

## China's Response to Political Transition in Myanmar

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**Abstract-** The paper is an attempt to examine the response of China to political transition in Myanmar in 2010. Since early time, China has been in good term with Myanmar. Myanmar was the first non-communist country to recognise People's Republic of China in 1949. After the suppression of pro-democracy movement and restoration of military Junta in 1988, China has been gaining from the International communities sanction against Myanmar military junta. Subsequently, Myanmar has become China's closest ally in Southeast Asia and became dependent on China. But the political transition in 2010 changed the scenario, West's sanction lifted, Myanmar's international relations has improved and various reforms have been taking place in the form of democracy, opening up of economy, etc. But this has no great impact on China's relation with Myanmar. Therefore, the paper examines the reasons as to why China still maintains good relation with Myanmar and what drives China to engage with Myanmar irrespective of the form of government that Myanmar has. The paper argues that china's policy towards Myanmar is driven by economic and strategic consideration rather than political. It contends that China's nonchalant attitude towards Myanmar's political transition will continue unless China's economic and strategic concerns are at stake.

**Keywords:** *Political transition in Myanmar, Myanmar's reform, importance of Myanmar for China, China-Myanmar relation and Impact of Myanmar's Political Transition on China.*

### Background of Myanmar-China Relations

Myanmar's relation with China has a long history. Chinese have been presence in Myanmar for centuries. Myanmar got its independence from Britain in 1942 after experiencing colonialism from Britain and Japanese occupation. Myanmar was the first non-Communist Asian country to recognise the People's Republic of China in 1949. In the early period of independence there was cordial and friendly relationship between the two countries. In June 1954, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai visits Myanmar and U Nu visited China the same year. However, Ne Win policy of isolationalism after the coup in 1962 and Chinese Cultural

Revolutions in the late 1960s undermine bilateral relations between Myanmar and China. Nevertheless, the relations improved in 1971 when Ne Win government reestablished diplomatic ties with China by accepting a Chinese ambassador to Myanmar. During the second half of the 1980s the relations grow further with China resuming official development assistance. The formation of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government after the crackdown of democracy movement in 18 September 1988 enhanced closer relations between the two countries. In October 1989, the then SLORC's number two leader and chief of army Lt. General Than Shwe visited China. The military junta after coming into power pursued economic policy of building roads, bridges, hydroelectric projects, dams and import-substituting state owned industries. China during this period provided military equipment, training and economic and political assistance to the military regime (Robert 2012). China was also involved in establishing sugar plants, textile factories, plywood plants, rice mills and other industrial factories and provides coastal liners, irrigation pumps, construction materials and satellite ground station (Zhao, 2008).

However, the military junta was criticised and put on sanction from different countries of the world since the crackdown of the democratic movement in 1988. On this juncture China came out with aid and investment. China backed Myanmar to survive during the sanction put on by the western countries and has been a major source of economic assistance to Myanmar (Clark, 1999). However, Tea in 2010 argues that China provides economic assistance to protect its own investment and influence the military junta and ethnic groups to pursue economic trade with Myanmar. Nevertheless, economic relations grew rapidly after the imposition of sanctions by Western states including the United States (US), Canada, Britain, Nordic states, Australia, members of the European Union (EU) and Japan. Furthermore, the cancellation of the election results in 1990 brings the relations with China into more closer.

China and Myanmar also improved military cooperation since 1988. China provided conventional arms and equipment, multiple rocket launchers, surface-to-air missiles, modern missile boats, supersonic fighters, advanced jet trainers, air-to-air missiles, four-engine transports, electronic warfare and signals intelligence equipment. In January 2003, China announced US\$ 200 million loan to Myanmar for improving electricity generating capacity for industrial development (James, 2004) and established modern reconnaissance and electronic intelligence system on Coco Island, built a deep-sea port in Kyaukpyu in the Rakhine state and also set up listening posts in Sittwe and Zedekyi Kyun (Zhao, 2008). The visits of a senior Myanmar delegation to China in November the same year further increase

Chinese interest in investment. Politically Myanmar became depended on China to back up for its regime survival and economically rely on China for assistance (Yi, 2013). The reform after the election and transfer of power in 2010 bring changes Myanmar's relations with other countries and affected it's relation with China. In early 2011, print media censorship was relaxed and Chinese activities began to be questioned in Myanmar. In November 2011, Thein Sein government suspended Myitsone dam project till its term. This was followed by the protest against other China's projects. In 2015, election took place and transfer power to the newly elected National League for Democracy government. China's even change in the form of government continues to main its relations with Myanmar.

### **China's Interest in Myanmar**

China has four key interests in Myanmar: border stability, energy security, geostrategic utility and economic investment. Hlaing (2012) pointed out China's interest towards Myanmar in five areas: (1) access to the Indian Ocean, (2) stability along the border it shares with Myanmar, (3) energy security, (4) economic cooperation between the two counties and (5) relations with developing nations. Toshihiro Kudo in China's Policy toward Myanmar: Challenges and Prospects observed that China's has three strategic interests in Myanmar: (1) energy procurement and energy security, (2) access to the Indian Ocean and (3) security of the border areas and border trade (Kudo). Poon Kim Shee also pointed out China's objective in Myanmar from four main angles: (1) ensuring a stable external environment with the neighbouring states, (2) maintaining the spirit of Bandung's policy of peaceful coexistence, (3) geo-economic dimension and (4) formation of sub-regional grouping for economic cooperation (Shee, 2002). China is also interested in Myanmar because of its geostrategic location and rich natural resources. In terms of geostrategic location, Myanmar is the only land bridge to reach South Asia from Yunnan and to access to the Indian Ocean. Myanmar provides an outlet for the development of Yunnan and Sichuan which is a landlocked province in the southwest border in China. To gain access to the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea, Myanmar is of great importance for China. It's strategic location at China's southwest holds importance for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar-controlled islands. By bypassing Strait of Malacca the PLAN would shorten the distance by 3000 km in reaching the Bay of Bengal. This has also become important in terms of energy security, with China's growing dependence on imported oil of which 80 percent is shipped to China via the Malacca Strait.

Economically, China is interesting in securing Myanmar's natural resources. Myanmar is very rich in oil, gas, lumber and gemstones. It is also rich in water resources which can be

exploited for electric power generation. For China, Myanmar is a provider of hydropower, natural gas and energy transportation route. It has reserved natural gas of about 89.7 trillion cubic feet which could contribute to development China's south-west. Myanmar is also seen as a ready market for China to export their cheap consumer goods. So, China is interested in Myanmar because of its strategic location and a source of raw materials and energy supply and is ready market for Chinese products. Politically, China favoured political stability in Myanmar as any instability and armed conflict on the Myanmar-China border regions has negative impact on China's border security and stability (Myoe, 2015). As a result, the 2010 election in Myanmar is perceived as a progress for the SPDC to unify the country and provide the stability to the Sino-Myanmar border (Narayanan, 2010).

### **Myanmar's Political Transition**

In 2010, the military junta held Legislative election in accordance with the 2008 constitution. The elections were not considered to be democratic by many countries. After the election the west claims that the election was not free and fair. President Barack Obama asserted that the election was neither free nor fair. The EU also said that the election is "not compatible with internationally accepted standards". After the election, Thein Sein was elected as President in March 2011 and transferred power accordingly as a part of democratisation. Political transition from military rule to civilian government took place and reforms were taking place and there was major change in its relations with other countries. The newly elected government released political prisoners, relax press and internet censorships and implement new labour laws that allow union and strikes. The government has also signed ceasefire agreements with most of the ethnic groups and holds political dialogues with ceasefire groups to resolve ethnic political problems (Hlaing, 2012). Western countries start acknowledging the political transition to democracy in Myanmar. Countries such as UK, France, Germany, Canada and Scandinavian countries have visited Myanmar after 2011 political transition. The EU suspending most of the sanctions it had imposed on the country. In May the US lifted financial sanction and import in September 2011. In December the same year US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, visited Myanmar to improve bilateral relations with the country. The US also appointed its first ambassador to Myanmar, lifted restrictions on humanitarian assistance. In 2012, the Myanmar government amended the political party registration and election law and allowed Aung San Suu Kyi to contest elections. In the same year by-election was held, National League for Democracy (NLD) was participated and won 43 out of 45 seats in which it contested. It is for the first time that the NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to participate and stand for elections since

1990. After the election there was positive reaction from the international communities. In 19 November 2012, President Barak Obama paid a six-hour first ever sitting US President visits to Myanmar and meet President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. On this visit China has not openly reacted. However, some analyst pointed out that China is uncomfortable with the increasing ties between the US and Myanmar (Kuppuswamy, C.S. 2012).

Many analysts pointed out several reasons for the political transition in Myanmar. Poon Kim Shee in 'The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations: Strategic and Economic Dimensions', pointed out both external and internal factors for the political reform in Myanmar. He pointed out four external factors such as China, the US, Association South East Asian Nation (ASEAN) and the Arab Spring for the reform and argued that reforms were motivated by a desire to refrain from China. It can be mentioned here that after the suppression of the democratic uprising in 1988, Myanmar was put on sanction from various countries and remained isolated. This provides China the opportunity to fill the gap and come closer with Myanmar. During this period there was closer political and economic tie between the two countries. China protected Myanmar from United Nations (UN) sanction in 2007 and provided vast investment and foreign aid to the country. Subsequently, Myanmar becomes overdependence on China economically and politically. Economically, there was exploitation of natural resources creating serious problems and politically forced the country to accept China's interference on the border ethnic groups and agreed to adjust its diplomatic positions for China on regional forums such as ASEAN and creates insecurity to the Myanmar's government. So, to overcome too much dependence from China became one of the main reasons to reform the country in 2011.

### **The Implications of Myanmar's Political transition for China**

Political transition in Myanmar has contributed to positive political changes internally and externally (Sun, 2012). Internally, President Thein Sein carried out various dramatic reforms after his coming into power. He met with Aung San Su Kyi, grant political prisoners, relax press and internet censorships, implement new labour laws that allowed unions and strikes, achieved cease fire agreement with ethnic insurgents group. Externally, ASEAN members have accepted Myanmar's bid for ASEAN chair for 2014. The relationship between Myanmar and the US improved. US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton paid a visit to Myanmar in December 2011 to encourage further progress. The US lifted restrictions on the work of World Bank and IMF in Myanmar and also began to allow American business companies to operate in Myanmar since November 2012. In the same month President Barak

Obama visited Myanmar. Subsequently, the president of Myanmar paid a visit to the US in May 2013. The EU also lifted most of the sanctions imposed on the country in April 2012 and allowed most top Myanmar government officials to travel within EU countries. Australia lifted its sanction in January 2012. Its relation with the international communities improved after the reform. However, political transition in Myanmar affected China in political, economic and strategic terms.

### **1. Political Impact**

China did not expect rapid political reforms in Myanmar. The reform in Myanmar surprised China as it was against China's advice for Myanmar to resort to economic reform instead of democratic reform (Sun, 2013). After the political transition, China decreased the level of senior official state visits to Myanmar. Four members of the Chinese Politburo Standing Committee paid visit to Myanmar between March 2009 and April 2011. Since then there has been no Chinese senior leaders visit till September 2012. Nevertheless, the political relations between the two countries was normal during the reform even though there was decreased of high level visits. Wu Bangguo, the Chairman of China's National People's Congress, paid a visit to Myanmar and stressed three points of bilateral relations: to enhance bilateral strategic mutual trust, to push forward the agreed major cooperation projects and to deepen cultural and people to people exchanges. Myanmar's political reforms made bilateral relations between Myanmar and China cool at the political level.

### **2. Economic Impact**

After the lifting up of media censorship in 2011 as a part of reform, anti-China sentiments have been brought to the forefront in privately-owned media platforms (Li and James Char 2014). There were vocal against China's project in Myanmar such as pipeline project, Myitsone dam project, etc. Three largest Chinese investment projects: the Myitsone Dam, the Letpadaung Copper Mine and the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines has faced serious difficulties (Sun, 2013). Thein Sein after coming into power suspended the Chinese 3.6 billion USD Myitsone hydro power project in Kachin State on September 2011 till the end of his term in 2015 which was built upon Irrawaddy River, the main lifeline of Myanmar's people. The suspension was based on five main ground: (1) the threat to the natural beauty of Myitsone, (2) the risk of flooding to villages in the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy River, (3) the risk to private rubber and teak plantations, (4) the potential consequences of flooding or an earthquake in the dam region and (5) the environmental impact on the Irrawaddy itself.



Analyst pointed out that the suspension of Myitsone project was the most important impact of Myanmar's political reform on China. Burmese observer opined that China has made the "resolution" of Myitsone dam issue a precondition for negotiation on other deals and projects. Subsequently, the issue on Myitsone dam project became the areas of contention between the two countries. The suspension of Myitsone dam project further encouraged the people to be more vocal in criticising other projects. The anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar makes China skeptical about the pipeline project which is China's top national priority inside Myanmar. Myanmar also called for the suspension of China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) oil and gas pipelines project and there was voiced against the Mongywa copper mine project acquired by the China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) in 2010 (Sun, 2013). Moreover, Chinese companies also faced with high competition from American, European, Japanese and Korean companies which are attracted to invest in Myanmar market. In term of technology and quality of their work, Chinese companies face disadvantage which further undercut their competitiveness.

### **3. Strategic Impact**

China's strategic interest included Myanmar's support for China at the ASEAN and the Greater Mekong Sub-regional economic cooperation as well as national "bridgehead" strategy that would turn Myanmar into China's outpost into the Indian Ocean (Sun, 2013). Before the reform taking place in Myanmar, China assumed that Myanmar will still remain under the authoritarian rule and would not adopt reform and its dependence on China in terms of political as well as economic will continue. After the political transition, Myanmar goes through rapid changes: opening its economy and invited other countries to invest. This impacted on China as Myanmar is no longer seen as a loyal ally to advance China's regional and strategic agenda. The US engagement with Myanmar also undermined China's strategic interest in Myanmar. China's perceived the US engagement and improved ties with Myanmar as a move to undermine China's regional influence (Sun, 2013). Some Chinese expert argues that the increase US-Myanmar relation was designed to threaten China's security, damage the China-Myanmar cooperation and indirectly hurt the security of the Chinese border and energy transportation route. The reform in Myanmar has also influenced China's strength at ASEAN. After the reform, Myanmar is free from overdependence on China and free to decide its own policy. Myanmar determines its own position on South China Sea in accordance with its own national interest and as a member of ASEAN community. So, Myanmar determines its position on the South China Sea in accordance with

its own national interest and solidarity of ASEAN as the regional organisation (Yi, 2013).

### **China's Responses to Political Transition in Myanmar**

China was positive about the reform in Myanmar and believed that Myanmar's economic reforms would open up new possibilities for China-Myanmar relations (Wilson, 2014). China faced strategic, political and economic competition to win influence over Myanmar after the transition in Myanmar. Not only that China has also faced competition from the US, EU as well as Japan which tried to renew their relations with Myanmar (Li & James 2015). It faced local opposition for its economic projects and suspended China's heavily invested Myitsone Dam in Myanmar. As a result, China changes its policy after the transition and reform in Myanmar. The Chinese government started meeting and establishing contacts with political parties and opposition parties which were avoided during the military rule. China hosted a multiparty delegation and an NLD delegation for a ten day visit in 2013. China's policy has shifted from focusing on improving relations with the country's elites to emphasis greater ties with various local communities. To meet the changing domestics and external political situation, China focus towards Myanmar include: (1) strengthening relations with Myanmar's democratic opposition, (2) reaching out to Myanmar's civil society groups, (3) encouraging corporate social responsibility practices among Chinese enterprises and (4) creatively mediating peace between the state government and armed ethnic minorities (Li & James 2015). The Chinese government start interacting with local people, NGOs and the media through its embassy. The embassy also maintains a website and a Facebook page.

China has also responded to the changes inside Myanmar in several ways. These include reduction of Chinese investments, cooling political relationship, establishment of relations with NLD and major public relations campaigns (Sun 2012). China starts acknowledging NLD and wanted to have good relation with Aung Sang Suu Kyi. Subsequently, in late 2011, China began to develop a normal relationship with NLD. From December 2011 to June 2012, the Chinese Ambassador had three meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi. This brings new hope of positive relations between the two countries. Aung San Suu Kyi starts expressing the importance of maintaining relations with China and the US. China aims to improve its image and relations with the local community and media. China starts inviting Burmese media delegations to China and began to broadcast Chinese Central TV in Myanmar after the suspension of Myitsone dam to promote positive image of China among Myanmar media



and people. In 2012, China campaign for deep fraternal friendship in Myanmar to boost traditional ties and consolidate friendship between the two peoples.

Politically, there is decrease level of senior official visits to Myanmar. Four members of China's Politburo Standing Committee visited Myanmar from March 2009 to April 2011. Since then no senior Chinese leader had been visited the country until September 2012. During this period, most of Chinese officials visiting Myanmar were focusing on working-level, substantive issues, rather than on high-profile display and celebration of bilateral friendships. However, political transition in Myanmar does not affect much on China-Myanmar relations.

The changes of China's policy towards Myanmar specially reduction of investment affected Myanmar. Myanmar is a resource rich country that lacks capital and expertise to develop domestically. To increase resource development, production and utilization Myanmar relies on foreign investment and technology from other countries (Clark, 1999). Since 1988 the country is under sanction which leads to slow development and curtail exploration activities. During this period, China acts as a back up and has been a major source of investment and economic assistance to the country (Clark 1999). There was rapid growth of Chinese investment from 2008 to 2011. During this period, Chinese investment rose from 1 billion to about 13 billion USD. However, the political reforms in Myanmar interrupted the rapid growth of investment and there was huge reduction of Chinese investment in Myanmar since 2011 and alternatively affected Myanmar's development. The anti-Chinese sentiment, the rising political risk, the uncertainty of Myanmar domestic politics, unsettled foreign investment law and power distribution among parliaments and governments make China reluctant to invest in Myanmar. Subsequently, the decrease in Chinese investment leading to slow down of Myanmar's economic development as Chinese investment could help Myanmar to overcome underdeveloped and inadequate infrastructure, such as a shortage of electricity and an inadequate electric transmission system, along with a poor national transportation network. Because of all that reason, Myanmar after the change of the form of government still wanted has good and cordial relations with China.

### **China-Myanmar relations after 2010**

After political transition in Myanmar, its relation with international community improved. Many countries which put up sanctions after the crackdown of pro-democracy movement in 1988 were lifted and attracted for investment. However, the political reform after the transition has impacted its relation with China which is a close ally during the sanction and isolation. China welcomes the transition to democracy in Myanmar and favoured stable

Myanmar even though China did not expect the fast political reform in Myanmar. After the reform, China-Myanmar relations reached improve after the signing of the “Strategic Economic Cooperative Partnership” when President Thein Sein visited Beijing in May 2011. However, the changes in Myanmar’s domestic politics brought challenges to China’s interests in the country and its strategic planning. The suspension of the \$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam project and the improvement of Myanmar’s relationship with the West, especially with the US affected the relations between the two countries. China had also poor public image in Myanmar after the transition but it does not impacted much on political ties between the two countries. China instead tries to maintain good relation with the military, NLD and public and adjusting its policies and commitments to strengthen the relation. China has also involved in peace negotiation between the ethnic groups and the government of Myanmar. Myanmar also on the other hand tries to maintained good and cordial relations with China.

In 2012, by-elections took place in Myanmar. From this period, China has followed a policy of party-to-party relations or dual-track diplomacy and has engaged with political parties, civil society organisations, enhance people-to-people understanding and to improve Myanmar–China friendly relations. China has also initiated relations with other non-ruling parties in Myanmar since early 2013. Subsequently, in April 2013, a delegation comprising 12 senior members from the All Mon Regional Democracy Party (AMRDP), the National Unity Party (NUP), the NDF, the Shan Nationality Democracy Party (SNDP) and the Rakhine Nationality Democracy Party (RNDP) visited China (Myoe, 2015). On May 2013, a 12 member NLD delegation travelled to China for a ten-day visit and on December 2013, at the invitation of the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, the secretary of the central executive committee of the NLD, Nyan Win, led a delegation to China. In June 2015, Aung San Suu Kyi visited China and this visit further strengthens the party to party relations between the two countries.

**Conclusion:**

Myanmar was under the military rule directly or indirection since 1962. During the military rule, there was close tie between Myanmar and China. However, transition to democracy started after the election in 2010 and transfer of power to the newly elected civilian government. After the transition, reforms has been taken place and changes its domestics and external policies. Its relation with international community improved and adversely affected its relations with China in terms of political, economical and strategically. Many analysts pointed out several reasons for the reform in Myanmar. China was one of the main

reasons for the reform in Myanmar. During the military rule Myanmar after crack down the movement for democracy, Myanmar became heavily dependent on China political and economically. To overcome too much dependence from China, Myanmar adopted political reform in the country in 2010. China faced criticism from public and media after the reform and the government of Myanmar suspended its heavily invested project. This has negative consequences to Myanmar relations with China. China after the reform responded in many ways, it reduced investment and decrease high level official visits to Myanmar. The decrease of Chinese investment on the other hand slows down Myanmar's economic development. As a result, Myanmar wanted to maintain good relations with China. And China on the other hand also wanted to maintain good relations with Myanmar because of Myanmar's strategic importance and rich in natural resources. At political level, China changes its policy towards Myanmar and started improving its relation not only with the political parties but also with the people and media and trying to show good image to Myanmar. Therefore, the form of government whether authoritarian or democracy in Myanmar did not factor much on the relations between the two countries because of the Myanmar's geostrategic location and rich natural resources and also of the importance of China for the development of Myanmar.

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