China, Myanmar and the US: Reshuffling of Players?

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Myanmar, the once reclusive land from international communities, now in transition to a “disciplined democracy”, both deserves and is destined to play a much more crucial role in world events for its strategic location.

In May 2011, more than one month after his inauguration, President U Thein Sein paid a visit to China, and the two sides declared to forge a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. On September 30, 2011, President U Thein Sein announced a disputable decision to suspend China-Myanmar jointly-ventured Myitsone dam. On a landmark three-day visit to Myanmar on November 30, 2011, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton met with president U Thein Sein for historic talks, representing a dramatic shift towards Myanmar. Speculations were doing rounds on the assumption that China-Myanmar relations has reached to a turning point and Myanmar would go farther toward the west in the future. What role does China exactly play in Myanmar? And what is US strategy toward Myanmar (or so-called Burma) grounded on? Those questions are what the author tries to explore.

China’s role in Myanmar

There are mixed feelings on China’s role in Myanmar for US. US Senator Jim Webb contended that US negligence of Myanmar will put it to China’s hand as its “province”. China is motivated to expand its economic and military ambitions, synthesized journal commentator Waynet Bert, and to pose a upper-handed circumstance over India and Southeastern countries, in terms of supporting a “despotic state in stasis” like Myanmar politically and militarily. An internal report by Pentagon in 2005 titled “energy futures in Asia” referred to the strategy of China’s navy for the first time as a strategy of “string of pearls”, extending from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and on to the Persian Gulf. Along the route bases were set up to vying for overseas influence, and protect oil transpiration. Among them several pearls were enunciated, including Haing Gyi islands, Sittwe,
Kyaukphyu and Myeik Kyunzu, others including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Thailand. To those American analysist, China must build supply base to develop a blue-water navy, and China is trying to obtain docking ports for warships overseas through financing.

However, some scholars believe that China is not as in an absolutely dominant position in the bilateral relation as western countries claim. Professor John H. Badgley of Cornell University, who has studied Myanmar for over half a century, pointed out that it’d better look at Myanmar rulers as a nationalist faction immune to outside sway or buying off: It is incorrect to suppose that external organizations might coerce them to change their intransigent behavior. Historically Myanmar harbored strong nationalist emotion and treasured independence and national sovereignty. Since the end of cold war, Myanmar leaders found that Myanmar is gaining important favor of stature in a drastically changing strategic environment in the region, and through various channels get the knowledge of how other powers perceive China-Myanmar relations. Military junta started to manipulate its geopolitics to leverage intricate bilateral relations. Myanmar successfully gained India’s support and attention of other ASEAN members. Since abundant gas reserves were discovered at western off-shore blocks, Myanmar has found a crucial new leverage to game amid energy-craving powers. To actively develop its ties with India, ASEAN, Russia and West signifies Myanmar’s endeavour to counterbalance the impact of a single power and to maintain diplomatic independence. US critic Kerry Howley wrote on Los Angeles Times, the west deliberately overestimated China’s sway over the ruling junta, blaming China for Myanmar issue, so as to seek a scapegoat for their failing Myanmar policy.

China’s Self-Identity

Which viewpoint is correct? The answer lies in how China’s role is defined. On China’s action, US might grudge with discontent. On September 21, 2005, Rober B. Zoellick stated that China must take its responsibility as a stakeholder. The problem is, in whose eyes does China seek to take responsibility? From “soft power” to “peaceful rise” and then “harmonious world”, China shows it is not a bearer of
responsibility defined by the US. Especially from the fundamental interest of China, a responsible power in the eyes of China may stand aloof from US on Myanmar issue.

As its strength accumulates steadfastly, China’s development has drawn pervasive attention from international communities by mid-1990s. Western countries perceive China’s actions with more stringent and critical standards, and it is in this context that the call for China to be a responsible member in international communities has emerged. To appease the suspicion, China embarked on shaping the image of a responsible power since the 1997 financial crisis. As a strategic move, China raised such conceptions as “new security concept”、“amicable, tranquil and prosperous neighborhood”, “peaceful rise”, “harmonious world” to illustrate China’s foreign policy.

In response to so-called “stakeholder”, China has tacitly consented to undertake certain responsibility in international communities. However as far as the problem how to be responsible is concerned, China is substantially different from the US. As a developing power, China has manipulated and is manipulating reasonably globalization to boom its economy, therefore it actively advance “going out” strategy to use external market, resource and capital. In the mean time, in developing China wishes for a stable environment of neighborhood for its growth more than ever before.

As China grows in strength, misgivings may be incurred amidst the peripheral neighbors, which will hinder the process of China’s rise up. China uses measures to comfort its neighbors and alleviate their anxiety and suspect, for instance, demarcating Demilitarized Zones (DMZ), facilitating border trade back and forth, and providing development opportunity to neighborhood. Unlike the US aggressive attitude towards Myanmar, since 1988 China has persuaded the military junta to promote democracy in its own way without intention of colour revolution and regime change, and discreetly avoided involvement in Myanmar’s internal political infight, in lieu of identifying itself with the US sanction plans, and enhanced the momentum of economic investment and bilateral ties.
In connection with the US critics over China’s role in Myanmar, whether it is out of genuine misunderstanding or deliberate distortion, China must comply with its own way to construct a greater strategy on Myanmar, aiming to precipitate Myanmar’s political stability and economic development. A Myanmar-China relation based on common interest is of strategic significance for China’s peripheral stability and peaceful development.

Competition and Balance: China is being challenged by US

In the travelogue of Thant Myint-U, the grandson of the late Secretary General of UN U Than, where China meets India, Myanmar is poised between two of the most dynamic powers in the world. According to Samuel P. Huntington’s theory of Clash of Civilizations, Myanmar is situated at the overlapping of Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucius civilizations. Taiwan scholar Yuh-Ming Tsai concluded in his essay Breakout: China Foreign Policy toward Myanmar that China’s Myanmar policy encompasses three objectives: to safeguard the security of the 2200 km long Myanmar-China border; to look at Myanmar as the transfer station for exportation of western China’s commodities and importation of resources; to make Myanmar a new oil transportation lifeline. China is striving to lift itself from “one ocean strategy” (Pacific Ocean) and to build “two ocean strategy” (Pacific and Indian Ocean). The ongoing Myanmar-China oil and gas pipelines, the recommended railway and highway transportation corridor from Kyaukphyu to Ruili will alleviate China’s reliance on the Malacca Strait and resolve its “Malacca dilemma”.

In the US perspective, Myanmar is called a “pariah,” “rogue,” “failed,” and “thuggish” state in which the U.S. economic interests are minimal and strategic concerns ignored at least during the Clinton and Bush administrations. After the inauguration of Obama administration, US has adjusted its Southeast Asian policy by hailing “Return to Southeast Asia”. US is determined to compete with China over the region, and Myanmar serves as an arena. Such rivalry is however low-keyed. It figures neither in China-US diplomatic interactions, nor in official policy articulations, however sometimes bodacious. On a landmark three-day visit to Myanmar on November 30, 2011, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton met with president U Thein
Sein for historic talks, representing a dramatic shift towards Myanmar. Before arriving at Myanmar, Clinton told an aid conference that developing countries should be “smart shoppers” and be wary of taking assistance from donors that were more interested “in extracting your resources, than in building your capacity.” The message was obviously interpreted as US tried to gain an ethical upper hand in Myanmar. In May 2011, US suspended sanctions barring American investment in Myanmar in response to political reforms. On July 11, 2012, Derek Mitchell flew to Yangon to be the first ambassador to Myanmar since two decades. The substantial improvement of bilateral relation also poses a challenge to China’s role in Myanmar.

US involved the Myitsone dam suspension. The 2011 Wikileaks telegram titled *Burma: Grassroots Opposition to Chinese-Backed Dam in Northern Burma* by Larry Dinger in Yangon office unveiled: “In our recent meeting with the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA), Chairman U Uga voiced a commonly shared view that China will be the recipient of much of the power generated by the new hydropower projects…. An unusual aspect of this case is the role grassroots organizations have played in opposing the dam, which speaks to the growing strength of civil society groups in Kachin State, including recipients of Embassy small grants.”

Myanmar’s Nationalism

During the military regime era, Myanmar embraced China’s political, economic and military endorsement and viewed China as “the most important ally”. Meanwhile military junta harbored a strong sense of independence, sensitive to any challenges to its sovereignty. With the enhanced underpinning of the regime, the Myanmar government has endeavored to improve ties with regional neighbours, and adopted a balanced policy among powers, yielding some effect. Myanmar has formed subtle relations with India, Singapore and Japan. As far as the suspension of Myitsone dam project is concerned, Professor David Steinberg of Georgetown University analyzed, that according to its response, China had not been informed in advance. This unusual event signaled something. It is suggested that Myanmar is redux to its traditional neutralism course, reluctant to depend on one power. Myanmar had been practicing absolute neutralism in diplomacy during the cold war period and U Nu, Ne Win
administrations gained advantage from both the east and the west. The sanction imposed by the US since 1988 pushed Myanmar to China side. Dr. Nay Zin Latt, political advisor for president U Thein Sein claimed: “It is not good for Burma or any other nation to rely too much on relations with just one country. We must forge friendly ties with all nations.” This redux repercusses with US policy change, and now the US is responding actively.

Many elites harbor nationalist emotion and view China as a neo-colonialism country depredating Myanmar’s resource through investment, and bringing about unemployment in rural areas and accelerated dissolution of Myanmar traditional values. They are discontent with government’s policy towards China and Chinese investments. On various occasions these criticism are heard accusing Chinese companies and the sabotage of Myanmar’s environment and traditional culture. The people-to-people tension between China and Myanmar comes from strong nationalism, practical economic rivalry, public image through media, lack of market economy thought, and involvement of the western countries.

There exist ethnic groups with strong nationalism and resistance against central government. Their views of China are complex. According to International Crisis Group (ICG) reports, the relationship of ethnic groups with Myanmar government has become sour constantly since 2009, and they recognize China’s positive role in mediating the conflicts and preventing ethnic clashes. Meanwhile China invests large-scale projects in Kachin State and Shan State, the security of these projects is intimately intertwined with and bound up to with the stability in those ethnic regions. They are alarmed of the fact that these mega-projects could be manipulated by Myanmar government as an excuse to deprive them of the relatively independent stature by deploying troops to nibble the territory under their control in the name of security. In addition, many business and projects, with uneven interest distribution and damage to local tradition and life style, have aroused a flurry of hostile sentiment towards China’s investments. The local Kachin NGOs play a part in the suspension of Myitsone dam project. In an open letter to Chinese government, the Kachin Development Networking Group (KDNG) stated in 2010, the Myitsone dam construction is going to displace 15,000 neighboring Kachin natives and millions of
people living downstream of the dam construction location because of inundation, and the displaced villagers have to struggle finding new livelihoods, adequate healthcare services and education for their children at new villages. The hostility led to bombing attack on the site in April 2010 and government army-KIA skirmishes near Taiping hydropower site in June 2011.

Myanmar’s nationalism is also elucidated by the recent debates in parliament on the new Foreign Investment Law. The law which provides a maximum 49% foreign share of investment and a threshold of 8 million US in capital will ultimately drives foreign investors away with protectionism clauses.

Adaptation to Status Quo

China remains important and influential neighbors to Myanmar and Myanmar will not necessarily develop unilateral tie with China or US. US and China are playing a game in Myanmar without direct conflicts, for it is not a zero-sum game. Even as the US-Myanmar tie strengthens, China-Myanmar tie will stay its course.

Compared to the historical Paukphaw relationship, the Myanmar-China relation has evolved into an interest-community based one. As a responsible power, China has promoted Myanmar’s change in a different way from the US. China has realized whatever type of reform may occur in Myanmar, a Myanmar politically stable and economically prosperous is most to China’s long-term interest. Therefore China has endorsed Myanmar’s democratization process and the new government’s legitimacy, expecting it could reliably resolve the national reconciliation and ethnic issues.

Given the enormity of the investment and two-way political exchanges between Myanmar and China, Myanmar has not nudged China’s impact. However it is certain that Myanmar resorts to a traditional neutral posture as it gains a more favored international environment. This doesn’t mean China lose Myanmar, for no single country can occupy Myanmar market in this modern age. Therefore China welcomed normalization of Myanmar-US relations and the US and European suspension of sanction on Myanmar.
The greatest challenge China currently faces in Myanmar is not regional countries or other powers, but people to people relations and its nationalism deep-rooted in history and tradition. It reflects in the opportunism and grassroots nationalism redux. China is confronted with an evitable tendency after the inauguration of the new civilian government: a Myanmar government supervised by the parliament with accountability will not only create a more stable environment for business, but also lead to multiple voices targeted at China, spelling uncertainty to the bilateral relation.

As to Myanmar’s various voices and opinions, China has to employ a rational attitude and adapt to a world with naysayers to China. Although many allies of US have had clashes or contradictions with US throughout the world, in a long run this haven’t changed underpinning of their relations. The criteria to judge the turning of bilateral relation is whether the pattern of common political, economic and strategic interests exists. If this core factor remains intact, the overall situation is unchanged despite some contradictions.