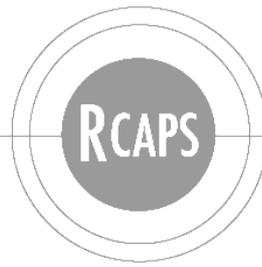


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Myanmar's Rapprochement with the United States:  
Is it a Warning for China in Mainland Southeast Asia?  
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# **International Relations in the Asia Pacific**

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**(Final Report)**

## **Myanmar's Rapprochement with the United States: Is it a Warning for China in Mainland Southeast Asia?**



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## **Abbreviations**

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCP	Burma Communist Party
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
EU	European Union
KMT	Kuomintang
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
NKCP	North Kali-mantan Communist Party
PCP	Philippine Communist Party
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
US	United States

## **Myanmar's Rapprochement with the United States: Is it a Warning for China in Mainland Southeast Asia?**

**Keywords :** Myanmar, United States, China, relations, Foreign Policy

### **Introduction**

After the military coup government's crackdown on Myanmar's (Burma at that time)<sup>1</sup> pro-democracy movement in 1988 and its failure to honour the 1990 general election results, bilateral relations between the United States and Myanmar strained and declined. The United States, some Western and European countries and international organizations imposed the several financial, economic and travel sanctions on Myanmar. In 1990, the United States has downgraded the diplomatic relation with Myanmar by reducing the representative level from Ambassador to Charge d' affairs (U.S. Department of State, 2012).

In 2009, the United States launched a new policy of principled engagement including direct senior-level dialogue with Myanmar's authorities. Relations between the United States and Myanmar began to improve. After an election, which was held in November 2010, the new Myanmar civil government was formed in March 2011. The new government implemented a various reform process including meeting with opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi, releasing political prisoners, removing the media censorship, negotiating ceasefire agreements with several minority ethnic armed and holding credible parliamentary by-elections (Hill, 2012). The Myanmar government has continued its reform and the United States has demonstrated its commitment to supporting Myanmar's reform with an "action-for-action" strategy to respond to the reforms (U.S. Department of State, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> The former official name of Myanmar was Burma. The country was renamed from Burma to Myanmar by the Myanmar military government in 1989. The United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) do not accept this name and still address the country as Burma.

Myanmar's administration was emerging as a "Civil Government" in good shape in 2011. Due to the reforming process, Myanmar was recognized by observers within and outside the country, especially with the landmark visit of U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton (Thuzar, 2012). Myanmar obtained the support and agreement of ASEAN to serve as the Chair of ASEAN in 2014, to resume the turn she gave up in 2006. Due to Myanmar military government's political repression of the democracy movement in the country, the United States, British and EU pressured and hinted that they might boycott the ASEAN annual meeting if Myanmar took the chair in 2006. Hence, Myanmar relinquished its turn as Chair of ASEAN in 2006 (Than, 2006). Ultimately, U.S. President Barak Obama's visit to Myanmar on November 19, 2012, has developed and encouraged Myanmar's flickers progress into steady of flame (Thuzar, 2012; Daga, 2012).

The impressive U.S.-Myanmar rapprochement relations raised Myanmar's standing in the international and regional community. The recent rapprochement and improved relations with the United States play a critical role and create a better image of Myanmar in the international and regional community. Due to this circumstance, hope and expectations are high for the Myanmar government to continue and maintain the recent progress and development of the country in the international relations corner. This progress has to be maintained for future development of nascent Myanmar.

In contrast, the U.S. policy towards Myanmar and their rapprochement have caught attention of Myanmar's neighbouring country, China. Myanmar's progressive relations with the United States generally puzzled China, the closest ally of Myanmar in the region (Clapp, 2010). As it is significant to keep up the improved relations with the United States, it is also important to maintain friendly relations with the neighbouring countries, especially with the two Asian Giants, China and India. Myanmar has been enjoying China's protection in the field of international relations for over two decades.

Some scholar had a pessimistic view on U.S.-Myanmar relations before 2011. Clapp examined the pragmatic engagement policy of the United States as a more flexible policy structure that aimed to respond to the results of Myanmar's transition process (Clapp, 2010). Clapp described the situation of U.S.-Myanmar relations as "suspended animation" and predicted that there will be no chance of rapprochement in the near future (Clapp, 2010). In contrast, Taylor suggested that the western countries might require to revise their foreign policy toward Myanmar, especially after the 2010 multi-party elections (Taylor, 2009). Although other authors have rejected the prospect of improvement in the U.S.-Myanmar relations due to the latter's domestic policies, Taylor predicted that there would be a recalculation of approaches toward Myanmar from China, Japan, the United States and EU countries (Taylor, 2009). Due to the current rapprochement relations between two countries, the prediction of Robert H. Taylor has become true.

There were also different views on the recent U.S.-Myanmar relationship. Li asserted that the current U.S.-Myanmar ties was not a threat to the Chinese-Myanmar relations and China does not seek to use Myanmar as an ally to weaken or dilute ASEAN or its unity (Li, 2012). However, according to Yun SUM, China had seen the new engagement of the United States with Myanmar as one of the key factors to undercut China's security interests in the region and to lose China's monopolistic edge on Myanmar (Sun, 2012). China seems that Myanmar could be distanced from China in future China-Myanmar relations (Haacke, 2012).

Under the surface of this situation, the question has risen about whether Myanmar's improved relations with the United States is a warning for China that Myanmar is parting from its closest ally. Hence, this paper aim to examine Myanmar significance in the U.S.-China geopolitical competition and Myanmar's calibrated relations with the both countries.

## **Major Power and Mainland Southeast Asia**

Geographically, Southeast Asia can be divided into Mainland Southeast Asia and Maritime Southeast Asia. Mainland Southeast Asia consists of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and this region is also known as Indochina. Maritime Southeast Asia is composed of Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore (Southeast Asia, 2013). Southeast Asia is surrounded by China in the north, the Pacific Ocean in the east, the Indian Ocean in the south, Australian Continent in the southeast, the Bay of Bengal and India in the southwest. Due to their geo-strategic significance, both Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia region became a region of great power competition (Weatherbee, 2009).

Historically, the region had been influenced and ruled by outside powers, such as Great Britain, China, Portugal, Dutch, France, Japan, Spain and the United States (A Short History of Southeast Asia, 2013). In the late 19th century, all of the Southeast Asian countries, except Thailand, were colonized by European nations. Burma and Malaya were ruled by the British. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were colonized by the French. Indonesia was ruled by the Dutch and Philippines was occupied by the Spanish and the United States (A Short History of Southeast Asia, 2013). During the period of World War II, Southeast Asia, except Thailand, was colonized by Japan. Japan invaded Burma, the Philippines, the Malaya and Singapore in January 1942 and colonized them in part or whole (A Short History of Southeast Asia, 2013). When Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, all Japan colonized countries were ruled again by their former colonial rulers. Because of this historical experience, the region became an interested site for international outlook (Morrison, 1994). Southeast Asia was seemed as a strategic region by the international and regional countries (Morrison, 1994).

Today, the region of Maritime Southeast Asia, situated at the strategic crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, plays a vital role in securing global trade flows, and the region has become not only one of the major focuses for U.S. strategists and policymakers but also for China as well (Denmark & Kliman, 2011). China realizes the significance of the mainland Southeast Asia region and firmly accepts that the region is a strategic unit for the security of China. Geographically, China shares its southwestern border with the mainland Southeast Asia (Grinter, 2006). Therefore, any conflicts in the Mainland Southeast Asia region can effectively destabilize China. The United States is concerned about China's rising influence in Southeast Asia. The Mainland Southeast Asia has become a new engagement site of the United States to limit the great power activities in the region (Grinter, 2006).

The U.S. interests in mainland Southeast Asia during the Cold War were related to ideological reason. The United States presumed that the non-Communist Southeast Asia countries could be influenced by the Communism. It became a major concern of the United States after China turned into a communist nation (Aung, 2009). The U.S. global strategy during the Cold War was consequentially contained in the political and economic development of Southeast Asia region (Weatherbee, 2009).

The Geo-economic dimension of the U.S. post-Cold War strategy in Southeast Asia has been characterized by efforts to advance the U.S. economic agenda of international trade and investment liberalization. In 1993, the United States articulated its vision of a Pacific Community resting on three pillars: economic growth, political democracy, and security (Weatherbee, 2009).

During the Bush administration, the U.S. awareness of rising China had risen, and the United States gave increased attention to ASEAN regionalism. It promoted and enhanced U.S.-ASEAN economic relationship. Although Cold War has ended, U.S. security

interests in the region are considered to require continued strategic access to and through the region. After the September 11, 2001 terror attack, the United States shifted its focus to the Middle East and Afghanistan. American disengagement from Southeast Asia has created opportunities for China to dilute the U.S. presence in the region.

During the Obama administration, the U.S. strategic focus was moved back to the Asia-Pacific region and the United States has characterized "a U.S. pivot toward the Asia-Pacific" (Clinton, 2011). China's dramatic growth in economic, diplomatic and military might has influenced Southeast Asia and raised the U.S. attention to the region (Ott, 2012).

Today, the mainland Southeast Asia became a region of interest to the United States. The Chinese dominance and influence over mainland Southeast Asia is causing a great concern to the United States. Hence, the mainland Southeast Asia has become an important site for the United States to seek opportunities and limit Chinese activities in the region.

With the dramatic growth of Asian economies, China has seen Southeast Asia as a region of largely commercial interest in the late 1990s. Hence, China has offered itself as an economic partner and benign neighbour in Southeast Asia (Ott, 2012). Nowadays, China is seen as a responsible major actor in the future of some mainland Southeast Asian countries, such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. The growing economic strength of China engages Southeast Asia, and China-ASEAN economic relations are paralleled in the political relations. China has imposed political discipline on Southeast Asia over the Taiwan issue, and the ASEAN states unquestioningly accept that Taiwan is part of China.

China presumes that the mainland Southeast Asia is a doorstep of China southwestern part and it can effectively destabilize the China's security due to its strategic position. Therefore, China cannot accept any anti-China state present in its doorstep (Grinter, 2006). The recent U.S. involvement in the Southeast Asia region prodded as a challenge to China's strategic blueprint for the region. While both countries were seeking to influence the

region, Myanmar became a crucial arena of competition in mainland Southeast Asia (Grinter, 2006).

India did not interest the Southeast Asia as its trading partner until the 1970s. (Sikri, 2009). In the late 1980s, India began to think about the strategic position of Southeast Asia and started to initiate an overture to Southeast Asian nations (Sikri, 2009). After the collapse of India's main trading partner, the Soviet Union, and 1991 India's economic crisis, India strengthened its trading link with Southeast Asia (Yahya, 2003). After the Cold War, India has realized the significance of Southeast Asia region and was concerned about China's influence that growing in the region. Hence, India tried to treat the Southeast Asia as a strategic theatre (Sikri, 2009). India has also observed that China's strategic link with Pakistan was a threat to India's stability and an interference in South Asia. Actually, India and China have been strategic competitors in the region since the Sino-India War of 1962 (Yahya, 2003).

Hence, India manifested its "Look East Policy" in 1991, while aiming to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations and offer itself as a counterweight to the strategic influence of China (Sikri, 2009). Under the "Look East Policy", India aimed to connect firmly with Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Asia-Pacific region. Mainland Southeast Asia has become a strategic region, which lies at the crossroads of the Indian subcontinent and Asia. Mainland Southeast Asia serves not only India's regional economic integration, but also its strategic security to balance the rising China.

### **U.S. Policy toward Myanmar**

After the Iraq War, the U.S. focus has turned towards the Asia-Pacific region (Clinton, 2011). The ASEAN countries have become the objects of U.S. attention in the Asia-

Pacific region, and the United States has fully engaged with the ASEAN countries (Clinton, 2011). The adoption of the pragmatic U.S. policy toward Myanmar also aimed at strengthening U.S. relations with ASEAN. The U.S. pragmatic engagement policy intends to promote the relationship between the United States and Myanmar and also aims to refresh its relations with the ASEAN (Haacke, 2012).

While preparing to counter and balance China, the United States has been involved in the South China Sea issue. "The United States is concerned that recent incidents in the South China Sea threaten the peace and stability on which the remarkable progress of the Asia-Pacific region has been built " (The South China Sea, 2011). Although the United States has welcomed China's economic growth, China's growing military power and influence in the region became a U.S. concern (Haacke, 2012).

The United States is one of the countries which recognized Burma's independence in 1947 and established an embassy in Rangoon (renamed Yangon in 1989). Although Burma accepted some U.S. economic assistance during the period of 1948 to 1953, Burma refused the assistance in 1953 due to the U.S. covert support to the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) forces which trespassed inside Burma in 1950 (Timeline: U.S.-Burma/Myanmar Relations, 2010). However, Burma accepted the U.S. humanitarian aid and military assistance program in 1974 until 1988 (Yawngnwe, 2010).

After crushing the pro-democracy movement in 1988, the military established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988. The country was renamed from Burma to Myanmar by the military government in 1989, but the United States and the United Kingdom do not accept this name and still address the country as Burma. The military government held a general election on May 27, 1990, for the first time since 1960. However, the military government refused to recognize the election results. Due to these circumstances, SLORC, the military government, has strongly been deplored by the United

Nations and the international community. The U.S. Congress decided to downgrade U.S. diplomatic representation in Myanmar in 1993, and bilateral relation between two countries dropped to the lowest level. The United States imposed several financial, economic sanctions and visa restriction on some Myanmar government officials and banned the U.S. individuals' investment to Myanmar in 1997 (Timeline: U.S.-Burma/Myanmar Relations, 2010).

In 2007, the Saffron Revolution occurred in protest to the unannounced decision of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which was the new name of military government and the SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as the SPDC in 1997, to increase the price of diesel and petrol. Due to the cruel suppression of this movement by the military government, the United States imposed more punitive sanctions on Myanmar (Myoe, 2007).

U.S. foreign policy toward Myanmar shifted in 2009. The Obama administration acknowledged that the U.S. strategy solely relying on sanctions, which was unsuccessful to achieve the political changes and reforms in Myanmar, and there should be a better policy instrument to achieve this goal (Haacke, 2012). The United States introduced a new policy of principled engagement, including direct senior-level dialogue with Myanmar authorities (U.S. Department of State, 2012). Actually, a comprehensive review of the U.S. policy on Myanmar in September 2009 was a new approach, which intend to deal with the military government, by taking a balance between engagement and sanction (U.S. Department of States, 2009).

After the general elections in Myanmar on November 7, 2010, the new Myanmar civil government led by the President U Thein Sein implemented a series of reform process and holding credible parliamentary by-elections on April 1, 2012. The United States, Japan, and some members of the European Union (EU) welcomed and supported Myanmar's reform with an "action-for-action" strategy (*U.S. Relations with Burma. Country Fact*, 2012).

The United States has played a key role in dealing with both the new Myanmar government and the main opposition party leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

In the dramatic visit to Myanmar on December 1, 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton expressed the U.S. stance:

It is firmly believed that the relations between the two countries would be developed, based on mutual respect; the United States pledged to cooperate in Myanmar's reform process as a partner country and acknowledged Myanmar's role in ASEAN. The United States welcomed the significant reforms the new Myanmar government has carried out and desired to respond the remarkable progress with the matched cooperation (President receives the U.S. Delegation, 2011).

Also in the historic working visit to Myanmar, Barack Obama, the President of the United States, on Nov 19, 2012, stated:

The United States will continue to work hard to strengthen bilateral relationship to promote progress that would be good not only for Myanmar but for the region and international community (President holds a discussion with U.S. President, 2012).

As a response to the historic reforms of Myanmar, the United States eased certain economic and financial sanctions on Myanmar on July, 11, 2012, aiming to encourage for more political changes and contribute to the economic development of the country (*Administration Eases Financial and Investment Sanctions on Burma*, 2012). Under this broader context of U.S.-Myanmar relations, the new U.S. policy prodding to promote democratic governance and national reconciliation in Myanmar was built upon awareness of the rising China.

## **China' Policy toward Myanmar**

When Burma regained independence in 1948, the Kuomintang Government was still in control of China. In fact the Kuomintang Government was one of the governments which sponsored Burma's admission to the United Nations in 1948. But the situation changed quickly in the Chinese Civil War, and by the end of 1949 the Chinese communists had gained control of China except the island of Formosa where Chiang Kai Shek took refuge. Faced with this reality, the new government of China was recognized by Burma as the legal government in December 1949 (Colbert, 1977). Burma became the first non-Communist and an Asian nation to recognize the new Chinese government on December 18, 1949 (Burma, 1949).

The defeated Kuomintang (KMT) Army, which was supported by the CIA, invaded into the Shan State of Burma in 1950. The CIA regrouped the remnants of the defeated Kuomintang army and facilitated the transfer of weapons and other supplies to KMT bases in the Burmese Shan State for a projected invasion of southern China. With CIA supports, the KMT remained in Burma until 1961 (Yinhui, 2009). The Burmese Army eventually launched an offensive to drive them from the Burmese soil in 1961 (Ministry of Information, 1953).

Although the relations between China and Burma declined due to the Kuomintang (KMT) issue, China-Burma relations since then improved until the Cultural Revolution (Aung, 2009). During the Cultural Revolution, the anti-Chinese riot broke out in Rangoon on June 26, 1967. Chinese students' defiance against the Burmese government's restriction on wearing the Mao badges led to the riot (Hongwei, 2012). The riot contributed to estranged relations between Beijing and Rangoon. After that, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, the relations between the two countries rapidly normalized, however (Hongwei, 2012).

Formerly, China supported the Burma Communist Party (BCP), which was an insurgent armed group along the China-Burma border. After the Chinese government reduced their support to the Burma Communist Party (BCP), the relationship between two countries improved again. (Liang, 1997). In accordance with its party to party relations policy, during the Cultural Revolution period, China had provided support and assistance to the communist insurgent parties from the Southeast Asia region which included the BCP, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the North Kalimantan Communist Party (NKCP) from Malaysia, the Philippine Communist Party (PCP) from the Philippines, and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) from Thailand (Heaton, 1982). China reviewed its policy in the mid-1970s. While maintaining party ties with the insurgent groups of the region, China had embarked on improving state-to-state relations with Southeast Asian countries in the mid-1970s (Heaton, 1982).

Warm and cordial relations between China and Burma emerged on August 5, 1988 with the border trade agreement of both governments (Liang, 1997). A year after that, the Burma Communist Party collapsed in 1989. After the military coup in 1988, Burma was deplored by the international community. Hence, the renamed Myanmar military government sought to cultivate a strong relationship with China. China's influence grew rapidly after the international community abandoned Myanmar (Geng, 2006).

In the last two decades, China has emerged as an important ally of Myanmar to support its position in the international forums and repeatedly defended Myanmar from serious criticisms by the international community. The international sanctions on Myanmar could not be effected without the participation of China (Li and Zheng, 2009). In the period of Myanmar's military government, the relationship between the two countries reached the highest stage and continued their longstanding 'paukphaw' (kinship) relations, which was first formed in the 1950s (Haacke, 2012). China enjoyed the enormous influence in

economic activities at the time of the Myanmar military regime. There are several Chinese investment projects in Myanmar including the natural gas and oil pipeline project which was connected from the offshore gas fields in the Bay of Bengal near the Rakhine state of Myanmar to China's Yunnan Province (Myanmar's pipeline politics, 2007). China can rely on this pipeline to import oil and gas from the Middle East and Africa rather than through the Malacca Strait (Pao, T. K & Fuller, T. 2007).

After general elections were peacefully concluded on November 7, 2010, the new civil government was formed in Myanmar on March 30, 2011. Myanmar's President U Thein Sein paid a three day visit to China on May 26, 2011, the first he had ever done since his inauguration. During this visit, both governments agreed to establish a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (Li, 2012). The purpose of China's strategic partnership is analogous to its foreign policy: not to conflict with each other, to pursue international coordination, and to advocate the spirit of equality and mutual benefit under the guidance of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. From the perspective of China, such partnership could encourage to strengthen the current relationship between two countries (Haacke, 2012).

Indeed, the U.S. review of its Myanmar policy in 2009 did not immediately threaten China. China even analysed that the U.S. policy review was an opportunity for the Myanmar government to take a chance for wider diplomatic space. Moreover, China announced its welcoming of the pragmatic U.S. engagement policy. China faced an unexpected shock after the Myanmar President suspended the Chinese investment massive Myitsone hydropower project on September 30, 2011, which was the construction project of the China Power Investment Corporation since late 2009 ("President has sent a message", 2011).

The Myitsone hydro power project is one of the Chinese investment massive projects and the project will export 90 percent of its electricity to China. But, the project is

heavily criticized by the international and domestic environmental preservation and protection groups (Irrawaddy Myitsone Dam, n.d.). Even though China had attributed reasons of the suspension due to both internal and external factors in Myanmar, China actually felt the dam project was the victim of Myanmar's urge to improve relations with the United States and it was a distinct movement against over Chinese influence. (Haacke, 2012).

Myanmar's rapid rapprochement with the United States and the suspended decision of Myitsone Dam hydro power project fundamentally shook Beijing's previous understanding of Myanmar as a loyal friend of China (Sun, 2012). Myanmar's moves surprised and frustrated many in China, forcing China to reconsider its strategies towards its southwestern neighbour.

## **7. Myanmar Foreign Policy**

While the Cold War was raging between the Eastern and the Western bloc, some of the colonies regained their independence. The newly independent countries, like Burma, had adopted the "independent foreign policy", aiming to be free from the influence of outside power. The newly independent Burma wished to be non-aligned between the Eastern and Western blocs (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.). Moreover, Burma desired to be independent and non-aligned due to its geographic position between two highly populous countries, China and India (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.). The historical non-aligned character lives on in Myanmar's foreign policy today.

During Chinese Premier Chou En Lai's visit to Burma and India in 1954, Burma, China and India signed the agreements of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.). The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence are:

- Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty,
- To abide by mutual non-aggression,
- Noninterference in each other's internal affairs,
- Respect for mutual equality and to work for mutual benefit, and
- Peaceful co-existence.

These Five Principles are the basic foundation of Myanmar's foreign policy and constantly remains throughout the history of Myanmar's foreign policy (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.).

After the military staged a coup in 1962, the newly established Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) turned the country introverted and gave much more attention to internal matters. Consequently, the BSPP government declared to pursue an independent and non-aligned foreign policy, and the neutrality was the main theme in this foreign policy (Taylor, 1987). The BSPP government pursued the idea of non-aligned policy as an ideal policy throughout their government period (Taylor, 1987). With this policy of neutrality, Burma slowly converted itself into a xenophobic and isolationist state (Buszynsky, 1986), although its neutralist stance aimed at pursuing good relations with all countries by steering clear from power blocs.

During China's Cultural Revolution, the relationship between Burma and China soured due to the anti-government activities of the Chinese minority in Rangoon in October 1967. Burma restored the relations with China in October 1970. In 1971, Burma changed its independent and non-aligned foreign policy to "an independent and active foreign policy" (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.).

The principles of "an independent and active foreign policy" were as follows:

- Respect of and adherence to the principle of equality among peoples and among nations and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence;
- Taking a non-aligned, independent and just stand on international issues;
- Maintaining friendly relations with all nations, and good-neighbourly relations with neighbouring countries;
- Continued support of, and active participation in, the United Nations and its affiliated organisations;
- Pursuance of mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes;
- Regional consultation and beneficial cooperation in regional economic and social affairs;
- Active participation in the maintenance of international peace and security and the creation of an equitable economic order and opposition to imperialism, colonialism, intervention, aggression and hegemonism;
- Acceptance of foreign assistance which is beneficial to national development, provided there are no strings attached (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.).

Even though, Burma adopted the new theme of independent and active foreign policy, the non-aligned principle still remained to be the main theme of its foreign policy. Burma enjoyed its non-aligned approach since it had feared of unwanted involvement in conflicts.

Only when Burma faced an unavoidable decision to take sides, the country received high attention from the international community. This happened at the Sixth Conference of Heads of States or Governments of the Nonaligned Countries, which was held

in Havana, Cuba from August 28, 1979 to September 9, 1979. At the Conference, Cuba attempted to steer the Nonaligned Movement into a pro-Soviet bloc direction and Burma believed that Cuba had inclinations to become a stooge of the Soviet Union and that it was tending the Nonaligned Movement towards a pro-Soviet bloc (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1973). Therefore, Burma withdrew from the Nonaligned Movement in 1979.

After seizing power in 1988, the SLORC military government decided to pursue "an independent and active foreign policy" (Independent and Active Foreign Policy, n.d.). The SPDC continued to pursue the same policy in 1997 (Steinberg, 2001). Even though the SLORC and the SPDC highlighted the active foreign policy, it was just a word and no distinctive initiative was carried out in international relations throughout the term of the military government.

Due to the international responses and domestic political changes, Myanmar revised her foreign relations in the late of 1980s. Aiming to get the support of the organization and provide a cover to resist pressure to democratize, Myanmar rejoined the non-aligned movement in August, 1992 and became an ASEAN member in 1997 (Aung, 2009). For the reason of the political and human rights condition, the Western and European countries refrained from Myanmar and relations with those countries declined dramatically. Therefore, Myanmar relied on China aiming to get the diplomatic protection and supporting in the United Nations and the international relations arena (Haacke, 2012).

In this situation, the Myanmar military government realized that it was difficult to rely on only one country and grew interested to engage in a dialogue with Washington in 2007 (Hlaing, 2012). As a proposal for political transition process, the military government introduced Myanmar's roadmap to democracy, which provided a seven-step process to restore disciplined democracy (Talyor, 2012).

These seven steps consist of;

1. Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996
2. After the successful holding of the National Convention, step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system
3. Drafting of a new constitution in accordance with the basic principles and detailed basic principles laid down by the National Convention
4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum
5. Holding of free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution
6. Convening of Hluttaws attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution
7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw ("The seven-step roadmap to disciplined democracy", 2003).

Finally, the new Myanmar civil government, formed on March 30, 2011, has effectively and successfully grasped the chance for rapprochement with the United States. This rapprochement and the improved ties with the United States have yielded many positive opportunities for Myanmar. Myanmar now enjoys inflow of foreign investments, including American investments and regains opportunities for Myanmar's export to the United States. Furthermore, the rapprochement is also bound to affect the renewal of educational and institutional capacities. The country regains wider international assistance for development

and humanitarian aid, and rapprochement with the United States has also reshaped Myanmar's international and regional relations.

## **8. Conclusion**

One of China's strategic interests is to keep Myanmar as a free corridor through mainland Southeast Asia, between the Bay of Bengal and China. Hence, China tried to defend and protect Myanmar from international interventions. Although China initially believed that the new Myanmar civil government could not diverge from its preceding military government's path, China has been surprised by the speed and the extent of U.S.-Myanmar rapprochement. The rapid improvement of bilateral relations between the United States and Myanmar caused China to lose its monopolistic edge. Furthermore, any opposition by China to the improvement of U.S.-Myanmar relations would constitute interference in Myanmar's internal affairs and damage China's relationship with both the Myanmar government and opposition parties.

On the other hand, according to its geopolitical reality, Myanmar's best strategy always lies in seeking a balanced diplomacy among big powers. It is an extremely delicate balancing act that requires wisdom and accurate calculations. In reality, the rebalancing of Myanmar's relationship with the United States to date does not aim at parting from China, Myanmar's closest neighbouring country. Instead, Myanmar will have to recalibrate its relationship with the United States, China and other regional states, such as Japan, India and ASEAN member countries, in order to achieve the better relations with all countries and to ensure the continuity in Myanmar's multiple hedging not only around with the big power countries but also with all other countries in the region.

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