracy has returned to grow under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi (Ibrahim, 2021). However, it is impossible for Myanmar to suddenly accept democracy which is an idea from the West because for a long period Myanmar was in isolation.

Myanmar's acceptance of democracy is one of the United States' successes in using its "invincible hands", namely through sanctions. The existence of various sanctions imposed by the United States on Myanmar is certainly very burdensome for Myanmar, especially Myanmar a country that used to be self-isolating. During its self-isolation, Myanmar has seen the progress of other countries and the new government wanted to catch up with its perceived lag. However, Myanmar was subjected to sanctions imposed by the United States. Therefore, several Myanmar state actors began to adopt democracy to overthrow the Myanmar military regime. When the democratic transition happened, Western countries, especially the United States praised the government for its efforts to be a democratic country. Thus, the United States has succeeded in using sanctions as a tool to bring political change to Myanmar. The output of the United States "invincible hands" is to turn Myanmar into a democracy which in the end, if seen through Constructivism Theory, Myanmar will have the same identity as the United States. The same identity can also make relations between Myanmar and the United States warmer, such as the various meetings between President Barack Obama and Aung San Suu Kyi, the awarding of medals, to the appointment of various sanctions as stated in the sub-theme 'Myanmar and the United States Relations'.

Discourses, norms, and identities that begin to resemble may not just exist naturally but are constructed by various things. This term in Constructivism Theory is called 'socialization'. In the context of China, the close relationship between Myanmar and China can occur because of the socialization carried out by Beijing. This outreach can take various forms, as stated in the sub-theme 'Myanmar and China Relations'. This socialization would not have been possible if it were not driven by the domestic political interests of China to influence Myanmar. This is the same in the United States which also conducts socialization. Washington conducts socialization to be able to influence Myanmar as well as in the interests of the United States itself. Thus, the United States and China can add “followers” in this world to advance their respective agendas.

MYANMAR’S STANCE AND DILEMMA IN THE UNITED STATES-CHINA RIVALRY

Myanmar’s preference for the nature and format of the United States-China interactions plays a determining role in shaping the eventual outcomes. In addition, the maturity and capacity of the Myanmar government to shape such interactions also fundamentally affect the possibility and success of any United States-China cooperation in its country. American and Chinese analysts both acknowledge the importance that Myanmar be included in any potential United States-China cooperation in the country so that Naypyidaw does not perceive such efforts to be the two great powers “ganging up” on it or pressuring it to do anything outside its interests. Some have even argued that such cooperation should be initiated by Myanmar themselves to be effective.

Traditionally, Myanmar pursued a neutralist, non-alignment foreign policy strategy and balancing diplomacy among all powers, including China and the United States (Myat, 2021). In the case of China, Myanmar has always been suspicious and fearful about China’s intentions, given the vast difference in their size and Beijing’s support of the Burmese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution (International Crisis Group, 2020). In the case of the United States, Myanmar endured two decades of isolation and sanctions by Washington, a serious security threat to the military government that led to its alignment with China during the same period (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Such disproportionate overdependence on China later prompted the pendulum to swing toward rapprochement with Washington to balance China. Therefore, Myanmar needs to find a balance between the United States and China to maximize its policy options and benefits.

On the issue of the United States-China cooperation versus competition in Myanmar, Myanmar constantly uses the “two elephants” analogy; the grass suffers regardless of whether the two elephants are on good or bad terms. On the one hand, Myanmar genuinely fears becoming the core of competition or confrontation between Washington and Beijing, which would force it to either choose a side or anger both. On the other hand, if the United States and China get along so well that they begin to jointly dictate the terms in Myanmar, Myanmar might lose its independence and become the victim of a back-channel agreement between Washington and Beijing. Myanmar is walking a fine line trying to prevent China and the United States from either fighting or striking a secret deal over Myanmar.

Although no one can deny that Myanmar should take the initiative and lead the United States-China cooperation efforts in Myanmar, the reality is less promising. Myanmar seems unlikely to be ready to take the lead in initiating, shaping, and managing the United States-China cooperative efforts in its country. Although Myanmar aspires to maintain equal distance from both the United States and China, such acts require a strong domestic political base and a prominent level of policy coherence. Unfortunately, the current Myanmar government has yet to achieve such strong domestic support and any mismanagement of relations with either the United States or China could backfire. Navigating the complicated and sensitive issues of United States-China relations is tricky and requires political maturity, diplomatic adeptness, and government capacity that the current Myanmar government neither possesses nor prioritizes at its current stage. Unless Myanmar can accurately identify those issues on which the United States and China can cooperate without harsh feelings and carve out specific action plans, such cooperation will be difficult.

This competition with the United States over Myanmar also meant that China could not afford to lose further ground, but it appeared that the country could do little to make Myanmar comply with its demands. Retaliation carried the risk of pushing the country further to embrace the United States, which is not in China's national interest. It was this situation that prompted Beijing's diplomatic charm offensive towards Myanmar, expressed in a flurry of high-level visits between the two countries after the Myanmar-United States thaw. At the same time, the Chinese side reached out to the then-opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), by holding consultations and inviting party members to visit China. This culminated in Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to China in June 2015, before her party's victory in the national elections. However, Chinese investment in the fiscal years 2015 and 2016 quickly rebounded to USD 3.3 billion (Han, 2018). Thus, by abandoning its isolationist foreign policy during the post-Cold War period and engaging solely with China, the Myanmar government benefited from Chinese security protection and economic investment.

CONCLUSION

Myanmar initially pursued a non-alignment foreign policy strategy and balancing diplomacy among all powers, including China and the United States. The non-alignment policy by Myanmar is because it prefers to be a self-isolating country. This indicates that Myanmar does not want to join the rest of the world, but rather wants to be governed by military regimes for its development. However, Myanmar wants its country to also be able to develop like its neighbours in Southeast Asia. Therefore, Myanmar applied to become a member of ASEAN in 1996 and then officially became a member in 1997. Myanmar's joining ASEAN does not also indicate that Myanmar will abandon years of self-isolation under the military regime. The persistence of the military regime until 2011 when the Myanmar leadership fell into the hands of Thein Sein has shown it (BBC, 2015). Starting from Thein Sein's leadership, democracy in Myanmar has continued to grow and reached its peak with the election of Aung San Suu Kyi as Myanmar's state counsellor in 2012 (BBC, 2021).

The election of Aung San Suu Kyi as a state counsellor could lead Myanmar to open up more to the outside world. Opening to the outside world certainly raises

various possibilities for Myanmar's growth, given that Myanmar has been in self-isolation for decades under the leadership of a military regime. However, when Myanmar began to open up, Myanmar had to face rivalry between the United States and China in Southeast Asia. This rivalry will determine the future of Myanmar and also Southeast Asian countries. Of course, the rivalry in Southeast Asia is driven by the national interests of the United States and China. This rivalry could bring Myanmar to become one of the "battle arenas" between these two countries. This is because rivalry, which is driven by national interests, has various purposes, and one of the goals is to influence other countries. The affected country can become a friend to the influencing country. In the Constructivism Theory, this is referred to as "influenced by and influencing to".

Furthermore, in this rivalry, if China wins and succeeds in influencing Myanmar, then the Andaman Sea could be controlled by China. And if China wins the rivalry in the South China Sea, then the maritime sovereignty of the Maritime and Mainland Southeast Asian countries could be threatened. If so, China could control areas that are vital for international trade routes. If China wins, then Southeast Asian countries, in the context of the maritime economy (fishing and selling of fish), could be threatened and the income of each country would be reduced. Seeing this, of course, the United States does not want China to be able to control vital areas. This is because the United States also has to protect its allies in East Asia (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) and also in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines). By protecting vital areas, international trade and logistics routes for the United States' allies can be maintained. By maintaining these vital areas, the United States would continue to get recognition from other countries because it has succeeded in determining the expansion of China and its existence as a "world leader", could be maintained. Thus, the two countries that have different interests eventually lead to rivalry. However, it is also particularly important to look at history to see Myanmar's stances on whether it supports China or the United States.

In the case of China, Myanmar has always been suspicious and fearful about China's intentions, given the vast difference in their size and Beijing's support of the Burmese Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, in the case of the United States, Myanmar endured two decades of isolation and sanctions by Washington, a serious security threat to the military government that led to its alignment with China during the same period. Such disproportionate overdependence on China later prompted the pendulum to swing toward rapprochement with Washington to balance China. Therefore, Myanmar needs to balance between the United States and China to maximize Myanmar's policy options and benefits.

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