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MYANMAR'S FOREIGN STRATEGY TOWARD CHINA SINCE ROHINGYA CRISIS: CHANGES, OUTLOOK AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: *Myanmar has crafted a neutral foreign policy since its colonial years to avoid leaning too much on any foreign power, but a spiraling political crisis at home is pushing it toward China as a buffer against international outrage. Myanmar faces charges of genocide against the Rohingya. China has backed Myanmar in the UN. In fact, China is in a similar situation. China is grappling with international criticism over perceived repression of ethnic Uighur people. Myanmar is exposed to various words and loud in the international community. So Myanmar wants to improve relations with China and is turning into an active cooperative attitude as a strategy to secure a friendly army. This paper shows how the diplomatic relations between Myanmar and China are changing, and how Myanmar's foreign strategy toward China is approaching. Also this article analyzes the outlook of diplomatic relations and the implications of the current situation.*

Keywords: *Rohingya; Myanmar-China relations; Belt and Road Initiative; Indo-Pacific Region*

INTRODUCTION

China's influence in Myanmar manifests on three different levels. At the bilateral level, the government and the military establishment of Myanmar receives diplomatic dividends for maintaining good ties with China. At the domestic political level, China's relations with the country's ethnic organizations make it an important stakeholder in the ongoing reconciliation process. Finally, at the economic level, a lack of alternatives makes Naypyidaw reliant on Chinese investments, thereby ensuring favorable policies towards China over the longer term, notwithstanding regime changes (Monish Tourangbam and Pawan Amin 2019). Myanmar's ruling military junta decided to open up to the West in 2011 in order to reduce its dependence on China, but the Rohingya crisis has pushed Myanmar back toward China. Suu Kyi has been heavily criticized for her silence, but China has shielded her regime in the UN by whittling down a Security Council statement drafted by the UK. Beijing also attempted to stop a Security Council briefing on the Rohingya issue and reduce the budget allocated for investigating the incidents in Rakhine state. Moreover, China has positioned itself as a mediator between Myanmar and Bangladesh, which agreed to the three-step solution to the Rakhine state problems as proposed by China: stop violence, start repatriation and promote development. Myanmar has crafted a neutral foreign policy since its colonial years to avoid leaning too much on any foreign power, but a spiraling political crisis at home is pushing it toward China as a buffer against international outrage because of Rohingya issue. Myanmar is the poor but quickly developing and it is trying to wipe out Muslim Rohingya people near its border with Bangladesh.

Myanmar faces charges of genocide against the mainly Muslim Rohingya minority group. In the same situation, China had backed Myanmar in the U.N. Security Council when a military junta ruled the country before 2011. Because China is grappling with international criticism over perceived repression of ethnic Uighur people who oppose living under Beijing's rule (Ralph Jennings 2019). Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a two-day visit to Myanmar at the invitation of State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 2019. The visit was made just before the State Counselor's departure next week to contest the genocide case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Netherlands. Myanmar authorities want to meet with the Chinese counterparts, because Myanmar is being isolated and alienated from the international community on the Rohingya issue. This Rohingya issue is now the single cause of Myanmar's lack of international credibility. In this state of Myanmar, questions arose about the change in Myanmar's diplomatic strategy toward China. How did diplomatic relations between China and Myanmar change before and after the Rohingya issue? How is the Myanmar government's diplomatic strategy approaching toward China in particular? As well, how can we anticipate bilateral relations in the future, and what implications does the change in diplomatic relations between the two countries have in the Indo-Pacific region?

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With these research questions in mind, data for this paper was compiled from an exhaustive review of books, articles, and journalistic accounts of Rohingya affairs, in general, and Myanmar's foreign strategic change toward China, more specifically. Additionally, numerous Chinese-language source materials, including books, newspaper article, and government document were examined. In the end, I also found the status and honor literature in international relations to be a useful theoretical backdrop for this study.

Based upon this careful review, it appears that while China is looking to expand investment in Myanmar, the Myanmar government is seeking a new diplomatic strategy approach to breaking up the isolation from the international community as a result of recent Rohingya crisis. In this regard, this paper explores the changes of Myanmar's foreign strategy approach to China. This article proceeds in four steps. First it deals with the examination of the political changes in Myanmar and Myanmar-China economic relations. This is followed by an account and analysis of Rohingya crisis. The third section focuses on presenting the status of foreign strategy approach between Myanmar and China. The analysis of the future prospects for Myanmar-China relations and some implications for the Indo-Pacific region is made in the final section.

HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL RELATIONS

Myanmar and China are inextricably linked by geography, history, ethnicity, culture, and economy. The original Myanmar tribe came down from Tibet and spawned the kings who united the kingdom of Bama or Myanmar in the XII century and became the dominant ethnic group of modern Burma, now formally known as Myanmar. The two countries share a land border of more than 1,300 miles, populated largely by tribes living on both sides of the border in Burma's eastern Shan and Kachin states and in China's southwestern Yunnan Province. Myanmar has a long and colorful historical relationship with China. Traditionally, the northern reaches of the country were subjected to large-scale migrations of Sino-Thai peoples who inhabited the northern Shan and Kachin states. Chinese emperors have also historically threatened Burmese kingdoms and sought to subjugate them within a web of neighboring vassal states in securing political compliance and tribute. Consequently, some measure of Myanmar's threat perceptions has traditionally originated from China.

These perceptions were held at bay when the country was colonized by the British, beginning in 1826 when they captured Arakan and Tenasselim after the conclusion of the First Anglo-Burmese War. The strong control exerted by the British over the country from the late nineteenth century and the colonizer's equally strong control in parts of China deflected this threat (Narayanan Ganesan 2018). Accordingly, Myanmar and China have generally enjoyed a cordial relationship since the modern boundaries were drawn during the British colonial era. Perhaps the major exception is when the PLA (People's Liberation Army) joined and supported the communist riots in Myanmar during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

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However, despite attacking the army against a communist riot in the northeast of the country, General Ne Win, then head of the Burmese military government, was careful to maintain the right relationship with China. He also worked closely with Soviet Union, China's enemy then and received military and other forms of support from the United States. Nevertheless, the period of confrontation with the PLA left a significant mark on the military successors of Newin, who had acquired all the scars of the battle to fight Chinese invaders.

After Deng Xiao Ping came to power, Chinese support for the communist insurgency in Burma was withdrawn and Beijing encouraged the Kokang, Kachin, Wa, and Mong La insurgent border groups to negotiate cease-fire agreements with the Burmese military government. As part of the ceasefire arrangements with the military regime, these tribes were assigned relative autonomy over areas of the Shan and Kachin states, which later became enshrined in the 2008 constitution (Clapp 2015).

THE MYANMAR'S POLITICAL CHANGE AND RELATIONS WITH CHINA

Myanmar, under the 2008 Constitution, strives for both internal legitimacy, and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. At one time, tensions in relations with China have come to fore due to Myanmar's economic reform program and its expansion of external relations. But the new government in Myanmar took office in March 2011 and China sent its political adviser to Myanmar in April 2011.Jia Qinglin was the first foreign leader to visit Myanmar, soon after the new government came to power.

During his visit, China promised assistance irrespective of the development path chosen by Myanmar in accordance with its national conditions. However, China expressed concerns over safeguarding border areas stability and highlighted the importance of sustaining a stable environment. President Thein Sein assured that Myanmar's policy toward China would remain unchanged. During Thein Sein's visit to China in May 2011, the relationship was upgraded to comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. It was declared to be the closest and most important diplomatic relationship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the PRC 2011). At the 66th session of the General Assembly in September 2011, China extended support to Myanmar's ongoing political reconciliation and opposed interference in its internal affairs. Against this backdrop, the Chinese side called for maintaining high-level contacts, ensuring the completion of major projects and enhancing coordination in international and regional affairs to strengthen the bilateral strategic partnership. In response, Myanmar expressed its desire to step-up communication and exchanges with neighboring countries as well as international community. Soon after the relationship was upgraded, Beijing's concerns became a reality with the sudden suspension of the US $3.6 billion-worth Myitsone Dam project on September 2011. It shook the foundation of the relationship built during the military junta period in Myanmar. To improve the relationship, Myanmar's Foreign Minister has visited China as special envoy of the President over the dam suspension.

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There were external forces and also internal political dynamics influencing the foreign policy priorities of Myanmar. However, Myanmar still may have to pay $800 million with interest to the state-owned China Power Investment Corporation, the amount it claims to have already spent on the dam. The NLD government is now grappling with whether to forfeit that amount or yield to new Chinese pressure to restart the project (Lintner 2019). During State Councilor Dai Bingguoís visit to Myanmar in 2014 to attend the 4th summit of the Greater Mekong Sub-regional cooperation (GMS), both Myanmar and China discussed bilateral relations, sub-regional cooperation, global and regional issues including border stability, implementation of major projects and the economic and trade cooperation by exploiting the complementary advantages. And Myanmar Parliamentary Speaker, Shwe Mann visited China in 2012. China reiterated respect for Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and encouraged it to settle the problems and maintain stability along the border areas. Chinese concern over recent developments was termed as complicated changes in the global situation which have brought opportunities and challenges for both countries. Chinese side called for enhancing mutual trust, supporting each other's core interests, expanding cooperation, coordination on regional and international affairs. Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping told the Union Solidarity and Development Party delegation that China has always handled its relations with Myanmar from a strategic perspective. Aung San Suu Kyi endorsed China-Myanmar friendship in her speech at the World Economic Forum on East Asia and Beijing took opportunity to enhance understanding with the NLD party. Moreover, Yang Jiechi met with Myanmar counterpart on the sidelines of the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting and expressed desire to maintain high-level contacts, enhance strategic communication and cement the foundation of the bilateral relations. For the relations to withstand the test of vicissitudes of international situations, the Chinese side asked for maintaining high-level visits and exchange views on major issues of common concern to lay down an action plan for enhancing the strategic partnership. After the Myitsone Dam controversy, for the first time, Myanmar President visited China to attend the 9th China-ASEAN Expo in Nanning, capital of south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. At this time, President U Thein Sein called for fostering bilateral ties in a move to win confidence of the Chinese investors and restore ties with Beijing. In 2013, U Thein Sein gave an interview welcoming Chinese investment, especially those that can create jobs in Myanmar and announced that Chinese investments in Myanmar are mutually beneficial for both the countries. In the press communiqué issued on April 2013, China reiterated its respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Myanmar and its support for government's efforts to maintain national unity and ethnic harmony. The two sides also vowed to strengthen coordination and cooperation in ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, the East Asia Summit, GMS and the UN and to safeguard common interests of developing countries. China realized the need for steering the ties in the right direction on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit, deepen strategic mutual trust and safeguard shared interests.

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Beijing is hard-pressed to safeguard its interests from being swayed by the vicissitudes in international politics and external forces (Kubo 2016). Myanmar has opened up in all directions and the reform policy creates a fair competition where the Chinese companies once enjoyed unprecedented advantages due to sanctions and isolation policy (Singh 2014). At the Strengthening Connectivity Partnership, Chinese President committed to US $40 billion fund for infrastructure development among the Silk Road Economic Belt nations which involve revival of the ancient Silk Road between China and Europe via Afghanistan and Central Asia, besides linking BCIM Corridor as well as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Gurudas and Thomas 2018). China envisages an economic corridor linking its south-western Yunnan province through Myanmar to Kolkata as a key segment of a land-based 'Silk Road economic belt', and is also planning to boost ties with port cities, such as Chennai, through a 'Maritime Silk Road' starting out from south-eastern Fujian province through South China Sea to Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Regarding the proposed 21st century Maritime Silk Road, Myanmar considered that the route can play an important role in the development of the country by bringing new economic opportunities for Myanmar and its people. Accordingly, Myanmar is now regarded as a newly emerging destination for businesses on account of its strategic geographical location. Located on the southern tip of Indochina peninsula, possesses an important strategic location on the blinks of Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, the significant gateway for China to Indo-Pacific regional order and becoming as a commercial corridor for both giant neighbors. It is on the cross road of China's Go West Policy on the one hand and India's Look East Policy on the other. Similarly, Myanmar is important for China's landlocked southwestern provinces market access to Bangladesh and India through transit trade instead of China's eastern coast (Chaw Sein, 2015). China-Myanmar cooperation has a sound foundation.

Therefore, it may achieve early harvest results in the building of BRI (Chenyang and Shaojun 2019). Myanmar's government signed two memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and an agreement letter with China at a Beijing's Belt and Road Forum, detailing strengthened cooperation between the countries on the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), trade and technology. The estimated 1,700-kilometer-long corridor will connect Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan province, to Myanmar's major economic checkpoints-first to Mandalay in central Myanmar, and then east to Yangon and west to the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ). Unless China's diplomacy toward Myanmar changed and the Burma Communist Party (BCP) broke up, the power ownership and structure might not have been the same as it is at present. Arms transfer and economic ties have dramatically increased China's influence on and within Myanmar (Marvin 1998). Myanmar was always dependent on China for political protection in the UN during the years of military government when China and Russia protected them in the Security Council against international sanctions, and today they're still protecting Myanmar's civilian government against international sanctions.

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ROHINGYA ISSUE AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

The Rohingya, who numbered around one million in Myanmar at the start of 2017, are one of the many ethnic minorities in the country. Rohingya Muslims represent the largest percentage of Muslims in Myanmar, with the majority living in Rakhine state as geographically represented in Figure 1. They have their own language and culture and say they are descendants of Arab traders and other groups who have been in the region for generations. But the government of Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country, denies the Rohingya citizenship and even excluded them from the 2014 census, refusing to recognize them as a people. It sees them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Since late August 2017, more than 671,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled the Rakhine state to escape the military's large-scale campaign of ethnic cleansing. The atrocities committed by Myanmar's security forces, including mass killings, sexual violence, and widespread arson, amount to crimes against humanity. Military and civilian officials have repeatedly denied that security forces committed abuses during the operations, claims which are contradicted by extensive evidence and witness accounts.

The Rohingya, a highly persecuted Muslim group numbering over one million, face discrimination both from their neighbors and their nation, and are not considered citizens by Myanmar's government. Buddhist nationalist groups, including the MaBaTha and the anti-Muslim 969 Movement, regularly call for boycotts of Muslim shops, the expulsion of Muslims from Myanmar, and attacks on Muslim communities. After two waves of violence, reprisals, and riots in June and October of 2012 intensified the century-old conflict in the predominantly Buddhist country, more than one hundred thousand Muslim Rohingyas were internally displaced and hundreds killed.

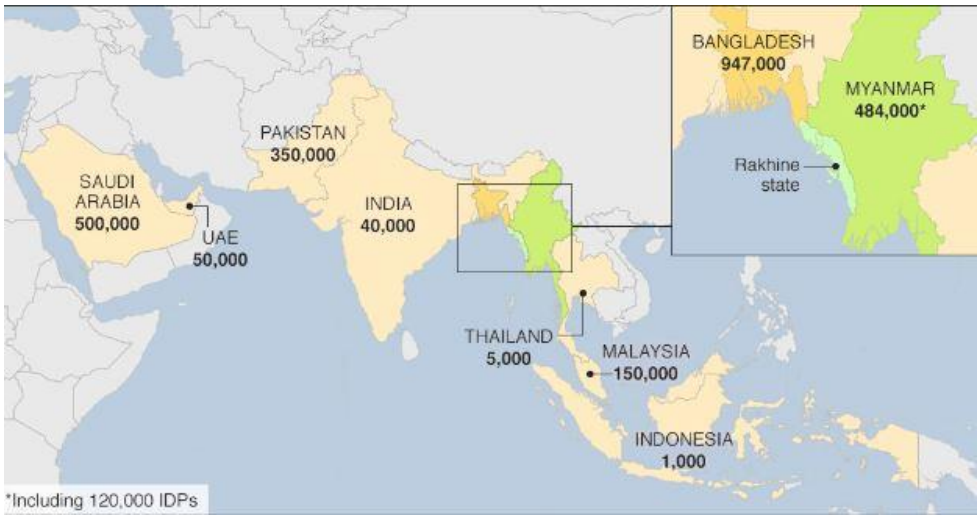


Figure 1: Spread of Rohingya Inside and Outside Myanmar (Source: The Arakan Project/BBC 2017)

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There is little indication that addressing the Rohingya issue will become a priority any time soon for Myanmar's government, which has focused instead on establishing a new relationship with the military and addressing multiple ongoing insurgencies. The military signed a cease-fire with several armed ethnic groups in October 2015, but some major groups—including two of the largest militias, the United Wa State Army and the Kachin Independence Army—continue to fight the government. While the cease-fire agreement was a potential step towards peace in Myanmar, it failed to finalize a framework for a new balance of power between the central government and local authorities in the restive borderlands or require ethnic groups to disarm.

Tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar's Rakhine state have escalated dramatically since late August 2017. A series of attacks by a group of Rohingya militants calling itself the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on military and police outposts killed more than seventy people, including twelve Burmese security forces personnel. In response, the military launched a brutal crackdown on Rohingya villages, causing over seven hundred thousand people to flee across the border to Bangladesh since August 2017. Widespread reports indicate indiscriminate killings and burning of Rohingya villages, escalating to the point that the UN Human Rights Commissioner called the situation in Rakhine state "A textbook example of ethnic cleansing" (Guardian, 2017). The violence has led to a growing humanitarian crisis in neighboring Bangladesh, where nearly one million Rohingya now reside in refugee camps along the border. In this situation, friendly relations between the US-Myanmar have gradually changed. Due to disagreements over human rights issues, the two countries have remained a divisive factor. However, Myanmar's stability is increasingly important to U.S. interests given Myanmar's strategic importance in Southeast Asia, vast natural resources, and emerging democratic government.

These are now the only real possibilities on offer for the Rohingya, a community that is, by and large, on its own, with dwindling numbers of supporters on the international stage, and grandiose talk of worldwide relief and international law and justice accompanied by little to no action. The 1982 citizenship law excluded the Rohingya from a list of 135 officially recognized ethnic groups. The governments officials today refuse even to acknowledge the term 'Rohingya' insisting that they are illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh and have no history in the country. This denial of citizenship has enabled numerous human rights abuses and impedes international efforts to assist the growing number of Rohingya who are fleeing to neighboring countries to escape persecution (Raymond, 2015). Wave after wave of extreme violence against them culminated in August 2017 with a crackdown that forcibly displaced nearly a million people. At least 9,000 members of their community died in just the first month of the onslaught, according to Médecins Sans Frontières, an NGO that has produced the most authoritative estimate of fatalities to date.

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FACTORS AFFECTING CHAINA-MYANMAR FOREIGN RELATIONS

Britain ruled Myanmar for more than a century. That is why Myanmar has strived for a nonaligned foreign policy for decades, probably to avoid a return to colonialism. Basically, considering the various circumstances, it is clear that the Myanmar's government has no confidence in China. Myanmar business people sometimes feel condescension from Chinese partners, while Yangon hopes to avoid any sovereign debt. The Chinese-funded $3.6 billion Myitsone Dam project (Zhou 2019) and China's stake in a seaport have worried the government about owing a debt. But Myanmar now wants any foreign investment to benefit the country, not just the investor. It vets projects at international standards.

In 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Chinese foreign minister discussed to promote bilateral cooperation under China's Belt and Road Initiative. The $1 trillion initiative extends Chinese-funded infrastructure around Asia with the aim of building new trade routes. Considered from a strategic and security standpoint, Myanmar's appreciation for China's importance as a great neighbor with unequal power and influence in Asia and the immediate local environment has always been a source of national political concern. Earlier China's entry into China and BCP support brought this reality back to modern times. The fact that the major ethnic armed groups representing the Wa, Kokang, Kachin and Shan have Chinese roots and have strong political and economic ties to China makes the situation even more important. As a result, from a political and strategic point of view, Chinese cooperation is essential for Myanmar to achieve domestic political cohesion and security. China has repeatedly experienced this situation by reminding Myanmar that border security and security are closely tied to how Myanmar addresses conflicts near the border. The simple reason for this development is the fact that violence in border areas always results in floods of refugees across borders in Yunnan, China. This development is not surprising as it is the safest exit abroad.

Ethnic insurgency in Myanmar has always involved neighboring countries and traditionally China and Thailand were the most involved in these activities. In the case of Thailand, the previous Thai governments' policy of supporting the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) as part of a broader buffer policy against Myanmar strained bilateral relations between the two countries (Chachavalpongpun 2005, 58-9). In the case of China, the situation is much more complicated and spans a broader spectrum of groups. The first two of these are the Wa and the Kokang – ethnic Chinese who formed the sword arms of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP). The two groups are represented by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) respectively. China has always maintained that it neither supports nor harbors ethnic insurgents from Myanmar and has in the past even pressured smaller groups like the MNDAA to sign ceasefire agreements. It has also sent government officials to observe negotiations between the Myanmar government's Union Peace Making Work

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Committee (UPWC) and the KIA (Ganesan 2014, 131-32). Analyzing the factors influencing mutual relations between China and Myanmar diplomatic relations can be summarized as follows. First, governance traps. Myanmar's industrial processes were heavily influenced by policies, and the government's management experience and efficiency were essential for industrial development. For a long time, Myanmar's economic lifeblood was in the hands of the military that had no economic management training and lacked economic expertise and management skills, which had affected the country's economic development to some extent. Myanmar is currently Yamasuhi's ruling ZANU-PF, the NLD has long been in opposition, there was no practice of managing the country, not a long time in power, lack of experience in market mechanisms and macroeconomic regulation, coupled with Myanmar's domestic military forces are still deep-rooted, forming a constraint. The ability of the new Government to govern has become an uncertain factor affecting Myanmar's economic and industrial development.

Second, the situation in the country is volatile. Myanmar's civil war has long affected economic and social development, and the situation in the country has eased in recent years, with a year-long peace in the country in 2015, when the Government of Myanmar and eight ethnic local armed groups signed a nationwide ceasefire agreement. In November 2016, however, four local forces in Myanmar launched another offensive against government forces in the worst fighting since Aung San Suu Kyi came to power. In 2017, unrest among the Rohingya in Myanmar's western Rakhine state pushed the Burmese government to the forefront of the international community. The internal armed conflict has always been a serious challenge for Myanmar, and the volatile situation has cast a shadow over China-Myanmar geo-cooperation.

The third, Myanmar's current economic and social development is backward, and the basis of China-Myanmar geo-cooperation is poor. Myanmar's per capita GNI in purchasing power terms was $4,930 in 2015, well below the world average of $15,529, and only higher among Southeast Asian countries than Cambodia and Timor-Leste. Myanmar's 26 per cent of the population is currently below the poverty line, with low incomes and low purchasing power leading to insufficient domestic demand to drive manufacturing growth. Myanmar's inflation rate has been high for a long time, at 9.5 per cent in 2016, compared with 2 per cent for ASEAN as a whole (Plecher 2019), and rising inflation has exacerbated poverty, increased the cost of business and is not conducive to the development of the real economy. In addition, Myanmar's infrastructure is underdeveloped.

The fourth, education is backward and talents are scarce. The issue of educational development and talent development is the focus and difficulty of successive Governments in Myanmar. Myanmar's backward educational development and the long-term low quality of its national population seriously restrict the potential of Myanmar's national development. Myanmar has a tradition of student participation in political movements, and university students, an important force in promoting democracy in Myanmar, have been repeatedly

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crushed by the military regime since the military government came to power in 1988, and Myanmar's universities have often been closed. Myanmar's transformation and development is severely constrained by the low level of education, overpopulation of agricultural populations, lack of economic management and lack of vocational skills.

MYANMAR'S FOREIGN STRATEGIC APPROACH TOWARD CHINA

From Myanmar's independence to the present, Myanmar's analysis of the flow of foreign policy shows that the most striking point is that the basis of the Neutral and Non-Aligned is the only thing common to foreign policy. Myanmar held that political position because of the politician's thoughts of spontaneous healing of the colonial pains and no longer recurring the dark history of the past. At the same time, it can be said that there is an intention not to be a victim of the international order that has been transformed into a bipolar system of US and Soviet power. Since independence, however, the geopolitical values of Myanmar have been recognized in the western world, including neighboring countries and even in the United States and Europe, confirming the fact that there have been various attempts to put Myanmar under its own influence. After the voluntary isolation and closure of the Ne Win regime, the new military regime had implemented a biased policy of pro-China to maintain the regime. As a result, Myanmar's geopolitical value was temporarily lost. However, in 50 years, Myanmar's value has revived as the military regime ends and the regime enters into a softening stage, with the unexpected reform and open market policy. Recently, however, the diplomatic strategy against China, which defends its policies, is changing due to Rohingya issue. Following Rohingya's changes in Myanmar's approach to China's foreign policy, the following can be diagnosed.

When NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi decided to join the new parliament in 2012, Beijing had to coordinate Myanmar's approach to the new government. Beijing could no longer place bilateral relations strictly on inter-party relations between the large Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the Chinese Communist Party. China has increasingly hosted visits by members of various political parties, and Chinese organizations have formed various new bilateral relations with growing civil society in Myanmar. Realizing that China is suffering from a serious lack of analytical knowledge about Myanmar and its political diversity, Beijing has encouraged various Myanmar's universities and policy research institutions to develop new research programs for Myanmar. As a result, China's policy community has become subtler and more sophisticated with respect to changing relations with the new Myanmar, especially as it has been found that the military no longer controls the country's economic and political life, as in the SPDC. Gradually began to grasp his attitude. Myanmar is linked to China by mountains and sea, and 'Pauk-Phaw' runs deep. In recent years, cooperation between Myanmar and China is improving in scale, scope and level, with broad prospects for cooperation.

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According to the data by the Ministry of Commerce of China, the bilateral trade volume between Myanmar and China in 2018 reached US $15.24 billion, a year-on-year increase of 13.1 percent. China is now Myanmar's largest trading country and the largest source of investment (The Myanmar Times 2019). Through the friendly and diverse cooperation between the two countries, Myanmar explores new strategic diplomatic relations with China as a strategy to make up for the criticism of the international community.

China's BRI is a strategic plan of historical and practical importance, offering a new platform for regional cooperation and new opportunities for mutual development. Myanmar is the largest mainland in ASEAN, a representative of developing countries, and a key partner in BRI construction. It is helpful to have a clear understanding of Myanmar's understanding of BRI. Myanmar's high-level political leaders have responded positively to the implementation of BRI, as China and Myanmar have a bright future to jointly promote BRI. With the cooperation issued in November 2014, Myanmar welcomes BRI, but both sides agree to inherit the spirit of the Silk Road. Strengthen cooperation in marine economy, connectivity, environmental protection and cultural exchange. Promote mutual benefits and joint development with countries along the route. However, Myanmar's society knows little about BRI; awareness is limited to officials and elites doing policy research about China. Even some officials of the U Thein Sein government do not know what kind of cooperation can be carried out between China and Myanmar. They suggest that China strengthen publicity of BRI and said that they can arrange for translation and publication if China can provide proper materials (Chenyang and Shaojun 2018).

The Myanmar government regards the Rohingya as illegal immigrants who entered after the country gained independence from Britain in 1948 and after the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971, when more people fled to Myanmar to avoid violence. As Washington begins to pursue sanctions against Myanmar's Army for what American and United Nations officials call a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya Muslim minority, China is taking advantage and filling the gap. Already spending billions of dollars on infrastructure projects in Myanmar, China is now also assisting its neighbor in diplomatic efforts to try and help burnish the country's image in the face of widespread criticism. Though China has usually been reluctant to become involved in mediation, it has offered to broker talks between Myanmar and Bangladesh, now the host of more than 600,000 Rohingya who fled the military campaign of systematic rape, massacre and arson in Myanmar. As China moves more aggressively to build a sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, Myanmar is a prime asset, a border state with a long coastline that offers a strategic outlet to the Indian Ocean (Perlez 2017). There is no territorial dispute with China in Myanmar. It seeks to benefit from China's infrastructure and energy projects, including Chau Phou Exclusive Economic Zone, oil and gas pipelines because Chinese investments do not carry any preconditions about human rights or democratic principles. This is even more important for the Myanmar government in the context of Rakhine state security and the Rohingya refugee crisis.

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China has actively supported Naypyidaw's stance on this particular issue. China has often prevented the UN from submitting a resolution to Myanmar addressing records of human rights abuses in Myanmar. Myanmar will continue to maintain the Pauk-Phaw (fraternal) relationship with China (Constantinou; Kerr and Sharp 2016) even as the US-China competition heats up. This actually serves Myanmar's long-held foreign policy, which calls for balancing internal factors while managing external relations independently. Naypyidaw will remain a hot spot for competition between China and the United States. On a recent past basis, the Myanmar government seeks to enjoy its own interests while maintaining a delicate balance in external relations.

OUTLOOK AND IMPLICATIONS

Outlook

Myanmar wants to engage China without giving it outsized leverage. It also hopes the fleeing Rohingya do not create a refugee crisis in Indonesia or Malaysia, both predominantly Muslim members of the bloc. The following are some of the issues that have been analyzed as future prospects.

First, The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (referred to as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor) as the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) is the core component of the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor in the six Belt and Road corridors. Among them, the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor starts from Nanning, Guangxi, China, and Kunming, Yunnan, and ends with Singapore. Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and other countries that run through the Indochina Peninsula are onshore silk roads and sea. The connection area of the Silk Road is a land bridge connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Since the launch of the 'Belt and Road initiative (BRI)', China-Myanmar Economic Corridor has achieved remarkable results in terms of connectivity, economic and trade cooperation, political mutual trust, financial cooperation and cultural exchanges. With the gradual deepening of China-Myanmar political mutual trust, China-Myanmar geopolitical cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative has great potential. Aung San Suu Kyi, state adviser directly headed the business committee to spearhead the BRI related business in China. In 2018, when Aung San Suu Kyi met President Xi Jinping in China, she received a loan of 10 billion yuan (about USD 14.36 billion) from China. Therefore, it is highly likely that the Myitsone Dam construction project, which has been suspended and is not being promoted, will be re-promoted in the future. Since 2011, Myanmar has received significant capital from Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam. On the other hand, the size of China's investment has decreased significantly year by year. China's investment in Greater Myanmar reached $4.3 billion in 2011-2012, falling to $56 million in 2013-2014 and $51 million in 2014-2015.

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However, the atmosphere of these investments has recently changed, as shown in Table 1. At $400 million in 2016-2017, it has re-emerged as one of the three largest investing countries after Singapore and Vietnam, and its investment size has recovered to $1.3 billion in 2017-2018.Myanmar lawmakers warned of high and rising debt to China and urged the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government to repay the loan as soon as possible to avoid a sovereign erosion debt trap. With foreign exchange reserves at a meager US $6.35 billion in 2018 and the national debt estimated at US $10 billion, of which $4 billion is now owed to China. The interest rate on most Chinese loans is a whopping 4.5%, believed to be the highest rate among all the foreign government and financial institutions that Myanmar now owes. Most of Myanmar's foreign debt was accumulated between 1988 and 2011, a period when the country was subjected to Western sanctions imposed against the previous military regime's poor rights record (Lintner 2019). At that time, China was the only major foreign donor to lend generously to an exiled government. Myanmar's international isolation for over 20 years left it heavily indebted to Chinese monetary institutions. Through the Belt and Road Initiative project that China is ambitiously promoting, including a high-speed railroad connecting China's landlocked southern region to a deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu that opens on to the Indian Ocean, that debt load eventually aimed ultimately to facilitate China's grand strategic designs for Myanmar.

Second, Myanmar's huge resources and market potential are favorable factors for its leapfrog development. Myanmar is rich in natural resources such as rice, wood, and fisheries, and rich in natural gas and hydropower resources. Especially, natural gas is the most important source of foreign exchange for export in Myanmar. Myanmar has proven natural gas reserves of 10 trillion cubic feet, and produced 692 billion cubic feet in 2015. It is exported to Thailand and China except for its own use. As an early industrialized country, Myanmar has abundant labor resources, and its demographic dividend has provided strong support for its industrialization development. Myanmar's population reached 53.4 million in 2018, ranking 26th in the world and 5th in Southeast Asia. At present, more than half of the labor force in Myanmar is engaged in agricultural production, 30% of the rural population has no arable land and no source of income, and the potential of labor is huge. A large number of cheap labor is the advantage of developing labor-intensive industries.

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Table 1. Foreign Investment in Myanmar by Country (Source: compiled by author based on DICA data)

COUNTRY	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Australia	-	-	17.896	19.290	-	-
Austria	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bangladesh		-	-	1.077	1.500	-
Brunei	-	-	2.273	18.026	8.074	10.234
Canada	-	2.102	-	5.150	1.360	-
China	**4345.728**	**231.773**	**56.160**	**481.591**	**1395.219**	**634.577**
France	-	-	5360	790	7.340	490
Germany	-	-	-	1.153	10.398	-
Hong Kong	-	84.839	104.004	213.700	251.982	456.372
India	7.300	11.500	26.040	-	10.993	5.000
Indonesia	-	-	-	9.034	9.859	-
Japan	4.318	54.063	55.711	60.423	384.119	42.777
Macau	-	-	-	-	3.640	
Malaysia	51.864	4.324	616.108	21390	21.877	1.779
ROK	25.572	37.942	81.205	66.423	253.904	89.383
Singapore	-	418.233	2300.121	3820..764	2163.963	2409.567
Sri Lanka	-	-	-	-	1.250	
Switzerland	-	-	-	-	-	16.838

The third, the commerce environment has gradually improved. In recent years, with Myanmar's democratization reform, its business environment has become increasingly open. Myanmar's Foreign Investment Law was promulgated in 1988. In May 1989, the Myanmar Foreign Investment Commission announced economic projects that foreign investors can invest in the variety of areas including food, textiles, daily necessities, household goods, leather products and imitation products, transportation vehicles and materials, and construction materials etc. (Tao 2016). After the new government of Myanmar came to power in 2011, it vigorously launched reforms in the economic field, actively introduced foreign capital, and strengthened industrial development. In response to the influx of Western investment, the Myanmar Parliament passed a new Foreign Investment Law in November 2012, replacing the 1988 Foreign Investment Law. The new law allows foreign investment in power, oil and gas, mining, manufacturing, restaurants and tourism, real estate, transportation, telecommunications, construction and other service industries; the Myanmar-foreign joint ventures have abolished the requirement that foreign investment must account for at least 35%. The abolition of the requirement that the proportion of foreign investment in Myanmar-foreign joint ventures not exceed 50% in some restricted areas for 8 years of tax exemption for foreign investors. The Myanmar government announced a five-year national export strategy plan in 2015 to promote exports of rice, beans, aquatic products, rubber, wood and forest products, textiles and clothing, and develop tourism.

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Myanmar is more likely to accept China's participation in the economic corridor, a construction project that links China through Rakhine. The corridor has begun building a $7.3 billion deep-sea port next year at Kyaukpyu, the port city of the Indian Ocean Rakain, by one of China's major construction companies. Pipelines from the port are planned to transport gas and oil via Rakhine to southern China. Kyaukpyu is of considerable strategic and economic value for China as it seeks to speed development of Yunnan and its other inland provinces. That value is centered on the development of a deep-water port and the construction of accompanying road and rail links to supplement the pipelines already running to Kunming. Whether the project also boosts Myanmar's economic growth will depend on the success of the accompanying SEZ, and the terms under which it takes shape (Poling, 2018).

The fourth, China and India will dominate Myanmar's foreign policy stage, and their dealings with the rest of ASEAN will grow during 2018. Sandwiched between two active Asian giants, Nay Pyi Taw will have to balance its relations carefully as India and China vie with each other for greater influence. Most importantly, Myanmar must avoid being sucked into conflict zones in their common areas of influence and know how to duck whenever these two confront one another. In the future, the crisis in Rakhine state will remain a key area where Beijing and New Delhi will continue to compete, displaying goodwill to help their troubled neighbor. Furthermore, they will try to mitigate any repercussions from the growing international condemnation of its handling of the crisis and the myriads of problems caused by the massive exodus to Bangladesh, which is now estimated to number 750,000 people. The international community will continue to step up pressure on Myanmar to accelerate efforts to repatriate more displaced people. But the real problems on the ground still need to be overcome.

The fifth, China will have a special role to play in Myanmar. China's new foreign policy under President Xi Jinping will increase engagement with Nay Pyi Taw in all areas. Since the end of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing has been actively facilitating peace talks and providing humanitarian assistance. The Rohingya crisis presents an excellent opportunity for China to test its diplomacy as never before. Myanmar's relationship with China involves historical and geographical linkages that cannot simply be wished away. Additionally, Myanmar will require Chinese assistance in dealing with important state security objectives like ending ethnic insurgency and human and drug trafficking. China also will have strong economic investments and linkages in Myanmar that need to be considered from a practical point of view. While the present situation in Rakhine state has cast Myanmar, the country's military and Aung San Suu Kyi in a negative light, it will provide China with a window of opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship (Ganesan 2018).

Following the inauguration of the new government in Myanmar, diplomatic relations in response to the reform and opening up and recent Rohingya issues have led to the establishment of a diplomatic strategy as a way to avoid criticism of the international

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community, decrease investment, and the resulting isolation of the international community. In that regard, Myanmar's future diplomatic relations with China have forced to change. But, traditional Myanmar's foreign policy is very likely to maintain its tone, as it is realism, that is, a non-aligned neutral path if there are no geopolitical changes, such as the disappearance of nearby powers. The current democratic government has abandoned the international community's voluntary process of self-reliance in order to maintain its government during the military government, and to maintain economic and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries at a certain level. It should be noted that on the security side, it will seek to take the initiative to structure the order around what can benefit the country.

Implications

Myanmar is located at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia. It is connected to India and China at its northwest and northeastern borders respectively. Additionally, its reserves of energy resources, emerging consumer class, youthful population, and its access to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean make it an important stakeholder in the Asia-Pacific (and Indo-Pacific) region. Myanmar has figured in the foreign policy discussions of most of its neighbors, including China, India, and the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Kundu 2018). Myanmar's internal conflict spurred a new approach with China, which was caused by U.S. sanctions and the resulting Myanmar government's search for a breakthrough.

First of all, the Government of Myanmar will have the opportunity to reform its image from economic interests and the international community by pursuing diplomatic cooperation with China. However, it can have a significant impact on the US-led Asia-Pacific strategy. This is because it could have a long-term strategic impact on India, Myanmar's neighboring country. By agreeing to build CMEC as part of China's BRI project, China could expand the CMEC by including Bangladesh. Myanmar may seek new cooperation as part of its BRI initiative with neighboring Bangladesh. In this case, the development situation in India, which hinders their role in the surrounding area, can be problematic. As strategic projects grow in Qiac, the broader Bengal Bay area will become more interested in Beijing's calculations as China's propensity for securing these projects grows and expands. Therefore, it is important for the United States to present Myanmar with a balanced leverage against china's move, along with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific strategy. For example, Japan now plays a key role in Myanmar's strategic infrastructure projects. India and Japan have agreed to jointly develop connectivity projects in the region, including Myanmar. This need for strategic cooperation can have a greater effect when Myanmar's fortunes are limited and difficult, as tensions with Myanmar and the West are intensifying. The US-China interaction is likely to remain a problem for Myanmar, as it is possible that the international community in Myanmar will not be able to resolve its image on racial issues in the near

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future, and Myanmar is likely to attempt to change its strategic approach in the future, taking into account national interests in both the United States and China. As Western countries move away from Myanmar due to the Rohingya issue, they will increasingly try to emphasize the importance of Naypyidaw's diplomatic balance. The priority decision of the national peace process for the economic development of the Aung San Suu Kyi government may be argued that it could be a strategic mistake because Myanmar has made it dependent on China when dealing with ethnic militant groups on the China-Myanmar border. In fact, this strategy minimizes the government's ability to use international goodwill for the necessary economic development. Naypyidaw's reliance on China to deal with ethnic issues is drawing China into designing China's strategic design as Western countries take an increasingly difficult stance on Myanmar's internal conflicts. But to be fair to the Aung San Suu Kyi government, the priority of national peace has its advantages in that it provides an opportunity to find solutions to the country's ethnic problems. The Government of Myanmar underestimated the complexity of the problem, but the aim was to find a solution to the problem decades ago in the new era of democratization.

China's active participation in ethnic conflicts in Myanmar for six years has not been successful in minimizing militarized conflicts between Myanmar's military and ethnic minorities along the Myanmar border or promoting Myanmar's peace process. In fact, there are concerns that a new military conflict may unfold in recent years, with new political or military alliances such as the Northern Alliance or the UWSA-led FPNCC, as well as new clashes between ethnic militants and Myanmar troops, creating a new level of ethnic conflict.
Actually Myanmar shares delicate relationships with both China and the United States and has been benefitting from this position for decades. Myanmar's relations with China have primarily been based on asymmetric power equations, which are proving to be beneficial for Myanmar (Kundu 2018).Under these circumstances, the United States needs to make efforts to improve diplomatic relations with Myanmar from a realistic standpoint in order to smoothly pursue the Indo-Pacific strategy and to deal with China's aggressive diplomatic strategy toward Myanmar. The US will require strategies quite unlike those that are familiar from the past. Above all else, Washington will need patience, subtlety, strategic flexibility, and the ability to hold the competing instruments of engagement, hedging, and balancing in a reflexive equilibrium that is capable of adapting rapidly, while at the same time rebuilding the domestic capacities required to sustain America's current preeminence in the Indo-Pacific region and actually increase its margins of advantage to the extent possible.

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CONCLUSION

This paper examines the new foreign strategic relationship between Myanmar and China since Rohingya crisis. In particular it has investigated how Myanmar's foreign strategy toward China was changing as the crucial first stage of negotiations.

The in-depth analysis of Myanmar's foreign policy since the Rohingya issue gives a new level of insight into how Myanmar's foreign strategy dealt with the international response and relations with China. The Rohingya issue have caused the West to re-impose limited sanctions and allowed China to reaffirm its financial leverage over the country. When the international community recognized the suppression against Rohingya Muslims as 'ethnic cleansing' and held the UN Security Council, China was the only country to support the Myanmar government who suppressed Rohingya. Since then, the Chinese government has publicly supported Myanmar's military operations.

Also the results regarding the future prospects show five facts through an analysis. Actually from a Chinese perspective for Geo-environment, Myanmar is an important country along China's ongoing 'Belt and Road Initiative'. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor is the core of the six main economic corridors of the BRI. At the same time, Myanmar is also in a complex geographically fragmented zone. For many years, Myanmar has been deeply affected by multiple forces such as great power struggles and local armed divisions. In the context of the 'Belt and Road Initiative', China-Myanmar geo-cooperation has broad potential. Taking the common interests of China and Myanmar as the starting point and the China-Myanmar economic corridor as the axis, China and Myanmar can focus on priority cooperation areas such as infrastructure, industrial development, economic and trade cooperation. China-Myanmar cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative has great potential. It is highly likely that the construction projects including Myitsone Dam related to the BRI will be re-promoted in the future. In addition, China and Myanmar are putting much effort into security cooperation in geopolitical terms.

Subsequently, we found out that Myanmar's future reform and development need China's support, while China needs Myanmar's cooperation for maintaining the stability of the Southwest border area. Myanmar is regarded as 'the last virgin land in Asia'. The future of China–Myanmar cooperation is bright, which will also promote Myanmar's development. China and Myanmar have solid mutual political trust and strong economic complementarities, which determine that China will play a very important and irreplaceable role in Myanmar's future transition. Myanmar is now emerging as a new country that will temporarily become a powerhouse of great powers.

Taking advantage of this ambience, Myanmar will continue its efforts to build active diplomatic cooperation with China, as part of overcoming difficult situations at home and abroad. In the future, China will have a special role to play in Myanmar. China's new foreign policy under President Xi Jinping will increase engagement with Myanmar in all areas.

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Myanmar's relationship with China involves historical and geographical linkages that cannot simply be wished away. Myanmar also will require Chinese assistance in dealing with important state security objectives. Like saying 'Misery loves company', both Myanmar and China are looking for a change in their diplomatic strategy. 

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