


Hedging against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relationship with China since 1988*

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This study analyzes Myanmar's China policy since the military took power in 1988 and argues that Myanmar has actually hedged against the high risk of its heavy reliance on China. Through a new formulated analytical framework based on external risks and strategic preference, this study investigates why and how Myanmar hedged against China. It finds that Myanmar's cautiously varying policy has been motivated by the rising risks imposed by China and the Burmese leaders' conciliatory preference for adopting less coercive measures to respond to external threats. In practice, Myanmar has actively engaged with China with the aim of maximizing benefits, whereas it has also made great efforts to ensure against over-dependence on China. In turn, this study predicts that the military regime established after the coup in February 2021 would move closer to China, while simultaneously resisting Chinese dominance.

Key words: Myanmar, China, United States, hedging, coup.

Introduction

As a weak state adjacent to powerful China, Myanmar, since independence, has attempted to continuously adjust its policies in order to find ways to best manage its relations with China. It has not aligned with other countries targeting China and neither balanced against nor showed itself bandwagoning with China during the Cold War era.¹ Initially when the military took power in September

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¹Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar's China Policy Since 1948* (Singapore: ISAS, 2011), p. 105, 179. See more in David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemma of Mutual Dependence* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012), pp. 10–151; Renaud Egretau and Larry Jagan, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), pp. 95–104, 123–137.

1988, Myanmar appeared to abandon the neutral foreign policy² the country had followed during the Cold War and aligned itself more openly with China to survive the military regime, which was caught in domestic unrest and Western sanctions. The general impression was that it fell into the Chinese orbit and became a “strategic pawn” and “client state” of China.³ In other words, Myanmar was suspected of having actually joined the Chinese bandwagon due to being a “low threat” and positive economic expectations from China.⁴ But it only adopted a limited alignment strategy in order to obtain assistance from China, while avoiding the loss of its independence.⁵ Others argued that Myanmar has intended to balance Chinese rising influence by diversifying its foreign relations.⁶ Nonetheless, Myanmar has avoided undermining Chinese interests and provoking China through involving itself in any military activities targeting China.⁷

Besides, growing attention has been given to the hedging nature of Myanmar’s strategy since the mid-2000s. According to Roy, Myanmar actually pursued a hedging strategy towards China as it engaged with China on one hand and sought to reduce its over-dependence on China by fostering relations with India and Japan on the other.⁸ Although Ciorciari claimed that Myanmar adopted an

²Myanmar’s “neutralism” foreign policy is divided into “active neutralism” and “passive neutralism.” The former refers to the foreign policy of the U Nu government, which means Myanmar developed friendly relations with all the great powers, actively participated in regional affairs, attracted foreign investments, and received development aids; the latter refers to the foreign policy of the Ne Win government, which means that Myanmar minimized connections with the great powers, withdraw from the regional and international organizations, decreased participation in regional affairs, emphasized self-reliance. See William C. Johnstone, *Burma’s Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963); Chi shad Lians, *Burma’s Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990).

³Mohan Malik, *China and India: Great Power Rivals* (Boulder: First Forum Press, 2011), pp. 202–203; Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State*, p. 240.

⁴Ian Tsung-Yen Chen and Alan Hao Yang, “A Harmonized Southeast Asia? Explanatory Typologies of ASEAN Countries’ Strategies to The Rise of China,” *The Pacific Review*, 26-3 (2013), pp. 273–274.

⁵Jürgen Haacke, “The Nature and Management of Myanmar’s Alignment with China: The SLORC/SPDC Years,” *The Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 30-2 (2011), p. 105, 133; Enze Han, “Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand’s Alignment Choices,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 11-1 (2018), pp. 96–99.

⁶Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw: Myanmar’s China Policy Since 1948*, p. 105, 184, 190; K. Yhome, *Emerging Trends in China’s Myanmar Policy* in M. Rasgotra ed., *China and South Asia: Developments and Trends* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2012), pp. 143–144; Jürgen Haacke, *Myanmar’s Foreign Policy: Domestic Influence and International Implications* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 26–28; David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), p. 234.

⁷Chiung Chiu Huang, “Balance of Relationship: The Essence of Myanmar’s China Policy,” *The Pacific Review*, 28-2 (2015), pp. 195–196; Mohan Malik, “Myanmar’s Role in China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27-111 (2018), p. 362.

⁸Denny Roy, “Southeast Asia and China: Balancing or Bandwagoning?” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 27-2 (2005), pp. 318–319.

alignment strategy with China between 1992 to 1994, Myanmar had to hedge against China so as to offset the risk of losing its autonomy.⁹ Since 2011, more and more scholars have started to conclude that Myanmar is following a hedging strategy, in which it has countered the risks of over-reliance on China by turning to other external factors; seeking alternatives to its powerful neighbor's fast-growing influence, while at the same time trying to keep on maximizing benefits through maintaining cordial relations with it.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the question whether Myanmar has actually hedged against China is still debated due to different understandings and definitions of the concept of hedging.

A broad perspective depicts hedging as a hybrid policy approach which combines both engagement and balancing. In this sense, it can be said that Myanmar has hedged against China since 1988 due to close engagement with China while at the same time actively pursuing diversified diplomatic relations. On the other hand, a narrower perspective views hedging as a risk management strategy aimed at mitigating security challenges. In that case, Myanmar cannot be accused of hedging since it is perceived to be faced with low threat and security risk from China as compared with other Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states which have territorial disputes with China.

This article attempts to contribute to the debate about Myanmar's hedging behavior by formulating a new theoretical framework of hedging based on external risks and strategic preference. It contends that Myanmar intended to hedge against China ever since the establishment of the military regime in 1988. The main body of the study is divided into five parts: the first two parts briefly introduce the main debates on Myanmar's China policy and present a more definite concept of what is a hedging strategy; the subsequent three parts deeply analyze the determining factors and implementation of Myanmar's hedging strategy towards China and predicts the future direction of it after the military coup in February 2021. Finally, it concludes the main findings and theoretical contributions of this study.

Theoretical Explanation of Hedging Strategy

The concept of hedging is increasingly employed by scholars to explore a secondary state's response to perceived risks or disadvantages posed by a threatening major power. So far, there are at least two different ways to define hedging. Those who take an *innenpolitik* perspective believe that hedging in foreign policy

⁹Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and A Proposal for A Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19-3 (2019), p. 383.

¹⁰Antonio Fiori and Andrea Passeri, "Hedging in Search of A New Age of Non-Alignment: Myanmar between China and the USA," *The Pacific Review*, 28-5 (2015), pp. 679-702; Chiung Chiu Huang, "Balance of Relationship: the Essence of Myanmar's China Policy," p. 200.

is the outcome of domestic politics through which a secondary state attempts to mitigate risks or threats while maximizing benefits. The perceived security risks or threats and the trade-off between the material benefits with a degree of loss of autonomy that such foreign cooperation might entail are the factors that contribute to the secondary state's adopting of hedging behavior.¹¹ In this sense, hedging may be considered to be either a risk management strategy or a necessary concomitant in the alignment choice. However, others argue that the room for hedging available to secondary states depends on the uncertainty/intensity of great power competition.¹² An uncertain future in the great power game enlarges secondary states feeling the need to resort to hedging in their relationships with them. Alternatively, they have to take sides or remain neutral. Given this, the systemic imperative is the precondition of a state's hedging behavior whereby it decides whether it can hedge. Nonetheless, the final decision of hedging is determined by various domestic factors such as the conditions in the immediate geopolitical environment; the state's domestic features; the perceptions and often interests of the state; and its policy preferences on autonomy, security, and welfare.¹³ Here, hedging is viewed as an output of systemic-level and unit-level variables.

Given the above two contested definitions of hedging, this study argues that the distinction between the domestic politics approach and the systemic-unit dynamics approach is meaningless because both approaches focus on domestic politics as a crucial determinant of the hedging strategy. It views the hedging behavior as jointly determined by state's perceived risks and strategic preference. First of all, it maintains that the external risks imposed by the threatening power

¹¹See the special issue of *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19-3 (2019). Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and A Proposal for A Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," pp. 377–380; Darren J. Lim and Rohan Mukherjee, "Hedging in South Asia: Balancing Economic and Security Interests amid Sino-Indian Competition," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19-3 (2019), pp. 493–503; Adam P. Liff, "Unambivalent Alignment: Japan's China Strategy, the US Alliance, and the 'Hedging' Fallacy," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19-3 (2019), pp. 460–462; Van Jackson, "Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 14-3 (2014), pp. 8–17; Kuik Cheng Chwee, *Smaller States' Alignment Choices: A Comparative Study of Malaysia and Singapore's Hedging Behavior in the Face of A Rising China*, Ph. D Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, June, 2010, pp. 124–125.

¹²Van Jackson, "Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security," pp. 8–17; Alexander Korolev, "Shrinking Room for Hedging: System-unit Dynamics and Behavior of Smaller Powers," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 19-3 (2019), p. 420.

¹³Alexander Korolev, "Shrinking Room for Hedging: System-unit Dynamics and Behavior of Smaller Powers," p. 424; Liu Feng and Chen Zhirui, "Dong Ya Guo Jia Ying Dui Zhong Guo Jue Qi De Zhan Lue Xuan Ze: Yi Zhong Xin Gu Dian Xian Shi Zhu Yi De Jie Shi [Trans-Strategic Options of the East Asia States in Dealing with China's Rise: An Neoclassical Realism Explanation]," *Dang Dai Ya Tai [Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies]*, 4 (2015), p. 120; Wang Dong, "Study of the Hedging Behavior in International Relations: In Case of the Asian Pacific States," *Shi Jie Jing Ji Yu Zheng Zhi [World Economics and Politics]*, 10 (2018), p. 34.

is a major deciding factor for a state's hedging behavior. States are likely to either hedge against the security threat from the threatening power or the political risks of losing autonomy¹⁴ from the close engagement with the threatening power. Alternatively, when there are low risks from the threatening power, secondary states can remain neutral or even bandwagon with the threatening power with the aim to maximize benefits. Nevertheless, secondary states would not be necessary to hedge against the threatening power unless they have particular strategic preference which refers to the manner in which states choose to respond to external risks. These may be divided into conciliatory, defensive, and offensive ways. They may adopt a conciliatory strategy relying on diplomatic and economic ways to either join the bandwagon or try to balance the great powers through manipulating relations with one or the other or utilize more tactful, less coercive measures. If they are facing a threat, they may choose a strategy depending on passive defense on the border or they may decide on relying on active defense or military offensives on the border with retaliatory or preemptive strikes.¹⁵ The strategic preference can be gauged by a state's geographic location, historical experience, and strategic culture. If state leaders have a conciliatory preference, they are more likely to mobilize economic and diplomatic resources to hedge against the security threat or political risks. Otherwise, they may be neutral, accommodate the threatening power, or take aggressive actions to challenge the threatening power.

In the following parts, I first analyze the external risks input by China and Myanmar's strategic preference and demonstrate that Myanmar could and would hedge against China. Thereafter, I introduce two indicators to investigate whether Myanmar hedged against China, the first being whether Myanmar took measures to reduce its heavy reliance on China and the second, whether Myanmar resisted Chinese pressure and thus avoided a loss of political autonomy.

External Risks Imposed by China

As the most powerful neighbor bordering with Myanmar, China, theoretically speaking, can pose a major threat to Myanmar. In practice, the security risk of being invaded by the northern giant has always been a main concern for the Burmese leaders who harbored deep distrust with China. A former Myanmar foreign minister Kyaw Nyein said in 1951, "every Burman has mistrusted China...We don't consider China a menace, but we accept a possibility of China one day

¹⁴In this article, the "autonomy" means that state's policymaking would not be pressured or interfered by foreign states unless it asks for foreign assistance.

¹⁵See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 38–39.

invading us.”¹⁶ Historically, there were three major wars between Myanmar’s Pagan, Taungoo, and Konbaung dynasties and Chinese Yuan, Ming, and Qing empires in the late 13th, 16th, and 18th centuries, respectively. Soon after independence, Myanmar fought against the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) soldiers and the Burmese communists backed by the Communist Party of China (CPC). Although China fully withdrew support to the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1989, it still maintained a lot of connections to the ethnic armed groups breaking away from CPB in northern Myanmar. The Burmese generals, therefore, have been aware of the overthrow of the military government launched by the ethnic rebels, dissidents, and foreign forces.¹⁷ They have also worried about China’s military intervention in the ethnic tensions in northern Myanmar, particularly when the military conflicts escalated.¹⁸

As a weak state surrounded by great powers, Myanmar has long been anxious about the political control of foreign powers. According to Pye, the behavior of the Burmese is much like a boy who seeks to gain protection from his unpredictable mother and maintain a stable dependent relationship, while remaining independent because of his distrust of a relationship that is often determined by his unpredictable mother.¹⁹ This explains why the Burmese leaders place the independent foreign policy as the first and foremost principle of Myanmar’s diplomacy. In practice, Myanmar had kept its distance from both the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) since independence, so as to get out of the great power games and thus avoid a loss of political autonomy.

However, Myanmar has to rely on China to consolidate the military rule and resist the pressure from the West since the establishment of the military government in 1988 led China to become the most important partner of Myanmar in all areas. The fast-growing asymmetric interdependence between Myanmar and China constitutes a major threat to the former’s independence as well as its political autonomy. First of all, China has attempted to exercise its leverage on Myanmar’s diplomacy to use it for Beijing’s regional interests. For instance, Myanmar was widely perceived as a key partner of China’s Indian Ocean strategy targeting India and the United States in the State Law and Order Restoration

¹⁶Andrea Passeri, “‘A Tender Gourd among the Cactus’: Making Sense of Myanmar’s Alignment Policies through the Lens of Strategic Culture,” *The Pacific Review*, 33-6 (2020), p. 12.

¹⁷Andrew Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces since 1988* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1996), pp. 16–17.

¹⁸Myanmar has long been suspicious of China’s connections with the armed ethnic groups in northern Myanmar. Such discontent with China peaked in early 2015 when the Kokang rebels attacked government forces. The Burmese military criticized Chinese individuals for involvement in the attacks and dropped bombs in Chinese territory (Yunnan) while China urged the Burmese military to stop military actions on the border and launched a military drill along the border to deter the Burmese troops. See Enze Han, “Geopolitics, Ethnic Conflicts along the Border, and Chinese Foreign Policy Changes towards Myanmar,” *Asian Security*, 13-1 (2017), pp. 59–73.

¹⁹Lucian Pye, *Politics, Personality, and National Building: Burma’s Search for Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 157.

Council (SLORC)/the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) era.²⁰ Later, Myanmar, together with Pakistan, has become a chief pillar of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Paradoxically, China's great efforts of facilitating Myanmar's participation in Chinese-led regional cooperation mechanisms actually cause the Burmese leaders' deep concern of falling under China's shadow.²¹

Second, in order to maintain political stability in Myanmar and to protect Chinese economic and strategic interests, China had not only operated intervention in Myanmar's democratic transition by voting for the United Nations (UN) resolution against Myanmar but contacted the opposition parties in Myanmar since the mid-2000s.²² This resulted in rising discontent among the Burmese generals who dominated the political reforms and opposed foreign interference. In a similar vein, China has actively involved itself in the peace talks between the government forces and ethnic groups in northern Myanmar, attempting to maintain peace and stability on its own border areas as well as leverage in Myanmar's politics. But the Myanmar military has kept a close eye on China's connections with the ethnic groups, to be alert to Chinese interference in the ethnic conflicts in northern Myanmar.

Third, as Chinese company and capital poured into Myanmar after the late 2000s, the Myanmar government has faced dual pressure from Beijing to protect or resume Chinese projects which are accused of environmental damage and land compensation by the local residents. Meanwhile, the Myanmar government has come under mounting pressure from people to reduce Chinese investment. What's more, it is concerned about the "debt trap" of the mega-projects financed by Chinese state-owned enterprises as well as the adverse effects of these projects on its national sovereignty.²³ Given the potential military and political

²⁰For China's fast-growing military influence in Myanmar's south coast, please see Andrew Selth, "Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth," *Regional Outlook Paper*, Griffith Asia Institute, 10 (2007), p. 4, 13–15; "Desmond Ball Unbound," *The Irrawaddy*, 12 October 2016, at <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/desmond-ball-unbound.html>> (searched date: 10 July 2021); In addition, many Indian scholars believed that China attempts to deter Indian navy's operational capability in the Bay of Bengal through the military facilities in Myanmar's ports. See Namrata Goswami, "China's Second Coast: Implications for Northeast India," *Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses*, June 2014, at <http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ChinasSecondCoast_ngoswami_190614> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

²¹Maung Aung Myoe, "Myanmar's Foreign Policy under the USDP Government: Continuities and Changes," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35-1 (2016), p. 136.

²²See "Resolution S-5/1: Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, US Department of State," 2 October 2007, at <<http://2001-2009.state.gov/pio/rls/othr/93383.htm>> (searched date: 10 July 2021). For more analysis of China's interference in Myanmar's political transition, please see Ian Holliday, "Beijing and the Myanmar Problem," *Pacific Review*, 22-4 (2009), p. 491; Hak Yin Li and Zheng Yongnian, "Reinterpreting China's Non-intervention Policy towards Myanmar: Leverage, Interests and Intervention," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 18-61 (2009), p. 636.

²³For instance, Myanmar officials said the experience of Sri Lanka had raised concerns the country could be walking into a debt trap. As a result, Myanmar sharply reducing the cost of the Kyaukpyu port. See Thiha, "Myanmar Scales Back Chinese-backed Port Project over Debt Fears," *Consult Myanmar*, 6 August 2018, at <<https://consult-myanmar.com/2018/08/06/myanmar-scales-back-chinese-backed-port-project-over-debt-fears/>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

intervention from China, Myanmar would not only be faced with the security threat from China but also be confronted with the political risk of losing political autonomy. In this context, it is reasonable for Myanmar to take action to reduce threat and offset risks.

Myanmar's Conciliatory Strategic Preference

Myanmar's conciliatory strategic preference has been jointly shaped by its geographical location, historical experience, and Buddhist culture. Given Myanmar's dangerous geographical position of a tender gourd among prickly cacti,²⁴ it has neither provoked the great powers by taking aggressive actions nor allowed itself to be subjected to too much foreign interference. As Kyaw Nyein said in 1951: "We do not want to do anything that will provoke China, but if she does invade, I am confident that the national spirit of our people will stand firm against her...being a small nation, we must find ways and means of avoiding embroilment in power blocs."²⁵ This idea was also evident in a statement put out by the Embassy of Myanmar in Brazil, which stated that Myanmar is geographically situated between two highly populous nations, India and China, and that it desired to be independent and non-aligned.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Myanmar authorities have sought to transform the risks into opportunities, thus maximizing benefits to the country by wisely using its significant strategic geography for its own good.²⁷ As Myanmar is located in the junction between regional groupings of South Asia and Southeast Asia, China and India, it has to turn the challenges coming from great power rivalry into opportunities by formulating and implementing the right policies.²⁸

In practice, this means that maintaining independence in great power rivalries has always been the top priority of the Myanmar government. On one hand, it sought to pursue benefits from the great power competition; on the other hand, it prevented its orbit of neighboring powers from increasing.²⁹ Since the

²⁴For instance, Myanmar officials said the experience of Sri Lanka had raised concerns the country could be walking into a debt trap. As a result, Myanmar sharply reducing the cost of the Kyaukpyu port. See Thiha, "Myanmar Scales Back Chinese-backed Port Project over Debt Fears." "Myanmar: The Military Regimes View of The World," ICG, 28 (2001), at <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-military-regimes-view-world>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

²⁵Frank N. Trager, "Burma's Foreign Policy, 1948-56: Neutralism, Third Force, and Rice," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 16-1 (1956), p. 93.

²⁶"Foreign Policy of Myanmar: Emergence of Foreign Policy," Embassy of Myanmar in Brazil, at <http://myanmarbsb.org/_site/foreign-policy-of-myanmar/> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

²⁷"Geographical Opportunity," *The New Light of Myanmar*, 21 May 2012, at <<https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/NLM2012-05-21.pdf>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

²⁸Maung Aung Myoe, "The NLD and Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Not New, But Different," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 36-1 (2017), p. 94.

²⁹Andrea Passeri, "A Tender Gourd among the Cactus': Making Sense of Myanmar's Alignment Policies through the Lens of Strategic Culture," p. 952.

establishment of the Pagan Kingdom in the 9th century, Myanmar became a vassal state of the powerful Chinese Empire until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century. The Burmese Kings were brought under Chinese tributary system in order to avoid foreign invasion, sustain the feudal system, and benefit from the tributary trade for centuries. After gaining independence from the British rule in 1948, Myanmar adopted a neutralist policy to manage its relations with the great powers. The Burmese generals who seized power in 1988 through a military coup learned from the historical experience of maintaining independence and peacefully coexisting with the great powers. They reaffirmed an independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy, pursued the principle of non-interference, and avoided posing threats to any other country.³⁰ They, in fact, adopted a variety of diplomatic and economic measures to resist Western pressure and reduce Chinese influence while receiving aids and investment from both sides with the aim to consolidate the military rule. The democratic leaders that have come into power since 2016 have continued to conduct an active independent foreign policy in which they have refused foreign interference in domestic politics and facilitated international trade and foreign investment. Aung San Suu Kyi stated that Myanmar had adopted an independent, non-aligned, and active foreign policy ever since its independence in 1948. The country not only built close ties with its neighbors but also developed friendly relations with the rest of the world.³¹

As a Buddhist-majority country, there are deep, inseparable relations between Buddhism and politics in Myanmar, in which Buddhism provides regime legitimacy and maintains social stability while the governors protect Buddhists. Most of the Burmese leaders have manipulated Buddhism so as to consolidate the governing rule, during which they have also been influenced by the Buddhist philosophy. The core values of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar are *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *upekkha* (equanimity), and the “middle path doctrine,”³² which represents peace, mercy, equilibrium, and non-extremism. Myanmar’s former prime minister U Nu, who was a devout Buddhist, advocated peaceful coexistence with the countries in the world and developed neutralist foreign policy to maintain independence. Although this harmonious relationship between government and Buddhism deteriorated severely during the Ne Win era, it was soon restored after Than Shwe took power in 1988. He revived Buddhism and combined it with patriotism, so as to increase the legitimacy of the military government, quiet down social protests, and defend against foreign penetration.

³⁰“President U Thein Sein Delivers Inaugural Address to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw,” *The New Light of Myanmar*, 30 March 2011, at <<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-03-31.pdf>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

³¹“Strength of the People,” *The New Light of Myanmar*, 23 April, 2016, at <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs22/23_April_16_gnlm.pdf> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

³²Andrea Passeri, “A Tender Gourd among the Cactus”: Making Sense of Myanmar’s Alignment Policies through the Lens of Strategic Culture,” p. 939.

As he said in March 1995, the government was renovated, reconstructing and preserving cultural religious edifices in order to promote love of cultural traditions and revitalization of patriotism, thereby safeguarding the nation from falling into servitude again.³³ In the meantime, he implemented the Buddhist diplomacy by facilitating Buddhist ties and Buddhist tourism with his Asian neighbors, intending to improve the poor image of the Myanmar military and expand friendship with these states. The successive leader Thein Sein continued to conduct Buddhist diplomacy by visiting Buddhist temples during his foreign trips and pushed forward the peace process by signing national ceasefire agreements with several ethnic groups. The democrat Aung San Suu Kyi was also a devout Buddhist. She emphasized that leaders must adhere to Buddha's teachings which are known as "dharma," such as truth, justice, love, and equanimity.³⁴ Based on these values, she has committed to building friendly relations with the foreign countries and promoting national reconciliation. Nonetheless, Buddhism can be a double-edged sword. For one thing, Buddhism serves as a bridge of friendship between Myanmar and the world as well as a spiritual pillar for the Myanmar people, thereby boosting Myanmar's constructive relationship with foreign countries and maintaining its social order. For another, due largely to their fear about the pluralism deriving from the political transition,³⁵ both the Buddhist nationalists and hardliners within the military have taken a harsh stance towards the ethnic groups, the Rohingya Muslims in particular, thereby escalating ethnic tensions. In addition, one cannot exaggerate the role of Buddhism in Myanmar's diplomacy as it usually serves for a cultural background and a useful tactic of the Burmese leaders to get public support and promote international relations. Given the significant geographical location, traditional neutrality and Buddhist influence, the Burmese leaders have primarily adopted a preference for a conciliatory strategic policy whereby they have pursued harmonious relationships with foreign countries, while using economic and diplomatic leverage to maintain their independence.

Myanmar's Close Engagement with China

Starting in 1988, both the military regime and the democratic government in Myanmar sought China's assistance for rescuing its collapsed economy, resulting

³³“SLORC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe Addressed the Opening of the Management Course No. 5/95 for Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) Executives,” *The New Light of Myanmar*, 24 March 1995, at <<https://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs3/BPS95-03.pdf>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

³⁴See Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear, And Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

³⁵Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (London: Curzon Press, 1999), p. 2.

in booming economic cooperation between the two countries. So far, China is Myanmar's largest trade partner and one of the main sources of foreign investment and aid. Moreover, the top Myanmar echelon frequently traveled to Beijing to seek political support for consolidating their regime and preventing Western interference. For instance, the senior-most Burmese leaders, General Saw Maung and Than Shwe, traveled to Beijing six times to solicit Chinese support since the military took over government in 1988. Myanmar's former President Thein Sein built a comprehensive strategic partnership with China and intended to stabilize and institutionalize the bilateral ties by establishing a number of consultation mechanisms such as the strategic and security dialogues. In return, Myanmar applauded China's BRI soon after its announcement and became a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in order to continue to get China's economic assistance and political support. Subsequently the National League for Democracy (NLD) government pursued Chinese support for the Rohingya issue and the peace process in northern Myanmar by conducting frequent high-level visits, reviving controversial Chinese projects, and approving China's new proposal for China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).

The Myanmar military relies heavily on China to enhance its military capabilities against the ethnic rebels and US threats due to the arms embargo imposed by the West in 1990s. In the past three decades, Myanmar has purchased large amounts of high-tech military equipment, including aircraft, naval ships, missiles, radar units, and armored vehicles from China. Myanmar imported an estimated US\$1.35bn worth of Chinese weaponry in the SLORC era (1989–1997), US \$0.53bn in State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) era (1998–2010), US \$0.97bn in the Thein Sein era (2011–2015), and US\$0.47bn in the NLD era (2016–2020), which constituted 85.21 percent, 33.38 percent, 58.42 percent, and 47.83 percent of its total arms imports for the different periods, respectively.³⁶ Myanmar has sent hundreds of Burmese officers to receive training at Chinese military institutions and worked together with Chinese military technicians to construct and upgrade important military bases and develop its local defense industry.³⁷

Myanmar's Efforts of Reducing High Dependence on China

Despite the close engagement with China, Myanmar has taken meaningful measures to avoid Chinese dominance over its economy and politics. First of all,

³⁶Data collected from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, at <<http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

³⁷See Andrew Selth, "Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth"; David Capie, "Small Arms Production and Transfers in Southeast Asia," Canberra Papers, Strategic and Defense Studies Centre at Australian National University, 146 (2002); Jon Grevatt, "Hostage to History?" *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 51-12, 19 March 2014.

Myanmar has diversified its trade and investment relations since the mid-1990s with the aim to reduce its heavy reliance on the Chinese economy. For example, with the fast-growing Myanmar–China trade, Myanmar has prioritized its trade with ASEAN,³⁸ expanded trade with India and Japan,³⁹ and normalized trade relations with the West.⁴⁰ To reduce its overdependence on Chinese capital, Myanmar opened its natural resource and infrastructure sectors to both Chinese and Southeast Asian,⁴¹ Indian,⁴² Japanese,⁴³ and South Korean⁴⁴ companies. It also resumed trade and investment negotiations with the Western countries since 2011 and successfully normalized economic ties with the West, as the latter lifted economic sanctions on Myanmar.⁴⁵ So far, three main special economic zones – Dawei, Thilawa, and Kyaukpadaung – are invested in by Thailand, Japan, and China, respectively. Since 2011, both the quasi-civilian and democratic government in Myanmar also allowed Chinese, Indian, South Korean, Russian, and even

³⁸According to Burmese statistics, the total volume of the bilateral trade between Myanmar and Thailand, Singapore, China is US\$87.78bn (export US\$24.13bn, import US\$63.65bn), US\$62.05bn (export US\$11.9bn, import US\$50.15bn), US\$105.83bn (export US\$46.67bn, import US\$59.16bn) respectively from 1990 to 2019. Data are collected from Myanmar Statistical Information Service (MSIS), at <http://mmsis.gov.mm/sub_menu/statistics/statDbList.jsp?vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

³⁹According to MSIS the total volume of the bilateral trade between Myanmar and India, and Japan are US\$30.01bn (export US\$20.83bn, import US\$9.18bn) and US\$27.94bn (export US\$9.53bn, import US\$18.41bn) respectively from 1990 to 2019. Data are collected from Myanmar Statistical Information Service (MSIS), at <http://mmsis.gov.mm/sub_menu/statistics/statDbList.jsp?vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁴⁰According to MSIS the total amount of Myanmar–US trade is US\$7bn (export US\$5.39bn, import US\$1.61bn) between 1990 and 2010. Myanmar's exports to the US grew from US\$29.45m to US\$737.6m from 2011 to 2019 and its import from the US increased from US\$263.62m to US\$327.56m in the same period. Data collected from Myanmar Statistical Information Service (MSIS), at <http://mmsis.gov.mm/sub_menu/statistics/statDbList.jsp?vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁴¹According to MSIS the total value of Singapore, Thailand and China's investments in Myanmar between 1990 and 2019 are US\$22.15bn, US\$11.14bn, US\$21.02bn respectively. Data collected from Myanmar Statistical Information Service (MSIS), at <http://mmsis.gov.mm/sub_menu/statistics/statDbList.jsp?vw_cd=MT_ZTITLE> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁴²India's investments in Myanmar have increased nearly seven times between 2005 and 2019 amounting to a total of US\$0.22bn. Data are collected from MSIS, at <<http://mmsis.gov.mm/statHtml/statHtml.do#>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁴³The FDI from Japanese companies jumped to US\$0.38bn in 2017, which was more than three times that in the 1990s. Data are collected from MSIS, at <<http://mmsis.gov.mm/statHtml/statHtml.do#>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁴⁴The cumulative value of South Korea's FDI in Myanmar between 1990 and 2019 was US\$4.61bn, and it ranked fifth after Singapore, China, Thailand, and Hong Kong. Data collected from MSIS, at <<http://mmsis.gov.mm/statHtml/statHtml.do#>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁴⁵The FDI flow into Myanmar from Western countries grew dramatically from US\$0.24bn in 2012 to peak at US\$1.26bn in 2014, a five-fold increase. The Western enterprises include United States, the UK, Germany, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Luxembourg, Ireland, Denmark, Austria, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Data collected from MSIS, at <<http://mmsis.gov.mm/statHtml/statHtml.do#>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

Western energy companies to bid for oil and gas exploration, so as to diversify its energy investors and maximize its own interests. In addition, both Chinese and Indian companies invested heavily in the hydroelectric resources and cross-border connectivity projects in northern and western Myanmar.

Second, the Burmese generals who have harbored a traditional distrust towards China approached other regional powers to balance China's rising influence in Myanmar.⁴⁶ During the SLORC/SPDC era, ASEAN and India were the two pillars of Myanmar's balancing act to China. As Than Shwe said in July 1998, ASEAN was an intimate friend of Myanmar while the rest were distant friends.⁴⁷ In practice, the Burmese leaders prioritized its relations with ASEAN in order to pursue its support for Myanmar's democratic transition and its mediating role between Myanmar and the West. As India shifted from a criticism to engagement policy towards the military regime in the mid-1990s, the Burmese generals introduced India into their regional diplomacy to reduce their commitment towards China at the cost of joint military operation against the insurgent groups from India's northeastern region and participation in various Indian initiatives aiming at eastward expansion.

Since 2011, ASEAN countries, India, Russia, and the United States have played key roles in Myanmar's diversified diplomacy. At the bilateral level, the quasi-civilian government in Myanmar approached the United States with an aim to hedge against the high risk of its heavy reliance on China after a series of political and economic reforms initiated by President Thein Sein that softened the super power's attitude towards it.⁴⁸ Through frequent high-level visits, close physical connectivity, and defense cooperation, Myanmar upgraded its relations with India so that it could counterbalance the Myanmar-China comprehensive strategic partnership.⁴⁹ Myanmar also embarked on developing warm relations with Russia to gain another significant diplomatic shelter and main source of weapons to further offset China's influence in the country.⁵⁰ At the multilateral level, the Burmese leaders attempted to deny dominance from the great powers, China included, by binding itself with ASEAN. In fact, Myanmar has stood with ASEAN on the international and regional issues that concerned China, such as the South China Sea (SCS) territorial disputes, intending to alleviate China's pressure. After the global outcry against the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017, the NLD government agreed to invite the Philippine and Japanese diplomats to

⁴⁶Renaud Egretreau and Larry Jagan, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State*, p. 168.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁸See Antonio Fiori and Andrea Passeri, "Hedging in Search of A New Age of Non-Alignment: Myanmar between China and the USA," pp. 679–702.

⁴⁹Nian Peng, "The Budding Indo-Myanmar Relations: Rising But Limited Challenges for China," *Asian Affairs*, 50-4 (2019), p. 590.

⁵⁰Ludmila Lutz-Auras, "Russia and Myanmar-Friends in Need?" *The Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 34-2 (2015), p. 167.

Table 1. Myanmar's Top Four Weapon Suppliers (1988–1999), US\$ Million

Country	China	Russia	Yugoslavia	Poland
Amount	1,626	81	81	57
Percentage	86.21	4.29	4.29	3.02

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

Table 2. Myanmar's Top Eight Weapon Suppliers (2000–2020), US\$ Million

Country	Russia	China	India	Ukraine	South Korea	Serbia	Belarus	Israel
Amount	1,661	1,579	169	105	180	65	64	62
Percentage	42.09	40.02	4.28	2.66	4.56	1.65	1.62	1.57

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

investigate the Rohingya genocide, so as to reduce the Western pressure as well as its heavy reliance on Chinese assistance.

Finally, the Myanmar military sought to expand its weapon suppliers with the aim to reduce its high dependence on Chinese military hardware. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, China dropped from the No. 1 weapon supplier with 86.21 percent of Myanmar's total arms in 1988 to 1999 to No. 2 in the period from 2000 to 2020, with only 40.02 percent.⁵¹ Russia, which had ranked second in the 1990s, overtook China to become the largest arms supplier in 2001 and has maintained this position to this day. In addition, Myanmar had only four major weapon suppliers through the 1990s, which expanded to eight in 2000–2020. Apart from arms deals, Myanmar has expanded military exchanges with programs for training and conducting joint military exercises with the other countries, such as Russia and India.

Myanmar's Measures of Avoiding a Loss of Political Autonomy

Despite lauding China, the Burmese leaders feared the powerful neighbor would gain undue influence in Myanmar.⁵² As Than Shwe said in September 1996, Myanmar should not be swayed or under pressure by some foreign powers in adopting and practicing foreign policies, defense policies, and economic

⁵¹Data are collected from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, at<<http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁵²David I. Steinberg, "Burma/Myanmar and the Dilemmas of U.S. Foreign Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 21-2 (1999), pp. 294–300.

policies.⁵³ When delivering his inaugural address in March 2011, Thein Sein stated that the neo-colonialists attempt to interfere in the domestic affairs of Myanmar due to its significant strategic position, but Myanmar never came under the influence of any powers.⁵⁴ In view of this, the Burmese leaders have taken various measures to resist Chinese pressure and interference, and thus maintained independence. During the SLORC/SPDC era, the hardliners within the junta have festering grievances of their own towards the pro-Beijing policy led by Khin Nyunt, who is of Burmese Chinese descent⁵⁵. They finally dismissed Khin Nyunt in October 2004 in order to end the rivalry between intelligence and army and to remove the influence of foreign powers, China included. Soon after the Buddhist “Saffron Revolution” in September 2007, the junta not only ignored China’s requirement of holding talks with the opposition parties and pushing forward the democratic process, but harshly cracked down on peaceful protesters. Four years later, President Thein Sein suspended the construction of the controversial Myitsone Dam without any prior notice to China as there was strong opposition towards this project from the Burmese society. Although Beijing pressed Naypyidaw to properly handle the Myitsone issue, the dam has not yet been resumed until now. The Burmese leaders also expressed growing concerns about the adverse effects of large-scale Chinese cross-border connectivity projects on Myanmar. These mainly include the influx of Chinese goods and illegal immigrants, and the security threats from the cross-border connectivity projects.⁵⁶ Therefore, the Thein Sein government canceled the Myanmar–China railway in 2014.⁵⁷ In 2018, the NLD government sharply narrowed down the Kyaukpyu deep water port due to its serious concerns over the “debt trap” and the sovereignty issue.⁵⁸

⁵³“SLORC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe Addressed the Concluding Session of the Annual Meeting of the Union Solidarity and Development Association.”

⁵⁴“President U Thein Sein Delivers Inaugural Address to Pyidaungsu Hluttaw.”

⁵⁵Khin Nyunt’s ethnic Chinese parents were Hakkas with ancestry from Meixian, Guangdong and his wife is ethnic Chinese from Singapore. See “Wai Jiao Guan Chen Bao Liu Kou Shu: Wo Yu Mian Dian Gao Ceng De Jiao Wang [The Dictation of Diplomat Chen Baoliu: The Contacts between Me and Burmese Leadership],” *Wai Jiao Guan Cha [Foreign Affairs Observer]*, 7 August 2013, at <<https://www.faoobserver.com/NewsInfo.aspx?id=8900>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁵⁶David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemma of Mutual Dependence*, p. 296.

⁵⁷According to my interview with Prof. Yin Myo Thu at Yangon University in Yangon in November 2017, financial issues are the biggest obstacle to the construction of Myanmar–China railway while the national security is also the main concern for the Burmese leaders. Interview with Prof. Yin Myo Thu at Yangon University, Yangon, November 2017.

⁵⁸The NLD government decreased the Kyaukpyu deep water port from an earlier version of US \$10bn and 10 berths to a US\$1.3bn terminal with two deep water berths, respectively. See Marex, “China and Myanmar Agree to \$1.3 Billion Port Project,” *The Maritime Executive*, 8 November 2018, at <<https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/china-and-myanmar-agree-to-1-3-billion-port-project>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

The danger of the increasing power of China was actually acknowledged by the Burmese generals even in the mid-1990s.⁵⁹ During the SLORC era, the junta issued orders prohibiting the deployment of any foreign troops on Myanmar's soil in order to maintain its sovereignty and independence. Moreover, the Burmese commanders who fought against ethnic rebels in the northern areas were aware of Chinese interference in these conflicts. It was alleged that Chinese Major General Huang Xing had leaked secret information to the Kokang rebels – Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA).⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Peng Jiasheng, the commander of MNDAA, and other disarmed soldiers allegedly fled to Yunnan. Since the renewed clashes between government troops and MNDAA in February 2015, Myanmar's discontent with China has increased significantly. It blamed Chinese local government and business circles for providing weapons, food, and medical care to the Kokang rebels,⁶¹ and launched an airstrike on the Kokang insurgents reportedly hiding in the border area. This caused five Chinese casualties in the border town of Yunnan province.⁶² In response to this, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted large-scale live-fire air-ground drill exercises without a clear deadline near the conflict zone. However, this did not deter the Myanmar military to continue its offensive with heavy weapons on the MNDAA. This demonstrates that the Myanmar military will not submit to any foreign powers regarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.

Myanmar's China Policy after the 2021 Coup

After the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar's China policy would of course continue to be affected by external risks and the general's conciliatory preference. Since the Biden administration has imposed new sanctions on the top Burmese military officers and business entities that are owned or controlled by the military after the military coup of February 2021,⁶³ Myanmar has had to seek Chinese help

⁵⁹Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma: Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State*, p. 168.

⁶⁰Minnie Chan, "Senior Chinese Military Strategist 'Leaked State Secrets, Helped Rebels in Myanmar,'" *South China Morning Post*, 6 March 2015, at <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1730837/pla-military-strategist-leaked-state-secrets-helped-myanmar-rebels>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁶¹Khin Khin Ei, "Myanmar Says Kokang Rebels Getting Help from China's Side of Border," *RFA*, 26 February 2015, at <<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ye-htut-kokang-02262015162400.html>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁶²Win Min, "Fighting Intensifies in Myanmar's Kokang Region," *VOA*, 18 March 2015, at <<http://www.voanews.com/a/fighting-intensifies-in-myanmar-kokang-region/2685901.html>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁶³Antony J. Blinken, "Designating Officials and Entities in Connection with the Military Coup in Burma," US Department of State, 11 February 2021, at <<https://www.state.gov/designating-officials-and-entities-in-connection-with-the-military-coup-in-burma/>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

to resist the US pressure. So far, General Min Aung Hlaing is the most powerful figure in Myanmar's politics. He is often described as a hardliner and conservative within the Tatmadaw, who refuses to compromise in political and security matters.⁶⁴ However, one cannot predict his behavior as to whether he will provoke the West and isolate Myanmar from the world again or not as there will be a decreasing security threat from the United States and rising economic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon after the military coup, he announced that he would continue to maintain the current political, administrative, economic, social, and external relations of the country.⁶⁵ The foreign policy would be independent, active, and non-aligned, aimed at world peace and friendly relations, and it would uphold the principles of peaceful coexistence with other nations.⁶⁶ Since the American troops are unlikely to be deployed in Myanmar and the ethnic conflicts will deescalate because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Burmese generals do not need to take aggressive actions to respond to external threats. Conversely, they need to seek foreign assistance to support the military government and to support the weak economy that has been severely undermined by the pandemic. In this context, China has once again emerged as a main foreign partner for the military regime in the post-February coup. The nomination of the new Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin is a clear sign that Myanmar intends to move closer to China.⁶⁷

Nonetheless, Min Aung Hlaing may instinctually mistrust China for its role in supporting ethnic groups,⁶⁸ and, for that matter, might also approach other great powers. Currently, he is bolstered by having excellent relations with Russia. This may be evinced by the fact that the Myanmar military signed a new arms deal with Russia on the eve of the coup and within a week sanctioned the use of the COVID-19 vaccine produced by Russia, which evinces a keenness to promote ties with Russia. More recently, Min Aung Hlaing made his first foreign trip to Moscow to expand defense cooperation with Russia after the February coup, 2 months after his Indonesia trip in April this year. He also announced that the

⁶⁴M Farmaner, "It's Time To Talk About Min Aung Hlaing," *Huffington Post*, 13 April 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mark-farmaner/min-aung-hlaing_b_15001514.html; Nian Peng, *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy since 1988* (Singapore, Springer Nature, 2020), p.142.

⁶⁵"Senior General Min Aung Hlaing Delivers His Speech at Coordination Meeting of the State Administration Council," *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 16 February 2021, at <<https://www.gnlm.com.mm/senior-general-min-aung-hlaing-delivers-speech-at-coordination-meeting-of-state-administration-council/>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁶⁶"Myanmar Continues to Practise An Independent, Active and Non-aligned Foreign Policy: Senior General," *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 19 February 2021, at <<https://www.gnlm.com.mm/myanmar-continues-to-practise-independent-active-and-non-aligned-foreign-policy-senior-general/>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁶⁷Bertil Lintner, "China the Geopolitical Winner of Myanmar's Coup," *Asian Times*, 4 February 2021, at <https://asiatimes.com/2021/02/china-the-geopolitical-winner-of-myanmars-coup/?mc_cid=49ccc8b30&mc_eid=6e454c3b72> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

government would use both the Chinese and Indian vaccines as well. Additionally, as the generals did in the past decades, Min Aung Hlaing has prioritized foreign relations with its ASEAN neighbors by permitting ASEAN's mediating role in the political deadlock in Myanmar.⁶⁹ Clearly, the new military policy is to try to get as much support as possible from neighboring countries and attempt to avoid over-dependence on China.

On the other hand, the coup reflected a strong rebound in anti-Chinese sentiment among the public as there is an adverse reaction in Burmese society to some rumors on social media that "Chinese aircraft transported technicians to Myanmar," or that "China is helping the Tatmadaw build a firewall."⁷⁰ Moreover, since the suspension of the Myitsone dam in September 2011, the local communities are still biased against Chinese investments and view them with suspicion.⁷¹ The ethnic groups, in particular, have criticized some Chinese resource projects for escalating tensions in the minorities.⁷² This eventually led to a smash attack on Chinese-run factories in the industrial zones in Yangon in March 2021. In addition, both the Myanmar government and the military have long been aware of the detrimental consequences of Chinese mega-projects, such as the debt trap and the security risks in these cross-border infrastructure projects funded by Chinese state-owned enterprises. Therefore, it is likely that Myanmar will now reinforce its relations with China with the aim to consolidate the new military regime and reduce Western pressure in the near future, while on the other hand it will seek to actively diversify its diplomacy. It will be cautious in ties with China and will try to properly manage issues at a bilateral level in order to avoid a loss of political autonomy by over-dependence on China.

Conclusion

This study contends that Myanmar actually adopted a hedging strategy to best deal with a rising China in the past three decades. In practice, Myanmar has

⁶⁹Min Aung Hlaing did not oppose the "Five-Point Consensus" in the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on Myanmar issue on April 24, 2021. See "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting," ASEAN, 24 April 2021, at <<https://asean.org/storage/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁷⁰"Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar H.E. Mr. Chen Hai Gives Interview to Myanmar Media on The Current Situation in Myanmar," Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, 16 February 2021, at <<http://mm.china-embassy.org/eng/sxwx/t1854268.htm>> (searched date: 10 July 2021).

⁷¹Li Chenyang, Meng Zijun, and Luo Shengrong, "Yi Dai Yi Lu Kuang Jia Xia De Zhong Mian Jing Ji Zou Lang Jian She:Zhu Yao Nei Rong, Mian Lin Tiao Zhan Yu Tui Jin Lu Jing [The Construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor under Belt and Road Initiative: Core Contents, Challenges and Paths Forward]," *Nan Ya Yan Jiu [South Asian Studies]*, 4 (2019), pp. 126–127.

⁷²Siu Sue Mark, Indra Overland and Roman Vakulchuk, "Sharing the Spoils: Winners and Losers in the Belt and Road Initiative in Myanmar," *The Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39-3 (2020), p. 398.

always been faced with the risks of Western interference and its high dependence on China due to its strategically important geography. Given this, Myanmar has either approached China to resist the United States or engaged with the United States to deny Chinese dominance. In the meantime, the Burmese leaders have long been influenced by Myanmar's dangerous geographical position and have thus formed a deep feeling of independence. They have also learned from the historical experience of peacefully coexisting with the powerful states as well as from classic Buddhist values, such as peace and non-extremism; thus, they have thereby adopted peaceful ways to mitigate external risks while avoiding provoking great powers. Therefore, Myanmar has cooperated with China on economic growth and military modernization on the one hand and has committed to reduce reliance on China by diversifying its foreign relations and resisting Chinese pressure on the other.

The main theoretical contribution to this study is the argument that states not only hedge against security threats, but also offset the political risks of losing autonomy in an age of rising rivalry between the great powers. For the secondary states like Myanmar, they have to survive the regime through engagement with the great powers while maintaining independence in the great power competition. Neither pure bandwagoning nor balancing could meet their urgent needs of developing the country while avoiding losing their political autonomy. Instead, hedging, which includes the two contradictory policies of cooperation and balancing, is one of the best ways for them to deny dominance from the threatening power while avoiding irritating it.

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