

# HAS MYANMAR BECOME CHINA'S BACK DOOR TO THE INDIAN OCEAN?

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## INTRODUCTION

Geography plays a significant role in the strategic competition between the United States and China. Recognizing this fact of life, many U.S. strategists have focused on the South China Sea but for various reasons omitted the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> This omission highlights a persistent blind spot for many U.S. strategists in the context of strategic competition. This blind spot has precluded them from appreciating the significance of Myanmar given its important geographical location. U.S. foreign policy towards Myanmar historically has been centered on the human rights and democratization issue. Meanwhile, Beijing considers Myanmar a strategically imperative country in Southeast Asia for China's geostrategic positioning and its overall grand strategy, which are aimed at leading Asia and diminishing America's access and influence in the region. With over 2,000 kilometers of coastline along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, proximity to the western entrance of the Malacca Strait, and a direct linkage to the Indian Ocean, Myanmar is a geographically significant country in Asia. That was the reason the British colonials and the Japanese during World War II strived to control Myanmar. The same geopolitical interests apply to modern-day China. A clear indication of this can be seen in Chinese President Xi Jinping's successful visit to Myanmar in January 2020 at the heel of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling regarding Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingyas. While others are preoccupied with battling the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has increased its diplomatic pressure to expedite the finalization of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) deal.<sup>2</sup>

Beijing's desire to establish a back door through Myanmar to the Indian Ocean is now much closer to becoming a reality.

As strategic competition heats up in the region, it is imperative for U.S. policy makers and strategists to reassess the impact of its bilateral policies on U.S. strategic position. U.S. policy toward Myanmar must enhance U.S. position within the context of strategic competition and assist the overall U.S. national and Indo-Pacific security strategy. Particularly, it must reflect the strategic imperatives of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision. In the long run, such a strategically-minded policy will help obtain the human rights and democratization goals that are honorable and worthy foreign policy aims for the United States.

### **THE TORTURED HISTORY OF U.S.-MYANMAR RELATIONS**

U.S.-Myanmar relations for the past 30 years have been dominated by sanctions and limited engagement. As a 2018 report of the Congressional Research Service notes, “[b]etween 1989 and 2008, Congress passed a series of laws imposing diplomatic and economic sanctions on Burma’s military junta, in response to its violent suppression of democratic protests in 1988, 1990, 2003, and 2007.”<sup>3</sup> Another series of mass protests in 2007—this time led by Buddhist monks and triggered by an economic shock—resulted in confrontation and bloodshed. About 8 months after the uprising on May 1, 2008, the United States announced a fresh set of sanctions on Myanmar. Coincidentally, on the night of May 2, Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar. The United States sent disaster management specialists to assist the Myanmar government with assessment of damages immediately after the cyclone. However, the Myanmar generals were absolutely convinced that it was a U.S. ploy to invade Myanmar.<sup>4</sup> The lack of trust by Myanmar officials, and their decision of to reject U.S. aid, may have prevented innocent lives from being lost but their mindset and fear were forged in the past. Thirty years of sanctions could not be overcome.

### **A New Beginning for U.S.-Myanmar Relations**

Two years after Cyclone Nargis (2010), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Myanmar’s National League for Democracy (NLD), was released from house arrest. The Myanmar military regime loosened its grip and allowed the country to transition from military authoritarian regime to a constitution-based semi-democratic government led by a retired general,

U Thein Sein. U.S. policymakers watched this transition with skepticism. When U Thein Sein decisively suspended the construction of Myintsone Dam, a big Chinese-built dam project, in September 2011 as the result of overwhelming public protests, the United States viewed this decision as a significant indicator of the authenticity of military-led democratic transition. Within 3 months after the Myintsone Dam suspension, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made an historic visit to Myanmar. Her visit signaled to other western countries and U.S. allies to open their doors to the newly democratic Myanmar. Soon after, the United States posted an ambassador to head up the U.S. mission in Myanmar and started to ease the sanctions. President Barack Obama had historic meetings with President U Thein Sein in 2013 in Washington and then in Naypyitaw in 2014. When Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party won the free and fair elections in 2015 and took the helm of the government in 2016, there was much optimism for the future of U.S.-Myanmar relations. As of early 2017, the United States had lifted almost all the sanctions and U.S.-Myanmar relations were at their best.

### **The U.S. U-Turn**

Then came the Rohingya crisis in August 2017. The images of hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh streamed all over the international news while the Myanmar military claimed to be responding to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's (ARSA) "coordinated attacks" on the police and military outposts in western Rakhine State.<sup>5</sup> The international media and community were quick to blame Daw Aung San Suu Kyi for the military's ruthless response. Since then, many Americans came to view Myanmar through the lens of media reports on the plight of the Rohingya. This crisis has become another U-turn point for Myanmar's relations with the United States and the West. The United States quickly suspended many of the engagements as special interest groups put pressure on the U.S. Congress to pass sanctions.

### **CHINA ACHIEVES VITAL STRATEGIC GAINS**

The August 2017 Rohingya crisis provided China with a lucky opportunity to regain its grip on Myanmar. On the heels of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling regarding the Myanmar treatment of the Rohingyas, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a visit to Myanmar in January 2020.. The visit represented a successful step to reach Beijing's goal of establish-

ing a back door through Myanmar to the Indian Ocean. Up until this crisis, Myanmar had put its relationship with China on a back-burner as Western countries led by the United States increased their engagements following Secretary Clinton's visit in December 2011. Myanmar was presented with plenty of options for engagement and received many offers of assistance for the development of the country's governance institutions and economy in support of on-going democratic transition. Beijing watched the unfolding landscape in Myanmar with increasing concern. It felt it were blind-sided by the military-led democratic transition in 2010. The leadership in Beijing was shocked when President U Thein Sein suspended the big construction project of the Myintsone Dam in September 2011.<sup>6</sup> Their uneasiness increased as the European Union and the United States started to insert themselves into Myanmar's peace talk processes. By 2015, Beijing felt that Myanmar was slipping away from its carefully constructed grip crafted after 1989 when the first wave of the U.S. and western sanctions went into effect to isolate Myanmar.<sup>7</sup> Every time the United States and the West tighten sanctions on Myanmar, China has been able to make additional headway in pulling Myanmar tighter into its grip.

China has viewed Myanmar as a land-bridge to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, safeguarding and controlling the Myanmar corridor was of vital importance for Beijing's foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> This recognition and the ensuing Chinese ambition date back to the early Chinese explorers who searched for a route from the land-locked provinces of China (such as the modern-day Yunnan area) via Myanmar to the sea.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Myanmar provides a strategic alternative to China's "Malacca Dilemma." China's dependency on the narrow Strait of Malacca, where a majority of its shipping and energy supplies must traverse through, created a significant vulnerability in its strategic competition with the United States. Beijing sees unfettered access to the Myanmar corridor as a key remedy to this strategic vulnerability. After Xi Jinping's January visit and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period, Beijing has increased its diplomatic efforts to expedite the finalization of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) deal.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, access to over 2,000 kilometers of Myanmar coastline strategically located at the western entrance to the Malacca Strait and with direct access to the Indian Ocean would give China an enormous advantage over its major competitors. If this comes to fruition, China will be able to control both the eastern part of Malacca Strait via the artificial islands in the South China Sea and the western part via Myanmar.

Myanmar, similar to most mainland Southeast Asian nations, shared the same fear of its powerful northern neighbor throughout history. Since the end of World War II, China's Communist Party has supported and armed communist insurgent groups in Myanmar. Given these Chinese actions, Myanmar has always approached China's foreign policy with skepticism and caution. However, the stringent Western sanctions left no alternative for Myanmar. Following the sanctions in 1989, Myanmar agreed to open its northern border for trade. Myanmar became China's major foreign market for cheap consumer goods and China became a major importer of Myanmar timber, forestry products, minerals, seafood, and agricultural produce.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 1991, China became one of the major lenders for infrastructure projects in Myanmar and began selling massive supplies of military hardware to the Myanmar military.<sup>12</sup> Fashioning after the United States' International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, China started to educate the next generation of Myanmar military officers. Although the relationship appeared close and friendly on the surface, there were still a sense of unease within the Myanmar regime.

Another round of U.S. sanctions in 2004 and 2008 gave needed leverage to China as it pushed for building an oil and gas pipeline connecting China's interior to Myanmar's Rakhine western coast. The construction of the 800 kilometer dual-pipeline commenced in October 2009, providing China with a significant strategic "end-run" around the Malacca Strait chokepoint. China's ability to influence and pressure Myanmar's military regime to allow the construction of the oil and gas dual-pipeline from the Yunnan Province to the deep-seaport in Kyaukphyu, on the western coast of Myanmar, was a significant major breakthrough. Myanmar's military regime caved in under the western sanctions. This breakthrough delivered China a vital strategic alternative to the "Malacca Dilemma" for the first time in history. It has also largely neutralized the United States' previous geostrategic advantage with its ability to disrupt China's energy supply route through the Malacca Strait in time of crisis. Indeed, China has been able to maneuver out of its *entrapping terrain*, one of the elements of nine terrains of Sun-tzu's *Art of War* principle of *know the terrain*.<sup>13</sup>

## THE NEED FOR ALIGNMENT WITH THE U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

As the strategic competition between the United States and China escalates in the Indo-Pacific region, pillar number four of the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS December 2017) called for “Advancing American Influence.” The NSS specifically recognized that the “Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>14</sup> It specifically stated “the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) remain centerpieces of the Indo-Pacific’s regional architecture and platforms for promoting an order based on freedom.” Focusing on ASEAN as a regional architecture centerpiece requires efforts to bolster the unity of ASEAN members to withstand China’s overtures in the region. Therefore, the need for the United States to synchronize its regional strategy with bilateral policies towards ASEAN members is critical. The bilateral policies could inadvertently undermine the regional strategy if these policies are not nested or aligned with the intended outcome laid out by the NSS.

Isolating and excluding Myanmar from U.S.-sponsored defense and security related activities will give more reasons for Myanmar to turn to China, the major strategic competitor of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. This in turn may be inadvertently weakening ASEAN. “Divide and rule” is a preferred Chinese strategy towards ASEAN. So far, China has been able to dominate two (Cambodia and Laos) out of five mainland ASEAN members and Myanmar could become the third. ASEAN members that rely on China for economic and diplomatic support could be dominated by China and have to act as Beijing’s “Trojan horses” in ASEAN in exchange for Chinese largess. The more ASEAN members are dominated by China, the more Beijing is able to influence the group, and the more ASEAN’s unity is weakened. Therefore, if the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy gives center stage to Southeast Asia and regards ASEAN as one of its centerpieces, it must align and synchronize its bilateral policies and practices towards the ASEAN member countries to support regional strategy.

Bilateral policies that are less in tune with the strategic imperatives of the larger regional and global policies may inadvertently create opportunities for China to gain undue influence over Myanmar and enable China to open the back door to the Indian Ocean. Continued disengagement and sanctions by the United States and the West could further narrow Myanmar’s international space, limit its geostrategic choices, eventually

pushing Myanmar closer to the China. Such conditions would be neither helpful for the people of Myanmar nor U.S. national security interest in the region. As the strategic competition escalates in the Indo-Pacific region, U.S. policy should serve to increase America's influence in and access to Myanmar. This requires minimizing the unintended consequences of policies that may contradict the strategic imperatives of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision.

On the other hand, broadening U.S. bilateral policy to include U.S. national security interests and strategic competition dimensions will, in the long term, have a positive impact on Myanmar's human rights and democratization efforts as the United States is able to increase its access and influence. The institutionalization of democratic and human rights values take time. It is unrealistic and naïve for the puritanical advocates of human rights to think that deep-seated ignorance of human rights issues within Myanmar institutions could be transformed within four to five years of engagement. The United States' enduring and persistent engagement with South Korea since the end of the Korean War would be a good model to apply to Myanmar's case. During these decades, from the 1950s to the 1990s, South Korea had internal coups and killings; thousands were arrested and hundreds were killed. In the end, however, liberal values were able to take root and the political system changed to the better, not least thanks to multiple channels between the South Korean society and the United States. It took the South Korean people at least four decades to change the value system of their society and the character of their political regime. Myanmar, which has 70 years of non-engagement with the United States, cannot realign the values within four years. A formal alliance may not be essential; however, a general principle of persistent engagement—through some of the most tumultuous domestic political instability and gross human rights violations within South Korea—has paid off in the long run for both U.S. security interest and South Korea's successful democratization. Similarly, through enduring and consistent engagements with the Myanmar government, military, and society over time, the United States may be able to assist Myanmar with its transformation towards a genuine democracy while creating access, developing trust, and habits of dialogue. Such consistent and enduring engagements do not need to be mutually exclusive with advocating for human rights and democratization.

After seizure of a large cache of brand-new Chinese-made weapons destined for Rakhine State by Thai officials in the Thai-Myanmar border area at the end of June 2020, Myanmar Chief of Defense, Senior General

Min Aung Hlaing, publicly, albeit indirectly, “criticized” China by mentioning “the strong forces that support them [terrorist groups in Rakhine State]”.<sup>15</sup> His call for “international cooperation in the fight against terrorism” was unprecedented. This latest development creates a small window of opportunity for the United States to recalibrate its engagement with the Myanmar government and military to pull them out of China’s sphere of influence.

Viewing the Indo-Pacific region and the strategic competition through the lens of Sun-tzu’s *Art of War*, *terrain* was identified as one of the major five factors in strategy considerations.<sup>16</sup> Based on their actions, China’s strategy towards Myanmar heeds Sun-tzu’s advice, “*know the terrain*.” Therefore, it is imperative for U.S. strategists to recognize Myanmar as a key geographical terrain in the context of the strategic competition and seize the opportunities for engagement.

## Notes

1 For example, see Robert Kaplan, “How Trump is Losing Asia,” *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/08/how-trump-is-losing-asia/>.

2 Lucas Myers, “The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and China’s Determination to See It Through,” *Asia Dispatches*, Wilson Center, May 26, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/china-myanmar-economic-corridor-and-chinas-determination-see-it-through>

3 Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Restrictions on Relations with Burma* (Washington D.C., 2018).

4 Thant Myint-U, *History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2020), 99.

5 ICG, “Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State,” *International Crisis Group*, 15 December 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/283-myanmar-new-muslim-insurgency-rakhine-state>

6 Sun Yun, “New Balance in China-Myanmar Ties,” *Brookings*, November 3, 2011. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/new-balance-in-china-myanmar-ties/>

7 Sun Yun, “Has China Lost Myanmar,” *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2013. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/15/has-china-lost-myanmar/>

8 Bertil Lintner, *The Costliest Pearl: China’s Struggle for India’s Ocean*. (London: C. Hurst & Company Ltd.), 37.

9 Thant Myint-U, *History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 117.

10 Lucas Myers, “China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.”

11 Bertil Lintner, *Costliest Pearl*, 41.

12 Bertil Lintner, *Costliest Pearl*, 40.

13 Sun-tzu translated by Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Art of War*. (New York: Fall River Press, 1994), 142.

14 White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government, 2017), 46.

15 Editorial, "Myanmar's Generals Aren't Happy with China and It's No Longer a Secret," *The Irrawaddy*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/editorial/myanmars-generals-arent-happy-china-no-longer-secret.html>.

16 Sun-tzu translated by Sawyer, *Art of War*, 142.

