

The US-Myanmar Rapprochement Reconsidered: Realignment or Non-Alignment?

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Abstract

This article examines Myanmar's alignment behaviour and the attempt to broaden its international outreach, particularly the opening chapter for a special relationship with the US. It mainly explores Myanmar attitudes and approaches with a particular emphasis on the changes that have taken place under the USDP government from 2011 to 2016. The US-Myanmar relations radically changing to a bilateral relationship through Obama's rapprochement policy vis-à-vis Thein Sein's engagement policy. In so doing, was Myanmar's policy guided by international concerns or domestic politics? And why and how did Myanmar's foreign policy began to embrace the US and the West as well as China? This article argues that Myanmar's policy toward the US is not 'realigned', instead, Myanmar de-aligned with China in favour of a non-aligned policy.

Keywords: US-Myanmar Relations, Rapprochement Policy, Realignment, Non-alignment.

1. Introduction

After a half-century absence, Myanmar¹ has returned to the international stage, normalizing both its domestic politics and diplomatic relations with the West. Particularly, bilateral relations between the United States (US) and Myanmar improved starting at the end of 2008 when President Barack Obama announced his Asian pivot, which entailed a pragmatic policy toward Myanmar. In Myanmar, meanwhile,

General Than Shwe's congratulatory message in response to Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election gave a strong signal for revitalizing relations between the two countries (Qingrun 2010). This resulted in the US-Myanmar relations radically changing to a bilateral relationship. At the same time as Thein Sein's re-engagement policy of reintegrating Myanmar into the international community, Obama's Asian pivot led to a positive milestone within the Union Solidarity and Development Party's (USDP) administration (Myoe 2016). The Thawing of relations could be seen in ways such as the US gradually lifting sanctions against Myanmar.²

This article aims to explore Myanmar's realignment policy toward the US and Myanmar attitudes and approaches with a particular emphasis on the changes that have taken place under the USDP government from 2011 to 2015. Before 2011, many domestic and foreign observers claimed that Myanmar was a *de facto* client state of China. The military regime heavily depended on China on the political and economic affairs during two decades of Western sanctions (Bert 2004). When the USDP government led by President Thein Sein came into power in 2011, some scholars claim that Myanmar realigned with the US based on both internal and external factors. Internally, Myanmar's realignment was mainly concerned with regime survival as the main motivation for political reform. Externally, this reform was caused by the growing influence of China (Bunte and Portela 2012; Bunte and Dosch 2015; Haacke 2016; Myoe 2016).

Meanwhile, some scholars argue that the role of international concerns were important in shifting Myanmar's policy (Kipgen 2013). The term 'realignment' requires clarification of how Myanmar's alignment policy toward the US is pursued. Realignment posits two major reasons: "coercion, conflict of interest and strategies, and changes in domestic authority and in power relationship". The best example of this case is the shifting alliances of Italy in the changing conditions in both World Wars (Wilkins 2011, p.74; Liska 1962, p.56). Thus, the existing literature on Myanmar's non-alignment tends to attribute the decision to the desire to "balance" against the overwhelming presence and overbearing influence of China by *realigning* herself to the US in the theoretical backdrop of neo-realist proposition of "balancing" vs. "bandwagoning." According to the existing literature of Myanmar's foreign policy, Myanmar has persistently and consistently practiced the policy of non-alignment constructed on internal and external security concerns since independence (Johnstone 1963).

This article examines Myanmar's alignment behaviour and the attempt to broaden its international outreach, particularly the opening chapter for a special relationship with the US. This relationship aims to give Myanmar more options outside of China's influence while still intending to prove Myanmar's persistent and consistent choice of non-alignment. In this article, it is argued that Myanmar's policy toward the US is not 'realigned', instead, Myanmar de-aligned with China in favour of a non-aligned policy. In so doing, was Myanmar's policy guided by international concerns or domestic politics? And why and how did Myanmar's foreign policy began to embrace the US and the West as well as China?

This article is divided into two main parts. First, the evolution of the US-Myanmar relationship is reviewed by examining the ups and downs of bilateral diplomatic relations in a historical perspective followed by discussions on whether the shifting policy is explained through its domestic politics or international concerns. The second part analyses Myanmar's foreign policy through three core principles embedded in the constitution, which are not just lip-service, but guiding principles. Following K.J. Holsti's (1971) classical model of foreign policy, the article showcases Myanmar's foreign policy orientations with specific objectives and then its foreign policy in actions. Finally, this article explains how Myanmar's foreign policy developed and even strengthened its commitment to the policy of non-alignment by normalizing relations particularly with the US as well as fostering regional integration and implementing domestic reforms of democratic practices.

2. The US-Myanmar Relations: From Distant to Close?

This section emphasizes how the US-Myanmar relations have developed from strange relations to affinity. The historic ties of the two countries go back as far as 1857, during the days of President James Buchanan and King Min Don, when the two nations opened diplomatic relations. The US was one of the earliest to recognize the independence of Myanmar on the 19th of September 1947, even before the official independence on the 4th of January 1948. Such early recognition may have reflected the fact that the US had used Myanmar as a base for its military operations against the Japanese forces during World War Two (WW II), the geo-strategic value that the US diplomats and strategists noticed during the world war, as well as the growing strategic value during

the Cold War. The US supported the new independent nation in becoming a member of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) in 1948, a founding member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1952 (Martin 2013, p.5). Then US Vice President Richard Nixon diplomatically visited Myanmar in 1953, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles visited in 1955, and Premier U Nu of Myanmar followed these with a reciprocal visit (Clymer 2015).

Despite the disputes over Kuomintang (KMT) in the early 1950s, and General Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962 and the ensuing isolationist policies of his Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP), the bilateral relations remained stable, if not warm. The U.S. recognized Myanmar as one of the original beneficiaries of its Generalized System of Preference (GSP) program in 1976 and granted the status of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) to Myanmar. Myanmar was also supported by the US for the provision of developmental assistance by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). Furthermore, the two countries still maintained close military-to-military relations and also continued to develop the program of drug eradication in Myanmar until 1988 (Marin 2013, p.6). On balance, the US-Myanmar bilateral relations until the late 1980s were neither exceptionally close, nor particularly distant.

However, starting from 1988, President Reagan's administration suspended the US aid for an anti-narcotics program and imposed an embargo on arms sales to Myanmar. The US policy towards Myanmar became characterized by "cascading sanctions,"³ with the imposing of new sanctions on top of existing sanctions, as Myanmar's government refused to comply with the demands placed on the earlier sanctions. The sanctions demanded the regime change by transferring power to the victorious party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in the 1990 general elections and/or respect of human rights by releasing Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of NLD, from house arrest. As a result, the US-Myanmar relations fell to a historic low, filled with mutual suspicions and hostilities. It may be aptly demonstrated that the bilateral diplomatic relationship was lowered to the *charge d'affaires* level in 1989 and was not restored until the 13th of January 2013, two years after the new semi-civilian government was formed in 2011 (Clymer 2015). Since then, the US-Myanmar ties became normalized for their specific interests in political and economic affairs which illustrate in the following section how these two countries came closer than before.

2.1 Opening a New Chapter of the US-Myanmar Relations

The turning point between the two countries can be seen distinctly on March 31, 2011. A quasi-civilian government, led by President Thein Sein, was the first constitutional government established since 1988, when an extra-constitutional military government, called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), took power. Eight months later, on November 30, 2011, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton paid a visit to Myanmar, the first time for a US Secretary of State to do so in more than half a century. From 2010 to 2013, the two countries enjoyed a honeymoon period that saw the exchange of reciprocal states visits by the heads of states, Presidents Obama and Thein Sein and the setting of positive milestones in the bilateral relationship that had remained uneasy for more than two decades.

Obama's Rapprochement Policy vis-à-vis Thein Sein's Engagement Policy

Obama's policy toward Myanmar dramatically improved through easing sanctions in 2012-2013. The rapprochement policy targeted not only on easing sanctions but also adopted guiding principles to implement the US development resources with a focus on Myanmar's democracy and governance, peace and security, humanitarian assistance, health and economic development. In 2012, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which had been halted in 1989, was re-implemented to assist the country's development. In education and economic development sectors, Washington initiated the Fulbright academic exchange program and cultivated youth leadership programs such as the Youth South East Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). As Washington removed a series of economic and financial sanctions in 2016, the US government encouraged investment in Myanmar. Starting from 2012, the US supported \$60 million including \$1 million for peace education. In 2013, the US provided \$68 million including \$18 million for the 2015 election, and \$11 million for democratic practice and law enforcement. The overall US assistance for Myanmar's economic, political and social development was increased more than triple, for instances, the aids in 2015 reached \$96.7 million increasing from \$38.6 million in 2010 (Wong 2018).

Regarding the easing of the US sanctions, the remaining sanctions were lifted after Suu Kyi first visited as State Counsellor of Myanmar to Washington in September 2016, marking another milestone in the US-Myanmar relations. During her visit, a joint statement was issued lifting the executive order-based framework of the Myanmar

sanctions while restoring trade benefits to Myanmar under the GSP. On October 7, 2016, President Obama signed the termination of the Burma Sanctions Program, which included seven executive orders involving financial and blocking sanctions, investment and import sanctions, and others (Office of the Press Secretary 2016). Obama's policy toward Myanmar was reactive, engaging an "action-for-action" strategy to meet a series of Myanmar's domestic political, economic, social and administrative reforms. These reforms consisted of peace building for cease-fire agreements with eight major ethnic groups, freedom of press, release of political prisoners, and more. In response, Washington recognized the positive progress undertaken to further reform (Wong 2018). In addition, Thein Sein's commitment to "good governance and clean government" was reflected in empowering local communities and civil society through transparency and accountability. For instance, Myanmar's National Human Rights Commission Law in March 2014 was enacted. These reform processes⁴ and Obama's direct engagement policy led both countries' foreign policy to shift for the better.

In brief, bilateral relationship during the 2011-2016 period underwent dramatic improvement thanks to Obama's rapprochement policy and Thein Sein's positive engagement. Despite having a series of improvements between the two countries, some sensitive issues such as the Rakhine crisis, ethnic reconciliation in the peace building process, and civil-military relations continue to cause problems in improving relations, largely due to the US's policy prioritization of democratic values and human rights issues (Haacke 2015). Finally, the two countries managed to align their respective policies: for the US, rebalancing its Asian policy to change the regional context of the Asia-Pacific arena, for Myanmar, reintegrating into the international community. Myanmar's re-engagement was primarily provoked by the country's domestic political and economic problems, particularly, domestic political instabilities and growing the anti-Chinese sentiment with increasing economic difficulties. As a result, the leaders of the military regime had to open up to heal the country's economy and to reduce its independence on China.

2.2 Re-examinations of Myanmar's Alignment Behaviour: Two Key Explanations

Myanmar's re-engagement policy towards the US was provoked by internal and external factors. As late as May 2008 during the Cyclone Nargis crisis, Nay Pyi Taw still refused to accept American aid and under American sanctions, the Junta sang "economic

sanctions do not matter.”⁵ During the Nargis disaster, the military regime adopted the 2008 Constitution through National Referendum, and held elections as promised in 2010. Then, President Thein Sein was inaugurated in 2011 and Myanmar normalized relations with the US. The dramatic re-examination of Myanmar’s alignment strategy has the two key explanations: the domestic political and economic explanations, and the international diplomatic explanations. Although none of these competing explanations will provide the complete picture by itself, and combinations of these provide a robust explanation.

(1) *Domestic Political and Economic Explanations*: As Myanmar suffered international sanctions from 1988 to 2010, the military regimes economic survival and regime security relied on the support of China. Domestic political instabilities with growing anti-Chinese sentiment and increasing economic difficulties led the regime to open up the country for economic recovery to reduce dependence on China. Myanmar remains one of the poorest nations in the world, while other regional countries, including Vietnam, thrive; Myanmar needs to get away from the sanctions placed by the West. Due to economic sanctions and legacies of the ill-fated Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), Myanmar’s economy was one of the weakest in the region, and the military government found the need to normalize relations with the West so as to lift economic sanctions. Regarding the security issues along the China-Myanmar border, the military government was aware of growing concern over the influence of China in Myanmar’s internal affairs, particularly the crisis between the Kokang ethnic armed group and the military in 2009 (Myoe 2015, p.32).

(2) *International Political Explanations*: Regarding the international diplomatic explanation, the military government was pressured during the 1990 elections, with a focus on democracy and human rights issues including Aung San Suu Kyi’s (Suu Kyi) house arrest after the 8888 uprising. These international pressures through the US-led western countries’ sanctions had forced Myanmar into dependence on China from the early 1990s. For example, China helped shield the military government together with Russia to veto in 2007, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions against Myanmar (Steinberg and Fan 2012). As a result, reliance on China led to the overwhelming presence and overbearing influence of China, which the military regime

wanted to balance by realigning with the US. Myanmar's policy shift was not seeking to be independent of China, but rather towards a rebalancing of Myanmar's policy of non-alignment as explained in the following section.

3. Explaining Myanmar's Foreign Policy of Non-Alignment

Myanmar's foreign policy in general and non-alignment policy in particular have evolved over seven decades and nine governments.⁶ Since independence in 1948, Myanmar governments have persistently and consistently chosen a non-alignment strategy without breaking the main theme of foreign policy principles. Moreover, there is no single term - 'neutrality', 'neutralism', 'non-alignment', 'isolationism' or 'independence'- for Myanmar's foreign policy but together these expressions could "fully express" Myanmar's basic foreign policy from 1948 to the late 1980s (Than 2010,p.450). It is true that Myanmar's foreign policy under U Nu's parliamentary government emphasized "neutralism"⁷. However, the concept of non-alignment was set in 1948, when U Nu declared, 'of the three great powers, the United Kingdom, the US, and the Soviet Union, Myanmar should be in friendly relations with all three' (Myat 2021, p.4).

Since then, Myanmar's foreign policy has headed in one direction—non-alignment—while zigzagging between activism and passivism, or engagement and isolation. U Nu's years of foreign policy activism added a significant position in international affairs such as supporting the UNSC's resolution on the Korean War in 1950, participating in the agreement on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence⁸ in 1954 with India and China, serving as an initiated member of the Bandung Conference in 1955, and joining as a founder member of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961. In the following years, the Revolutionary Council under General Ne Win took a strong isolationist turn in its "non-aligned" policy stance by adopting the ill-fated Burmese Way of Socialism, with an autarkic economic policy and a xenophobic⁹ attitude to the outside world.

The military regime under Ne Win, the BSPP government, officially promulgated an "independent" foreign policy which upholds the principles of peaceful coexistence in the 1974 Constitution (Article 26, emphasis added). The new military regimes that had come to power after the 1988 uprisings, the State Law and Order Restoration

Council (SLORC) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), tried to weaken the isolationist policy, particularly, the “independent and active” policy was described as Myanmar’s foreign policy (Than 2010). Although the military regime faced international isolation by the Western countries, Myanmar maintained close diplomatic ties with some major powers (Egreteau and Jagan 2018). The country fully returned to international society when the quasi-civilian government of Thein Sein normalised its relations with the US in 2011. Under the 2008 Constitution, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar practices an *independent, active and non-aligned* foreign policy (emphasis added). Moreover, President Thein Sein emphasized that Myanmar’s foreign policy in his inaugural speech:

From the post-independence period to date, successive governments practiced different political and economic policies and concepts. But, regarding foreign affairs, they all exercised an independent, non-aligned, and active foreign policy, and dealt with other countries in line with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence...Our government will also adhere to this honourable foreign policy.¹⁰

Then, the new civilian-led government, with de facto leader Suu Kyi, continued a non-aligned foreign policy of previous military regimes (Myoe 2017). In front of foreign diplomats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nay Pyi Taw, she said “since we became independent in 1948, we have adopted a policy of neutrality and universal friendship” (The Global New Light of Myanmar 2016). Such an unwavering choice of non-alignment policy has been rooted in Myanmar’s foreign policy orientations particularly with three core principles explained in the next section.

3.1 Myanmar Foreign Policy Between Objectives and Orientations

Being an independent and sovereign state, the primary *objectives* of Myanmar’s foreign policy are “to protect and promote the country’s national interests in [its]relations with other independent countries,” as well as other foreign actors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2004). In order to protect the country’s national interests, the successive governments have embraced at least three major objectives: national security, economic development, and leveraging the regional and global community for international standing. Based on

these objectives, Myanmar's foreign policy *orientations* have been formulated around the three considerations centred on geopolitical, domestic, and ideational factors which reach towards external and internal security dynamics with political and strategic cultures, religious and historical experiences. Thus, the three key determinants factors need to describe why Myanmar has practiced non-alignment as the country's foreign policy principles through careful analysis.

First, Myanmar's geostrategic location is at the centre of Myanmar's security concerns and its immediate relationship with neighbouring countries is critical. With a population of around 52 million and a small economy, Myanmar is sandwiched between China and India, the two most populous and the fastest growing economies in the world. With over 2,000 km of coastline along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, proximity to the western entrance of the Malacca Strait, situated at the gateway to Southeast Asia and South Asia, and a direct linkage to the Indian Ocean, Myanmar is a geographically significant country in Asia. While the choice of non-alignment was determined by geopolitics, domestic security considerations should also be considered as the second factor. Being a newly independent country, the government had confronted two types of insurgencies, an ethnic-based insurgency and an ideology-based communist insurgency (Johnstone 1963; Myoe 2020). For instances, the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) was founded by the support of Beijing (CIA Report 1950; Lintner 2018), and the Karen National Union¹¹ was backed by the Thai and the US emerging alongside the Thai-Myanmar border in January 1949 (Myint Kyi 2019; South 2011).

While the geopolitical and domestic factors are key considerations of Myanmar's non-alignment, the ideational factors are a foundational element in which political philosophy and strategic cultures¹² are intertwined. The political philosophy, shaped by Buddhism, is also one of the key domestic factors that has a significant influence on the formulation of Myanmar foreign policy - similar to the influences of Hinduism in Indian and Confucianism in Chinese political philosophies. Furthermore, although the Five Principles is known to have originated in India, it is rooted in the Five Precepts (*Panchsheel*) that are key moral principles related to Buddhism. Therefore, Myanmar was more than eager to join the Declaration of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954, together with India and China.¹³ While "self-isolation" was derived from the traditional belief of "self-reliance" in Buddhist philosophy, security concerns of the state's "external behaviour" plays a prominent role in shaping Myanmar's

non-alignment (Than 1999). This strategic lens has been deeply rooted in Myanmar's political leaders since before independence. For this reason, Myanmar has not been involved in any military alliances both bilaterally and multilaterally. In this way, the political philosophy together with the strategic culture has reflected Myanmar's non-alignment strategy through the ideational factors. Together with these foreign policy considerations, the three core principles, independent, active and non-alignment, reflect how Myanmar's attitudes and approaches and foreign policy actions.

The core principles of Myanmar's foreign policy expose three factors which have remained persistent over time. The first core principle is an independent foreign policy which is part of the "national character".¹⁴ The term "independent" simply means that the government of Myanmar will choose what best serves its own national interests on any international issue. Myanmar leaders insist that no one will tell them what to do in their own country which is a point of significant pride for the country. The second core principle is an active foreign policy which is hard to pinpoint. A minimum understanding of the term "active" is non-isolation (Pedersen 2014, p.60). In accordance with Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one of the basic principles of Myanmar's foreign policy is "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".¹⁵ Thus, Myanmar was granted membership in the UN soon after its independence in 1948. It is clear that the country enjoys multilateralism and contributes to world peace. A good example for Myanmar's active principle is the U Nu years such as Myanmar actively supported the UNSC's resolution on the Korean War in 1950.

While the two principles of independence and active foreign policy are fundamental aspects of Myanmar's foreign policy, the third core principle of non-alignment is strategically not giving commitments to military alliances with great powers. Myanmar's choice of non-alignment is based on three actors which supports its choice for increasing the nation's strength. Given the internal security threat of civil war, the rivalry of great powers for control of Myanmar and the post-Cold War power rivalry between China and the US, ideational matters of anti-colonial sentiment and the moral concept of the 'middle way' and the right 'judgement' on each issue, non-alignment has been one of the best foreign policy choices for Myanmar. Successive governments and constitutions have incrementally strengthened Myanmar's commitment to non-

alignment policy. Indeed, the latest Constitution of 2008 incorporates the principle of “independent, active and *non-aligned* foreign policy” and states that “no foreign troops shall be permitted to be deployed in the territory of the Union”. In line with the non-alignment policy, Myanmar adopts friendly relations with all nations based on the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” (Myoe 2020).

Overall, the successive governments try to follow the guidelines of non-alignment policy, such as maintaining friendly relations with all nations, avoiding alignment with any power blocs, accepting economic aids without strings attached and participating actively in world affairs. These principles have become a tradition to pursue due to the domestic conditions which remain fairly unchanged even today.

3.2. Myanmar’s Non-Alignment in Practice: Realignment or Non-alignment?

This section mainly explores Myanmar’s policy toward the US whether Myanmar performed the policy of realignment or non-alignment. Observing Myanmar’s foreign policy under the USDP government, Myanmar practiced a non-aligned foreign policy in terms of declaratory and practical expressions through normalization processes. This normalization was the significant foreign policy practices including the reintegrating into the international community; enhancing regional integration; and performing domestic reforms by implementing the democratic practices.

Thein Sein’s government first reintegrated into the international community by balancing major powers, particularly the US and the Western countries. Under the two decades of international isolation and sanctions by the West, Myanmar was forced to align with China by receiving economic and diplomatic supports. Indeed, the military government had no choice but to embrace China from 1989-2011. But the inclination to the Chinese side did not erode the desire for non-alignment, as the embracing was temporary and only as a specific circumstance of sanctions. Under the context of reducing its dependence on China, the Thein Sein government moved to rebalance with the major powers, particularly with the US (Myoe 2015). Myanmar’s relations with Japan, India, Russia, and the European Union are also significant in this context, however, these are beyond the limit of this article. In an effort to get the international community to respond, Myanmar hosted state visits from major powers including British Prime Minister David Cameron, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair

(Haacke 2016).

Second, the accelerating regional integration and active policy of Myanmar's non-alignment was a prominent point of Myanmar as a Chair of ASEAN Summit in 2014. Moreover, ASEAN awarded Myanmar its 2013 Southeast Asian Games' host country. Dealing with Myanmar's non-alignment behaviour, Thein Sein made twenty-two official visits around the world within two years. The Thein Sein government was cautious of Chinese influence, so it strived to diversify foreign relations with her neighbours across the region and regional organizations like ASEAN, BIMSTEC and Greater Mekong Subregion, etc. For instance, his first state visits were to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in March 2011 and some prominent state visits are illustrated in the following table.

Table 1 State Visits of President Thein Sein (2011-2013)

No.	Dates	Countries	Remarks
1	March 2011	Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia	To seek support for 2014-ASEAN Summit Chair
2	May 2011	China	Economic cooperation
3	October 2011	India	Official Visit
4	February 2012	Singapore	MoU on Singapore-Myanmar Technical Cooperation
5	September 2012	New York	Attended the 67 th UN General Assembly
6	October 2012	South Korea	Official Visit
7	November 2012	Laos	9 th Asia-Europe Meeting
8	November 2012	Cambodia	Attend the 7 th East Asia Summit
9	February 25- March 8, 2013	Italy, Norway, Austria, Finland and Belgium	10-Day Official Visit
10	May 2013	United States	Trade and Investment Cooperation
11	July 2013	UK and France	Official Visits
12	September 2013	China	Attend the 10 th China-ASEAN Expo
13	October 2013	Brunei	Attend the 23 rd ASEAN Summit
14	December 2013	Philippines	MoU on Cooperation in Food Security Summit
15	December 2013	Japan	Attend ASEAN-Japan Summit, Japan-Mekong Summit

Source: The New Light of Myanmar 2011-2013.

According to table 1, Thein Sein's policy on the rebalancing international community and promoting regional integrations was significant for normalizing Myanmar's foreign relations during 2011-2013. Enjoying state visits across the world, Thein Sein attempted to enhance regional cooperation and economic bilateral relationships which are heavily weighted in Myanmar's favour. Thirdly, Thein Sein's comprehensive reforms was a significant steppingstone for the normalizing process of bilateral ties between the US and Myanmar (Bunte and Dosch 2015). Myanmar government initiated four major reforms, namely political, economic, social, and administrative mechanism reforms (Sein 2016). The USDP government laid down the foundation for remarkable democratic transitions to create a new democracy and have created a better political environment in the country. These reform processes intended to improve the US-Myanmar relations, as the US policy toward Myanmar was based on a tic-for-tac strategy and in so doing, Thein Sein's policy toward the US resulted in the easing of sanctions by the US, as well as the British and EU sanctions on investment and financial aids in May 2012.

During Thein Sein's presidency, there were two distinct events marked as turning points in bilateral relations with Myanmar's giant immediate neighbour, China. First, on 30th September 2011, President Thein Sein announced the suspension of the Myintsone Hydropower Project¹⁶ for the duration of his term. The announcement was a shock for both the people of Myanmar as well as international observers who viewed the military governments as being heavily reliant on Beijing. Second, the meaning of "independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy" was put to the test when Myanmar finally became the chair country of ASEAN in 2014. Myanmar was hosting not just ASEAN Summits, but also ASEAN pluses, and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Pressures were mounting from various participants with respect to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, where three members of ASEAN, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia were disputing China's claim to the area, and a superpower member to EAS, the US, was in conflict with China over freedom of navigation. In 2012, Cambodia as the chair of ASEAN, abstained from the issue by not including the issue in the agenda under pressure from China. Myanmar, heavily dependent on China politically, diplomatically and economically, chose the way contrary to her apparent interests. The issues were included in the agenda against the wishes of Beijing (Sun 2014).¹⁷ Moreover, Myanmar's positive engagement policy toward the US as well as her diversified foreign

relations with the Western countries grew closer in political and economic ties during Thein Sein's administration.

4. Conclusion

In accordance with the new trends of international transformation in the post-Cold War period, the quasi-civilian Thein Sein government also reiterated Myanmar's position on "independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy". Thein Sein's foreign policy of "non-alignment" has been highlighted in the achievement of Myanmar's foreign policy goals towards friendly relationships with the US and all other world nations. Together with Obama's rapprochement policy, Myanmar's domestic political, economic, and social reforms made significant progress in its bilateral relationship with the US from 2011 to 2016. President Thein Sein made progress on democracy and human rights issues with a series of reforms including fair elections in 2012 and 2015. Meanwhile, Obama's policy changed as he rediscovered the strategic importance of Myanmar in the context of the rise of China. Domestic factors lessened thanks to negotiations over the release of Suu Kyi. The highest point of the relationship was President Thein Sein's visit to Washington in May 2013, becoming the first Myanmar head of state to visit the US since General Ne Win in 1966. Obama managed to overcome congressional resistance, easing sanctions and trying to build good relations through his action-for-action approach.

In brief, the US-Myanmar rapprochement under the Thein Sein administration was based on domestic political and economic considerations as well as international concerns. Myanmar's *realignment* turned into normalization through her traditional non-alignment. It is because of Myanmar's security considerations with geopolitics, political and strategic cultures, colonial experiences, and Buddhist philosophy that have inoculated Myanmar against seeking alignment with any major powers to implement the bandwagoning strategy that will inevitably involve loss of autonomy. Thus, successive Myanmar governments have consistently implemented the policy of non-alignment in line with the foreign policy objectives, orientations, and practices. Indeed, Thein Sein's policy shifted from China to the West, particularly toward the US as can be clearly seen as the policy of pragmatic, principled and positive engagement. From this special relationship, Myanmar gained major interests such as bargaining

leverage with China, the lifting of sanctions and gaining more aid. Moreover, Myanmar shows an intent to prove the persistent and consistent choice of non-alignment strategy by diversifying foreign relations through the regional and international community. Overall, the policy of non-alignment in practice under the Thein Sein presidency provides evidence of successful foreign policy practice through reintegration with Western countries, as well as hosting a chair country of the ASEAN Summit. Therefore, Myanmar's policy toward the US under the Thein Sein government can be seen as *de-alignment* from China, to achieve her ultimate goal of *non-alignment*.

1 Although the term "Myanmar" was included in the local expression of the title of the nation ever since its first constitution in 1947, the conventional English expression of "Burma" was kept in the official English title until 1989 when the SLORC changed it to "Myanmar". The change reflected the fact that "Burma" was the name of but one, albeit the largest, of 135 ethnic groups composing the "Union" of Myanmar and maintaining the union has been the most daunting challenge of the country. Confusion in regard to the name was exacerbated as the US, in defiance of the military regime and in deference to Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1991, refused to use Myanmar and continued to use Burma. After 2013, official documents of the US began to use Myanmar as the official name. In this writing, Myanmar is used throughout.

2 "Termination of Emergency with Respect to the Actions and Policies of the Government of Burma," terminated the national emergency, revoked E.O.s 13047, 13310, 13448, 13464, 13619, and 13651, and waived financial and blocking sanctions in the Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008. As a result, the economic and financial sanctions on Burma administered by OFAC are no longer in effect. For more detailed reference, see US Treasury Department. *Office of Public Affairs*, October 7, 2016.

3 The most distinctive cascading sanctions were the prohibition of new investment in 1997, the rejections of imports and the US banking system to Myanmar in 2003, and the restrictions on Jade and ruby imports in 2008, etc.

4 President Thein Sein's reform processes are described in detail, "New Democratic State and the President Thein Sein", written in Myanmar language by former Minister Soe Thein, Ministry of No. 2 Industries under President Thein Sein administration, 2018.

5 This song was broadcasted from the state owned media for nearly two decades, by propagating that the country was rich in natural resources and Myanmar did not care about these Western sanctions.

6 Myanmar experienced nine periods of political development: (1) the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League government under Prime Minister U Nu (1948–1958); (2) the caretaker government (1958–1960); (3) the Union Party government under Prime Minister U Nu (1960–1962); (4) the same military regime under Ne Win, but with different names of government: the Revolutionary Council (1962–1974) and (5) the Burmese Socialist Program Party government (1974–1988); (6) similar military rule under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government (1988–1997); (7) SLORC renamed as the State Peace and Development Council government (1997–2011); (8) the government of President Thein Sein under the new constitution adopted in 2010 (2011–2016); and (9) the civilian government of de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi from 2016 to present.

7 The concept of Myanmar's neutralism can be seen in more detail in James Barrington, 1958 and William C. Johnstone, 1963.

8 Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence or *Panchsheel* (Sanskrit: *panch*-five, *sheel*-virtues) includes (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) mutual non-interference; (4) equality and mutual benefit; and (5) peaceful co-existence. These principles are well-known in world civilization for international conduct and they can be called five precepts of political conduct and these

were first formulated by Chinese Vice-Minister of foreign affairs and the Indian ambassador to China for an agreement over the Tibet issue in April 1954.

9 The concept of xenophobia is significant characteristic reflected from the political value of ‘autonomy’ which can be learned during the colonial period. Most of the Burmese intellectuals sensed deeply humiliated staying under the alien rule. Therefore, this sentiment encouraged nationalist idea and xenophobia nature within the society of people’s view in common, and the political actors in particular. In order to protect changing society under the alien administration, this xenophobia behaviour can be learned under Ne Win administration. As he thought foreigners, particularly Westerners whom they imagine to be the capitalist agents to destroy his way of Burmese socialism (see detail in Gyi 1983,198).

10 See detailed in “President Thein Sein delivers inaugural address to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw,” *New Light of Myanmar*, Volume XVIII, Number 344, pp.1-6. March 31, 2011.

11 The KNU’s declaration of war in 1947 was followed by many ethnic insurgencies around the country. The instability and violent conflicts accelerated as the Panglong Agreement, established in 1947, dissolved after 10 years of independence.

12 The concept of strategic culture was developed by several strategic thinkers, to argue that the approach of Soviet Union’s nuclear strategy questions is very different from the United States in the late 1970s (Ball 1993, p.45).

13 Buddhists seek *nirvana*, (enlightenment) by breaking away “the wheel of life” through the Middle Path defined by the Eight Right Paths - right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration – in three stages of morality, concentration, and wisdom. The five precepts are essential for morality. See in detail U Thittila (1956). The two seniors, Dr. Khin Maung Nyut, a historian and Professor Emeritus of University of Yangon, and Ko Ko Hlaing, a former chief political advisor to President Thein Sein Office of Myanmar, whom the author interviewed in September 2019 concurred.

14 For a full transcript of Thein Sein’s Inaugural Address, see *New Light of Myanmar*, March 31, 2011.

15 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Myanmar), “Emergence of Foreign Policy,” http://www.mofa.gov.mm/?page_id=32.

16 *Myintsone* means “the confluence of the Mali and N’mai rivers” which is the source of the Ayeyawady River known as the country’s largest river and the most important commercial waterway in Myanmar. The Myintsone Hydropower Project was located in the Kachin State in the northernmost part of Myanmar. It aimed to build a large hydroelectric power plant for the national thirty-year electrification strategic plan backed by Chinese multi-billion-dollar project. See in detail Htut (2019).

17 For more detail references, see Tim McLaughlin and Nyan Lynn Aung, “ASEAN Unites to condemn rising South China Sea tensions”, *Myanmar Times*, 19th May 2014. <https://www.mmmtimes.com/national-news/10406-asean-unites-to-condemn-rising-south-china-sea-tensions.html>., “ASEAN Leaders Gather in Myanmar for a ‘Historic’ Summit”, <https://asean.org/asean-leaders-gather-in-myanmar-for-a-historic-summit/> (accessed August 5, 2019)

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