

Myanmar's 2020 Election:

THE COMPETING INTERESTS OF CHINA AND INDIA

By

Yan Myo Thein
| Independent Analyst |

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About the Report

This report evaluates the competing interests of China and India in Myanmar's 2020 General Election based on the current and historical documents, media reportages and online interviews, relevant to the multiparty general elections in Myanmar (Burma). The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) provided financial support to the research.

About the Author

Yan Myo Thein, a former political prisoner, is a political commentator cum analyst as well as an independent researcher, based in Yangon (Rangoon), Myanmar (Burma), who has covered Myanmar (Burma)'s making of a democratic federal union, peacebuilding and foreign relations, especially its ties with China and India for more than twenty years. He now writes for the local daily newspapers, the Daily Eleven and the 7th Day Daily in Myanmar and makes the political insights on Myanmar (Burma) for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), VOA, RFA and BBC.

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Summary

On November 8, 2020, while still reeling from the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar will hold its third general election the latest in the country's efforts towards building a genuinely inclusive Federal Democratic Union.¹ Many challenges undoubtedly lie ahead, particularly in the areas of stability along shared borders, sustainable economic development, and peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups. Some politicians, ethnic leaders and activists have raised doubts and questions regarding the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy party, which faces the possibility of losing more parliamentary seats in non-Bamar majority ethnic areas². That would be a setback for the party, which won the 2015 elections in a landslide and would result in a shift in power dynamics between the National League for Democracy party and the pro-democracy ethnic parties; the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, the Kachin State People's Party and the Arakan National Party.

China wielded substantial influence over the political process and elections in Myanmar before the 1967 Anti-Chinese riots. It did not gain in strength until 1985 when U Ne Win, the then-Chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party, paid a goodwill visit to China³. Following that visit, China continued to influence Myanmar until the dissolution of formal military rule in 2010. Beginning in 2011, as of the speedy engagements of the United States⁴ and European Union (E.U.)⁵ with Myanmar, China struggled to re-engage. The first order of business was a renewed attempt to build alliances with the political parties in Myanmar through the auspices of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC).

Following the 2016-2017 Rohingya Crisis⁶ and breakdown of diplomatic relations with the West⁷, China's influence has started to rise as it has helped Myanmar government maintain its position in the wider international community. Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Myanmar in January 2020 was a strategic move to consolidate these gains by accelerating the implementation of the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) which includes the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), the China-Myanmar Border Economic Cooperation Zone and the real estate project in Yangon, the New Yangon City Project. To be fair, China has a long history of trade relations with Myanmar, which has grown from \$2.9 billion in 2009 to \$10.8 billion in 2016-2017. China and Myanmar share a history of exports, including machinery (from China) and agriculture and jade (from Myanmar). These flourishing trade relations, therefore, preceded Myanmar joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2018 and formalizing the CMEC. During the visit, Xi reaffirmed China's commitment to revive the stalled multibillion-dollar Belt and Road (BRI) projects in Myanmar by signing 33 new memoranda of understanding including access to the deepwater port at Kyaukphyu in Rakhine state. The fact that China has restarted some of those agreements despite the setbacks of the pandemic is further evidence of how vital the relationship is to China.

However, China is not alone in its attempts to exert influence in Myanmar. Myanmar has remained of critical interest to India, due to two initiatives. First, Myanmar is a central element in the implementation of India's 'Act East' policy which focusses on the extended economic, political, strategic, and cultural neighborhood in the Asia-Pacific region, and includes the establishment of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation.⁸ Secondly, Myanmar is embraced by India's 'Neighborhood First' policy which focuses on creating mutually beneficial, people-oriented, regional frameworks for stability and prosperity.⁹ India supports Myanmar's democratization and seeks to minimize China's influence by providing robust support for the strengthening of democratic practices in Myanmar, primarily through the sharing of resources with its election commission, a strategic partnership begun in 2017.

In 2020, China and India have both turned their focus on Myanmar's general elections, its political parties, and leaders. The engagement of both countries has been self-interest and of strategic geopolitics. China's concerns lie with sustaining the CMEC, the oil and gas pipelines, and ensuring continued access to the Indian Ocean. China has a vested interest in ensuring that its investments in Myanmar, which are highly contentious, as discussed below, do not become a focal point of the elections. The interests of India are, similarly, threefold: access to ASEAN nations; the integrity of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which was predicted to be a critical part of the Act East Policy, and would also provide an outlet

for the landlocked frontier region of India's Northeast through Rakhine state; and the security of its northeast border region.

These interests loom large over the upcoming elections and if political interference is proved, have the potential to undermine Myanmar's progress toward internal stability and trust-building among competing demographics within civil society. Myanmar stands at a critical crossroads, and all hope of real democratization and an end to the civil war depends upon the elections being both free of outside influences, and entirely fair in the minds of the citizenry.

Political, social, and economic instability in Myanmar would be disruptive, obviously, to Myanmar, and both its close neighbors, but it is also not a desirable outcome for other countries who have a vested interest in the outcome of these elections. The United States and other western nations such as Australia, Japan, as well as South Korea, have made efforts to improve and consolidate their strategic relations with Myanmar and neutralize China's position in the country, efforts which would be undermined by any perceived lack of integrity in the electoral process and the turmoil that is likely to result from it.

This research finds that there is a vital role to be played by the United States, European nations, India, Australia, and Japan in the 2020 elections. Although, if taken together, these countries outspend China by a wide margin when it comes to investing in Myanmar's elections, we recommend that their investment be increased in order to stabilize the foundations of a strong electorate and electoral process, including civil society organizations, before, and after the elections. That kind of targeted engagement would mitigate the outsized influence of China on Myanmar and its elections, and could, in addition, enhance Myanmar's socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak.

This research is based on a review of current and historical documents relevant to Myanmar's elections, and, in the interest of including current constituents and experts in the conversation, on a series of online interviews conducted from April to mid-May, 2020, through Facebook messenger with three female parliamentarians of Bamar¹⁰, Shan¹¹, and Rakhine¹², two political leaders of Shan and Kachin, a former parliamentarian of Shan, two intellectuals and two former political prisoners under the military regime¹³.

Introduction

Political rivalry in the lead up to the 2020 general election is likely to intensify. The non-Bamar ethnic political parties, which make up 30% of the population, and based in the states bordering China, India, and Thailand, are contesting the election in an attempt to secure more parliamentary seats than in the earlier general election. In 2015, the ruling NLD party won 390 seats of the 664 seats in the Union Parliament, and the non-Bamar ethnic parties secured 56 seats.¹⁴ Since then, the non-Bamar ethnic parties have gained momentum. Political parties in five states; Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, and Mon, have taken significant steps to merge several parties under one banner before the national election. The need of the ruling NLD to secure two-thirds of the contested seats, the flow of non-Bamar ethnic peoples' votes towards away from the NLD and toward the proliferation of unified ethnic parties including the afore-mentioned SNLD, ANP, KSPP, as well as other such as the Karen National Democratic Party (KNDP), the Mon Unity Party (MUP), and the Chin National League for Democracy Party (CNLD) and the likely low voter turnout on account of COVID, are all critical driving forces behind the intense political competition around the 2020 general election.

Since its Independence, Myanmar has been mindful of its position between two giant neighbours, China and India. India's border with Myanmar is 1,643 kilometres, while China shares an approximately 2,185 km long border with Myanmar. In the lead up to independence, the late General Aung San insisted that the country must endeavour to establish friendly relations with India and China.¹⁵ He spotlighted the strategic position of those two countries, and shared borders, as a vital guideline for Myanmar in its foreign relations.

As mentioned above, energy procurement and security, access to the Indian Ocean, the tranquility of the border areas and the smooth trade flow across the borders are the strategic interests of China.¹⁶ China interests are, therefore served by maintaining stability in Myanmar, by gaining leverage and bargaining power through its role in the peace process¹⁷, the oil and gas pipeline¹⁸ and the CMEC. China's foreign policy approach aims to maximize its friends and minimize its foes in Myanmar. China's good neighbor policy¹⁹ and western development strategy²⁰ also guide its engagement along with the five principles of peaceful coexistence²¹. Given its vast territory, its dominance in the region is significant, and its role in Myanmar's peace process and economic development is undoubtedly critical.

India posits its foreign policy toward Myanmar with a view to holding fast to the accessibility of ASEAN nations, its border security, the multi-modal transport initiatives, and associated bilateral trade and investments. India's shared borders between the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, also include a maritime border along with the Andaman Islands. It emphasizes enhancing its strategic geopolitical and economic concerns and neutralizing Chinese dominance in Myanmar.²² India's friendly relationship with Myanmar had steadily improved since 2004 when Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, paid a first goodwill visit to India. Its ties with Myanmar have continued to develop in the post-election period, and its ongoing and close relations with the NLD Government has enabled the bilateral relationship to remain positive. In short, India needs Myanmar to secure access to ASEAN and the Bay of Bengal, while Myanmar needs India to balance China's rising influence.

Myanmar also needs China to ensure its protection in the United Nations Security Council amidst rising international pressure stemming from the 2016-17 Rohingya Crisis. This kind of transactional relationship on an international stage also underlies diplomatic engagement between India and Myanmar, although thus far India has indicated that it wants to keep investment projects and political support separate.

The Government of Myanmar looks to trade its strong statements of support for China's hegemonic interests in Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong in exchange for a sympathetic read from China on Myanmar's domestic political issues with Rakhine, Rohingya, etc. However, the NLD government is not willing to give China a favorable status on economic projects in exchange for China's political support and attempts to keep these two separates. Unlike India then, China insists on raising both political and economic issues simultaneously and articulating them as being inextricably bound.

Myanmar Election and China

Overview of History

China and 1956, 1960 and 1990 General Elections in Myanmar

In 1954, China formed a new foreign policy approach which focused on breaking through the U.S.'s China containment policy²³. China aimed to unite all countries that wished to maintain peace with China and create a peaceful, stable regional environment for its own economic development and recovery. Its new foreign policy triggered a shift in China-Myanmar relations, moving away from China's previous antipathy toward non-communist countries to peaceful coexistence with these countries; in other words, China aimed to make more friends than foes.²⁴ China's genuine friendship with Myanmar was established nearly 70 years ago, when both countries initiated brotherly Pauk Phaw relations, and Myanmar's Premier U Nu paid the first goodwill visit and held talks with Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Beijing.²⁵

The significance of China's thawed relations with Myanmar's Government became apparent during the second post-independence parliamentary elections, held in April and May of 1956, when the National United Front (NUF), an alliance of pro-communist political parties, secured nearly one-third of the total vote and 46 out of 233 available parliamentary seats.²⁶ The majority of NUF parliamentarians were the sympathizers of the outlawed Communist Party of Burma (CPB), who had the sympathies of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and they became the most vigorous opposition inside the parliament.

It must be noted here that the Burma Workers and Peasants Party (BWPP) was instrumental in forming the NUF in 1955, and that Thakin Than Tun, former Chairman of the CPB, defined the BWPP as the pro-communist party which was in opposition to the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). Indeed, it has been shown that the BWPP assumed policy positions similar to those of the CPB.²⁷ Further, the close alliance becomes even more evident when we consider that U Thein Pe Myint (Thakin Thein Pe), one of the leaders of NUF, was the former Secretary of the CPB.²⁸ These deep-rooted ideological alliance threatened the then-ruling AFPFL led by Premier U Nu and were seen as the rise of a pro-communist bloc inside the parliament. In addition, the AFPFL was concerned by reports of an alleged infusion of funding by foreign embassies to the NUF before the election. Among the foreign embassies alleged to have provided such targeted funding was the Chinese Embassy in Rangoon, which had reportedly assisted some political parties during the general election in 1956.²⁹

Following the elections, in August 1956, the Burmese Ambassador to China, U Hla Maung, brought these concerns regarding China's tampering in a domestic election to the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai.³⁰ The Burmese press also reported on Chinese meddling in the country's general election. Included among the allegations was the charge that Beijing had provided the opposition with campaign funds and arranged for the opposition leaders to visit China, covering all of their expenses.³¹ Although China denied these claims, the Burmese public and Government remained unconvinced.

Similarly, Chinese interference was apparent once more during the elections of 1960. This time, Chinese tactics appeared to be more complicated. Before the elections, the Chinese Myanmar nationals and the expatriate Chinese in Burma supported the Clean faction of the divided Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL)³², led by Premier U Nu. This support was a departure from what was offered during the 1956 election where it was seen as being given to the pro-Communist parties. Former Burmese Premier U Ba Swe told Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai when meeting with him in 1960 that before the elections that year, the Myanmar Chinese had provided funding to the AFPFL (Clean) and that AFPFL (Clean) leaders had raised money from Chinese businesspeople, both Chinese and Myanmar nationals, in Burma (Myanmar). The Bank of China in Rangoon was accused of sponsoring U Nu's run for the premiership.³³ Because of China's trustworthy and good relations with U Nu³⁴ and with the possible goal of ratifying the China-Burma Border Treaty successfully – an objective that was achieved on October 1 of that year – the Chinese Government, as well as individual Chinese citizens under the guidance of the CPC, directly backed the AFPFL (Clean) in the 1960 general elections.

In 1990, China once again changed its approach to Burma's election. For the first time in 28 years, Myanmar's military junta held a multiparty general election, fulfilling one of their original doctrines³⁵ from the military coup in 1988³⁶. Cheng Ruisheng, a former Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar (1987 – 1991) wrote in his position paper that after the NLD received a landslide victory, winning 396 seats out of the total 485 seats in the May 1990 general election, he had gone to the NLD headquarters to offer his congratulations, the first ambassador to do so.³⁷ His short but unexpected visit shocked the ruling military elites, opposition actors, and ethnic stakeholders in Myanmar. Whatever the intent of the visit might have been, the unusual diplomatic step was perceived by the military junta as being evidence of Chinese involvement in the outcome of the elections.

Although the NLD party won in a landslide in the 1990 election, with a 72.6% voter turnout, the results were not acknowledged by the ruling military. Instead, the junta continued to hold on to power, claimed legitimacy on the grounds of being recognized by the United Nations, and annulled the election. They also prioritized the writing of a new constitution that awarded the armed forces vast amounts of power in Government; that document was later ratified by a national referendum in 2008. China uncritically welcomed the poll as a step toward democratization.³⁸ In November 2010, the military junta held the controversial election which was considered a sham, with high censorship, no independent observers, widespread vote-rigging, low turnout, and more than two thousands political prisoners³⁹. A few days after the election, the Government released opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi after fifteen cumulative years of house arrest. She led the NLD party again and contested in the 2012 by-election. On December 8, 2011, a few months before that election, in what was seen as a tactical move, Chinese Ambassador Li Junhua (2010-2013) held talks with Aung San Suu Kyi for the first time in two decades.⁴⁰ After the election, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD members became the parliamentarians under the controversial 2008 constitution.

On September 28, 2015, just before the general election that year, Chinese Ambassador Hong Liang (2015-2019) held talks with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Chairperson of the NLD party. During the meeting, the two sides discussed the intra-party cooperation and exchanges between the CPC and the NLD.⁴¹ In the 2015 election, the NLD won a landslide victory with 86% of all eligible seats in the Union Parliament and attained a majority in all parliaments except the local parliaments of Shan State and Rakhine State. As such, the NLD held a supermajority in both chambers of the Union Parliament, allowing it the power to elect the President and also control most of the nation's Regional and State Parliaments. The Union parliament elected the President, Htin Kyaw along with two Vice Presidents including a Vice President nominated by the military representatives, as per the constitution. The Union parliament also enacted the State Counsellor Law as the first law of the second parliament, a move essentially enabling the electorate to appoint Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor, and make her the de-facto leader of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

A day before her appointment as State Counsellor, on April 5, 2016, Foreign Minister Aung San Suu Kyi held talks with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Naypyitaw. Wang Yi was the first foreign visitor to Myanmar, accepting an invitation from the NLD government sent it out immediately after the new Government took office. China appreciated the meeting and said that it was a clear demonstration of the "Paukphaw" friendship between the two countries.⁴²

China & the 2020 General Election

Elections are the hallmark of democratization and must be conducted in a free and fair manner without undue influence from external powers, whether directly or indirectly. We posit that China is less interested in the transparency and fairness of the elections in Myanmar and much more concerned with furthering its own economic and political agendas. That places Myanmar's commitment to free and fair elections at direct odds with Beijing's interests in securing its assets in Myanmar.

The First State Visit in Almost 20 Years: A NLD Success?

The events of recent months show evidence of continuing interest in Myanmar on the part of Chinese authorities. Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a goodwill visit to Myanmar on 17th and 18th January 2020. It was the first such high-level visit in almost twenty years. Before President Xi's historic visit to Myanmar, the last visit from a Chinese President was Mr. Jiang Zemin in December 2001.⁴³ The strategic focus of Xi's visit centered on the matters of mutual concern including the economic corridor, the bilateral relations, peacebuilding and development.⁴⁴

Xi's visit was intended to strengthen the ties between the two nations and to speed up the implementation of the CMEC under the guise of promoting people to people relations. The visit strongly reflected China's continued support to the NLD government, led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, insofar as her party supports Beijing's initiatives. By concentrating on economic cooperation, the visit also served to deflect international attention from the Rohingya issue. It also indirectly spotlighted China's role as a powerful protector amid escalating diplomatic tensions between Myanmar and other countries, including the U.S., UK, France, Canada, and Australia over the 2016-17 Rohingya Crisis.

President Xi Jinping stated in his speech in Nay Pyi Taw that, "*the year 2020 is of great significance for China, for Myanmar and our relations. Myanmar will hold a general election and enter a new phase of national development. This year also marks the beginning of a new era for China-Myanmar relations*".⁴⁵ We could see the fact that Xi mentioned the 2020 election in Myanmar during his remarks as indicating China's interest not only in Myanmar's upcoming elections but its outcome.

Xi's official trip to Nay Pyi Taw demonstrated a smart calculation on the part of the Chinese Government. The economic agreements already make up a remarkable achievement for the NLD party and its Government and could be seen as providing something of a political stimulus package for the NLD in an election year. However, most interview participants did not believe that in 2020, the economic agreements with China could necessarily relate an electoral victory of the NLD party. Despite the rising anti-Chinese sentiment, the respondents felt that, overall, the people of Myanmar commended the NLD government on its ability to secure a visit from the Chinese President in 2020, given that, previously, the much-touted Pauk Phaw relationship had been mostly one-sided in China's favor. Some interviewees did, however, feel that bilateral relations between the two countries reached its climax during Xi's visit and stressed the tour as being a formal reflection of China's role as a protector of Myanmar concerning the international community.

Myanmar agreed to collaborate with China on the BRI⁴⁶ as early as 2008 though it was not called by that name until much later. The agreement included implementing the three pillars of the CMEC⁴⁷; the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone, Myanmar-China Border Economic Cooperation Zones, and new Yangon City project. Due to widespread anti-Chinese sentiment brought on by perceptions that China's presence in Myanmar is aggressive, as well as opposition to China's investments in these areas, the NLD government has had to reassess its policies. The NLD has, therefore, been taking steps to review, regulate, and amend its policies on trade and development with China. In 2018, for instance, the NLD government seriously negotiated with China's CITIC Group to reduce its stake in the Kyaukphyu Port project of Rakhine State from 85% to 70%, though no fresh pullbacks of this sort have been seen since then.⁴⁸ Such cautious and robust approach, taken by the Government, helps the NLD party to cement public support again before the election.

Growing Chinese Engagement with Myanmar's Electoral Process in 2020

China's interest and role in the electoral process were quite limited and less active from 2011 to 2016, under the reign of the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP), which was the party vehicle for the former military leaders. However, as we have seen after 2015, China has involved itself actively in Myanmar's electoral process by engaging with the Union Election Commission of Myanmar (UEC)⁴⁹. The relationship can be traced back to October 2019 when Ms. Sun Haiyan⁵⁰, Director General of Bureau of Public Info and Communication of the International Department of the CPC⁵¹ visited and exchanged views

on the UEC's strategic plan for 2019 – 2022 with its Chairman U Hla Thein, signaling a new approach for China concerning the relationships between leading actors on the political stage in Myanmar.⁵²

Following the initial engagement, the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA)⁵³ took the further step of inviting the UEC Chairman to pay a visit to China. In December 2019, UEC Chairman and a delegation of officials visited China to explore, compare and contrast the electoral systems of two nations⁵⁴ and learn about China's governance experience and understand the operation of China's legislative body, the National People's Congress⁵⁵. It is critical to mention that such an invitation has been the first from China to Myanmar's electoral commission since 2011.

During the tour on December 2, 2019, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui held talks with UEC Chairman U Hla Thein in Beijing. In prepared remarks, Luo stated his support of the smooth fulfillment of the duties of the UEC and wished Myanmar a smooth general election in 2020. For his part, UEC Chairman assured the Chinese officials that Myanmar's general election and subsequent political reform would achieve steady progress in the future with the support of the international community, including China.⁵⁶ Chairman of the CPIFA Wang Chao also held talks with UEC Chairman and delegates in Beijing.

In Yunnan, Chen Hao, Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee as well as Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Provincial People's Congress, and Li Pei, Vice Chairman of the Provincial People's Congress, held talks with Myanmar's delegates.⁵⁷ Li Pei briefed about the Yunnan Provincial People's Congress and exchanged views on issues such as democratic politics, elections, and the making of the rule of law. He hoped to enhance the friendly exchanges between Yunnan and Myanmar to achieve more significant development that would be mutually beneficial in the new era.⁵⁸ As reported in the press, the delegation from Myanmar thanked China for its assistance and expressed its willingness to play a decisive role in promoting the development of bilateral relations and friendly cooperation between Myanmar and Yunnan.⁵⁹

The visit must be seen in light of the vastly diverse cultures that define the electoral system of each country. The electoral system in China is meritocratic, and all electoral authorities are the cadres of the CPC, which also sets the electoral rules. Thus, the free and fair elections are out of the question in China. The invitation extended to high-ranking members of Myanmar's UEC to understand China's system was therefore quite significant. The visit reflected a much more intimate engagement with Myanmar's electoral mechanism, though its effects are yet to be seen.

CPC's interactions with major political parties and its leaders

Equally critical to China's engagement strategy around Myanmar's election is its interactions and engagement with Myanmar's political parties. The primary actor involved in this effort is the CPC which has the flexibility to engage opposition parties in other countries, a tactic that the Government lacks due to China's stated tenets of foreign policy, outlined above as the five principles of peaceful engagement.

The CPC has prioritized its engagement with key players like the NLD, the USDP, and the ethnic parties, depending on the projected margins of wins and losses in the forthcoming election and their based areas⁶⁰ close to its border and projects, and their status as the ruling party, opposition parties, and potentially influential parties including newly formed parties, and youth leaders.

During the period from 1962 to 1985, China prioritized its engagement with Myanmar's Government and not with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP)⁶¹. Further, the CPC maintained its party to party relations only with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)⁶².

In 1988, Myanmar's coup military regime proclaimed that it would hold the multiparty general election and adopt the multiparty political system. In the 1990s, China's engagement with the parties, including the ethnic parties remained minimal and quite limited. After the 2010 election which revitalized the process of a multiparty political system, China enhanced its relations to accommodate the numerous political parties. Today, China has designated diplomats to be assigned special duties regarding the development of ties with influential political parties and their leaders in Myanmar.⁶³

China's approach to its relations with the political parties and leaders of Myanmar, among other developing nations, is a farsighted strategic plan for accelerating its influence and dominance towards so-called third world nations. The International Department of the CPC is the implementor of such policy. The visit of Ms Sun Haiyan, the Director-General of that department in October 2019 is a case in point. Although she held talks with the leaders of Myanmar's political parties including the NLD, the USDP, the Arakan National Party (ANP), the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) and the Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD) during that visit, no participant issued any informative press release regarding the content or purpose of their meetings. The lack of transparency and accountability was quite noticeable, particularly in the lead up to a critical election.

Chinese authorities are quite anxious about the outcome of the 2020 election and the Government likely to be formed in March 2021. They are also keen to back any political parties that would commit to rallying public support for the CMEC and its ongoing projects. Although the NLD government has scaled down plans and slowed progress on some of the more ambitious aspects of the CMEC, China seems still enthusiastic about continuing its partnership with Aung San Suu Kyi and the Government she leads. Moreover, China needs the legitimacy and popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi to neutralize the rising anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar.

From the perspective of China, Aung San Suu Kyi presents the possibility of a stable government led by a popular leader. It is outreach and engagement with other parties besides the NLD, therefore, appear to be a way of covering all bases rather than its main goal. For example, during the State visit in January of this year, President Xi Jinping greeted and took a group photo with the representatives of seventeen political parties in Nay Pyi Taw but did not hold interactive discussions with them. Before that, Minister Song Tao, Head of International Department of the CPC received the representatives of these political parties, but he briefed them only about official protocols to be observed while meeting with President Xi. Despite this, taking a photograph with those particular individuals alone was sufficient to spur local speculation that China was laying down a strategy to compromise potential parliamentarians who would secure China's projects, and defend its interests.

The CPC conducts its works through the party to party relations platform, which is a strategic apparatus to maintain its influence and dominance in the respective domestic politics involving the parliamentary election. The high-level party delegation of the ruling NLD party paid a goodwill visit China in September 2018 at the invitation of the CPC. Dr Zaw Myint Maung, Vice-Chairman (2) as well as Chief Minister of Mandalay Region Government, led the party delegation in which the members and alternate members of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) and senior members of the Central Committee were part of the delegation. Mr. Huang Kunning, a member of Politburo, Secretary of Secretariate and Head of the Publicity Department of the CPC, held talks with Dr Zaw Myint Maung and the party delegates in Beijing. Although it was the first high-level visit of the NLD party, both parties did not publish any press statement about the visit to the public.⁶⁴

China also continues to maintain a friendly relationship with the USDP. Its Chairman U Than Htay held talks with Huang Kunming, a member of Politburo, Secretary of Secretariate and Head of the Publicity Department of the CPC in July 2018⁶⁵ and Song Tao, Minister of the International Department of CPC in April⁶⁶ and November 2018⁶⁷. U Than Htay visited China twice at the invitation of the CPC.⁶⁸ The bilateral discussions that ensued as reported in the press centered on improved relations and cooperation, peacebuilding, poverty alleviation and enhancing practical cooperation in the future.⁶⁹ A cadre study group of the USDP Party also visited China in 2019 and Guo Yezhou, Vice-minister of the International Department

of the CPC, held talks with this group.⁷⁰ Some participants of the interview remarked that the CPC's relationship with the USDP party seems more strategic than its relations with the NLD party because of the NLD's weak party-building based on policies and principles and its overwhelming reliance on the personality cult.

The tangible evidence, pinpointing the close ties between the CPC and the USDP is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed by the leaders of two parties in June 2011. The MoU is the first formal agreement between two parties.⁷¹ Although the signatory parties fail to release more detailed information about the content of the bipartisan MoU, it spotlights the substantial and significant bipartisan ties. The MoU remains active to date and has ensured that the bipartisan relationship has been relatively stable and fraternal.

China's influence is both broad and deep, as can be seen in the case of the rise of the Wa National Party. The party is quite close to the United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/UWSA), which is leading a de-facto regime in the Wa region and maintains the harmonious and friendly relations with China. Moreover, the two parties are ideologically related as the UWSP adopts Socialism as the guidance in its action.⁷² According to local sources, who spoke under the conditions of anonymity, the UWSP/UWSA advised three Wa parties to merge into one party before the 2020 election. The outcome of the recent merger shall be the landslide victory of the Wa National Party in Hopan and Metman townships of Wa self-administered division in the coming election.⁷³

During the meetings with the leaders of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC),⁷⁴ a political alliance of the NCA non-signatory EAOs, which consists of UWSP/UWSA and the members of the Northern Alliance, in Yingjiang and Shweli in July 2020, Sun Guoxiang, Special Envoy for Asian Affairs of Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry, stressed the security and stability along the China-Myanmar border, Myanmar's peacebuilding and forthcoming general election. He also advised the leaders of the EAOs, based along Myanmar border with China to support for the successful holding of national polls on November 8, 2020.⁷⁵

Three Brotherhood Alliance⁷⁶ also issued a joint statement on July 21, 2020, urging Myanmar authorities to hold free and fair elections. They also stated their expectation that the election would deliver the newly elected members of parliaments and a new government that would be able to fulfil the will of people.⁷⁷ Chinese Special Envoy's recent meetings with the leaders of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) non-signatory EAOs might be one of the factors that pushed for issuance of such a statement immediately.

Discussion on China's Engagement

China's current approach is a combination of multilayered trends. These include the Government to Government, party to party, military to military and people to people initiatives. That last was missing in its previous engagements, and in years past, Chinese investments and projects were designed without regard for the voices of ordinary people. As President Xi Jinping articulated it, he has a vision of a shared future for both China and Myanmar, one that benefits the entire community, and people to people relations is a key component to guarantee that outcome. Chinese engagement with political parties, including ethnic parties, civil society organizations, and influential media, further cements its people to people relations.

The primary goal of China's multilayered engagement is to neutralize anti-Chinese sentiment and minimize the doubts and opposition towards China, its projects, and its investments principally in Myanmar's ethnic areas. From 1948 to 1967, China's political dominance was quite critical in Myanmar, and in 1956 and 1960, there was evidence of direct meddling in Myanmar's elections. While historically, China prioritized the building of political influence in Myanmar, it has moved now toward economic diplomacy.

Surprisingly, China engages and exchanges experience with the UEC. Its invitation to the UEC to pay a working visit to China was a first. Its approach towards the UEC and Myanmar's election has economic and geopolitical implications. In comparison with its bilateral engagement in the past, China's recent activities around Myanmar's election is quite significant, and it would be worthwhile for Myanmar to be attentive to more strategic attention to Sino-Myanmar relations in the post-election scenario.

China's past support for pro-Communist parties and politicians in Myanmar has shifted toward assisting pro-China parties, and pro-China parliamentarians, regardless of their sympathies for communism. Finally, although Chinese ties with the USDP party is weightier than its relations with NLD, China seems willing to utilize the legitimacy and popularity of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a means to minimize the anti-Chinese sentiment among Bamar nationalities and to boost the Paukphaw relationship.

Myanmar's Elections and India

Overview of History

India's Engagement for Free and Fair Election

Burma's relations with India were close and conflict-free before 1962. India was the first country to recognize the Revolutionary Council of Burma after the military coup in 1962.⁷⁸ Beyond 1988 democracy uprising, India was one of the first countries criticizing the military junta for the military coup in 1988.⁷⁹

Historical Background

In December 1949, Burma requested India to delay its recognition of the People's Republic of China so that it might be first.⁸⁰ Burma recognized PRC on December 18, 1949, and India followed in a few days. On July 7, 1951, Burma and India signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship under which each state resolved to recognize and respect the independence and rights of the other. The treaty which entered into force on January 31, 1952, declared that there would be everlasting peace and unalterable friendship between the two nations.⁸¹

The relations between India and Myanmar is historically quite significant. Rabindranath Tagore, a well-known Bengali poet and the first non-European winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, visited Yangon in 1916 and 1924. India's national leader Mahatma Gandhi visited Burma on three occasions in 1902, 1915 and 1929. Burma's first Prime Minister U Nu paid ten visits to India from 1947 to 1962, and then military leader General Ne Win paid eleven official visits to India from 1959 to 1984. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Myanmar twice in 1950 and 1957. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi visited Myanmar in 1969, and Rajiv Gandhi undertook an official visit to Myanmar in 1987 as Indian Prime Minister.⁸²

Beyond the military coup in 1988, India extended its moral support to Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. The Indian Embassy in Rangoon was active in helping pro-democracy activists. Embassy officials were in touch with opposition groups like the All Burma Federation of Students' Unions (ABFSU), Aung San Suu Kyi and U Nu during the uprising. When the Burmese student activists fled to the Indo-Burmese border, the Indian Embassy in Rangoon provided them financial assistance to go to India. For these students, the Indian Government opened refugee camps in the northeastern states of Mizoram and Manipur.⁸³

As seen in the writing of India's former Foreign Secretary J. N. Dixit, Indo-Myanmar relations went into a negative spin in 1990 when the military regime refused to accept the 1990 electoral verdict of the peoples who had voted the NLD led by Aung San Suu Kyi to victory.⁸⁴ J.N Dixit, then Foreign Secretary of India visited Yangon and held talks with the top military leaders in March 1993. The visit was to ease misunderstanding between the two nations and marked as a turning point in the Indo-Myanmar relations.⁸⁵

In 1993, New Delhi reviewed its policies towards Yangon and resolved to alter its approach. The shift in India's policy towards Myanmar was due to the rising influence of China, the security threat in India's north-east border and the Bay of Bengal and the Look East policy for engaging with the ASEAN countries. The Indian position concerning its relations with Myanmar was made reasonably clear in 2006 by the then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee. He said that India cannot export democracy to neighboring countries and that India had to deal with governments "as they exist".⁸⁶

On April 4, 2008, just before holding the referendum in Myanmar, then Vice Senior General Maung Aye visited India and held a series of meetings with the Indian leadership. As per the statement issued by the Indian External Affairs Ministry, Vice Senior General Maung Aye explained Vice President Ansari over the forthcoming referendum in May and the general election in 2010 as part of Myanmar Government's process of political reform and national reconciliation.⁸⁷

A joint statement issued during the state visit to India of Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman of State Peace and Development Council of Myanmar in July 2010, the Myanmar delegation informed their Indian counterparts about developments in Myanmar. Those included the groundwork for elections scheduled towards the end of the year. The Indian side thanked the Myanmar side for the detailed briefing. The exchange emphasized the importance of the comprehensive and broad-based process of national reconciliation and democratic changes, being introduced in Myanmar.⁸⁸

Myanmar remains a central element in India's 'Act East' policy and 'Neighborhood First' policy as exemplified by priority attention accorded to these relationships by most line Ministries of the Government of India, including the Ministry of Defense and India's Defense Services, as well as its infrastructure Ministries. India leaders have remarked that India's continued close ties with the NLD Government and other vital entities ensure that the bilateral relationship remains positive.⁸⁹

Observation, Visits & MoU

In 2015, the Government of India had deputed a team of three election observers, nominated by the Election Commission of India for observing Myanmar's general election.⁹⁰ Mr. S.B. Joshi, Secretary of the Election Commission of India (ECI) led India's team of the observers to Myanmar.

On March 30, 2016, India welcomed Myanmar's metamorphosis towards democracy under Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Reacting to the significant development, Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, Indian Ambassador to Myanmar remarked: "With the reforms, peace process, free elections and the new government, we can hope to see greater business interest in India free from residual baggage of the past and fuller development of relations across the board as democracies under a popularly elected leader and government."⁹¹ Myanmar's State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi received Mr. Vikram Misri, the Ambassador of the Republic of India to Myanmar in October 2016.⁹²

Furthermore, high-level bilateral visits during the tenure of the NLD government (2016-2020) reflected the strategic role, maneuvered by India. India's President Shri Ram Nath Kovind, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj, all paid the visits to Myanmar from September 2017 to December 2018. Myanmar's President U Win Myint attended the oath-taking ceremony of India's new Government in May 2019 and paid a State visit to India in February 2020. U Htin Kyaw, then the President and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited India in 2016.⁹³

On September 6, 2017, during the state visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Ambassador of the Republic of India and the Secretary of the Union Election Commission of the Republic of Union of Myanmar signed an MoU in the area of elections, confirming the partnership between the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Union Election Commission of Myanmar (UEC).⁹⁴

The MoU reaffirms commitment to democracy and mutual faith in a free and fair democratic process and generally accepted norms of human rights and looks to strengthen democratic institutions to improve

electoral management and administration. In its preface, it also highlights the need to set up a mechanism for cooperation in the design and implementation of the electoral process.⁹⁵

Both commissions undertake to promote the exchange of knowledge and experience in the field of organizational and technical development of the electoral process; to support the transfer of information, expertise and organizing training of personnel and to facilitate the relationships with other electoral authorities and organizations as of article 1 of the MoU. The ECI has already agreed to help out the UEC's dealing with other electoral commissions and organizations. The two commissions also commit to producing and distributing materials on electoral systems, voting technology, voters' education and awareness, the participation of women, minorities, persons with disabilities, enhancing cooperation in the electoral process.⁹⁶

India's ECI and Myanmar's UEC shall conduct regular consultations on identifying and evaluating priority areas of cooperation in particular organizational and technical fields of activity, recommending and preparing instruments designed to identify events, programs and projects to be executed, as well as arrangements for their implementation as of article 2.⁹⁷

India's Engagement

By comparison, India's engagement with Myanmar has been mostly benevolent. The articles in the MoU governing the support of free and fair elections reflect India's farsighted and long-term approach and cooperative outlook on securing Myanmar's electoral process. The ECI, with the support of the Ministry of External Affairs, undertook a four-year long (2017-2020) capacity building programme for officials of the UEC.

India's Ambassador HE Mr. Shri Saurabh Kumar called on U Hla Thein, Chairman of the UEC twice in 2019⁹⁸ as it continued to engage strategically with Myanmar over its electoral process, which is the backbone of the democratization and continues to provide resources for creating an environment which would be conducive to a clean election.

A five-member team of experts led by Mr.S.B. Joshi, Secretary of ECI, visited Myanmar in November 2017 for a training needs assessment mission. They held discussions with the commissioners of UEC, the electoral staffs, the members of international organizations engaged in capacity building, political parties, representatives of civil society organizations and the media to identify training needs for preparing training modules specific to the conditions of Myanmar.

India's International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM) conducted the specially designed foundation course in July and the particular training programme on capacity building for voter education in October 2018 for 25 UEC officials in each category. In 2019, IIIDEM organized four training programmes for Myanmar (2 at IIIDEM and 2 in Myanmar). Across 2018-2019, the IIIDEM also conducted nine courses in the series of training programs on capacity building for senior-level and mid-level officers of the UEC.⁹⁹

In addition to the above, UEC officials attended training courses conducted by IIIDEM under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme in 2012-13, 2015-16, 2018 and 2019. The ECI also conducted seven courses in 2019 and two in 2018 for the officials of Myanmar's UEC in New Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw.¹⁰⁰

U Aung Myint and U Hla Tint, the commissioners of the UEC, visited India to take part in the International Conference on Voter Education for Inclusive, Informed and Ethical Participation organized by ECI at New Delhi in October 2016. In May 2019, U Myint Naing, a Commissioner of UEC and senior officials, also took part in the Election Voting Programme, organized by the Election Commission of India (ECI) during Lok Sabha elections in New Delhi.¹⁰¹

India's engagement with Myanmar to support Myanmar's electoral process is exponentially vital for holding of a free and fair election which is the next concrete step towards Myanmar's democratization. The Election Commission of India and the IIIDEM has helped Myanmar to enhance its electoral structures and build the capacity of its human resources as they engage with the electoral process.

Furthermore, India prioritizes its relations with Myanmar's Sagaing region, Kachin and Chin states which are bordering with and strategically vital for India. India follows the same pattern as China in this regard, engaging with the ruling NLD, USDP, and the ethnic parties. India's engagement with Myanmar is primarily the inter-government in nature, inclusive of parliamentarians. As such, for instance, the Government of the Mizoram State¹⁰² engaged with the leaders of the Chin parties, based in the neighboring Chin state of Myanmar. There is, as a result, a semblance of transparency, something that is missing from the party-to-party partnerships between the CPC and political groups along the border on Myanmar's side.

Other exchanges included a high-level delegation of the USDP led by Chairman U Than Htay to India in February 2019. There, the India Foundation held discussion with the delegates of the USDP on "India-Myanmar Relations: The Way Ahead." Pu No Than Kap, Joint Chairperson of the Chin National League for Democracy party (CNLD), paid a visit to Mizoram State of the Republic of India in the same month and attended the celebration of Chin National Day there. Mizoram State Chief Minister Zoramthanga received and held talks with Pu No Than Kap and Chin delegates.¹⁰³

During a trip to Myitkyina, Kachin State in March 2020, Mr. Saurabh Kumar, Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, held talks with leaders of the Kachin State People's Party.¹⁰⁴ He sought the views of Kachin politicians on possible investment opportunities and ways to support development in the Kachin State. The Indian Ambassador also held talks with leaders of the Chin National League for Democracy party (CNLD) during his visit to Chin State in 2019.

It is clear from the above that India wants to see Myanmar as a federal democratic nation and keep it far away from the influence and dominance of China. Myanmar is a nation which was politically, culturally, and socially closer to India rather than China during its independence struggle against the British colonial rule. India adopts democracy, at least in theory, while the Chinese political trend is quite clearly a meritocracy. In Myanmar's democratization, India's support and contribution are quite significant.

Discussion on India's Engagement

India actively engages with Myanmar to strengthen its Indian Ocean strategy and Act East policy, to help in Myanmar's stabilization, and to counter and neutralize rising Chinese influence in Myanmar.

India's involvement in Myanmar's elections centers on supporting the political infrastructure for elections. While it once criticized and denounced Myanmar's junta and aided the opposition parties, since it recognized the swift rise of China, it has altered its approach. That shift in strategy, dating back to 1990s, continues today, where India maintains a friendship with both the government and opposition parties in Myanmar.

Its ties with Myanmar have continued to develop in future, and its ongoing and close ties with the NLD Government has enabled the bilateral relationship to keep a positive focus and momentum. Guided by its 'Act East' and 'Neighborhood First' policies, India needs Myanmar to secure access to ASEAN and the Bay of Bengal, while Myanmar needs India to neutralize China's rising influence.

India's emphasis on its economic and geopolitical priorities have ensured that its ties with Myanmar have continued to deepen. India needs Myanmar to secure access to ASEAN and the Bay of Bengal, while Myanmar needs India to neutralize China's rising influence, and these considerations have led to a close

and ongoing partnership. For now, its continuing and close ties with Myanmar has enabled the bilateral relationship to keep a positive focus and momentum.

China – India Dynamics and Myanmar's Election

Myanmar is sandwiched geographically, socio-economically, and politically between two giant neighbors: China and India. It acts as a land bridge for India to communicate with the ASEAN countries and for China to access to the Indian Ocean. The balance of diplomacy between these two countries is significant for Myanmar as it looks toward national reconciliation, state-building and democratization.

The India—China rivalry has been escalating for years in Myanmar, a nation where the Western Development strategy and the Good Neighborhood policy of China and the Act East policy and the Neighborhood First policy of India come into conflict. Myanmar needs to maintain the goodwill of both neighboring countries, but they, in turn, need Myanmar to continue to be a conduit for their regional interests. Still, it is a quiet rivalry, far from becoming a great game. China and India have stuck to realist diplomacy rather than value diplomacy with regard to their relations with Myanmar.

In the final analysis, it is of no matter to China or to India, which party gets the majority seats required to elect President and form a government in the post-2020 general election in Myanmar. However, India would prefer and encourage a government led by the NLD and ethnic democratic parties in the post-election, while China might prefer a coalition style government with the extensive representation of ethnic parties and the military which have been historically close to them. Both countries are planning strategically to lobby for their projects and interests in the post-election scenario.

China is more influential and dominant than India, given China's veto power in the United Nations Security Council. Amidst escalating international pressure on Myanmar, the latter counts on a favorable relationship with China. However, China and India are on the same track with regard to a multilayered engagement with Myanmar. The assistance of the United States, Japan, Australia, and other western nations to India, designed to back that country in its rivalry with China over Myanmar, may therefore even the balance between China and India in terms of power.

Although China and India have been involved in Myanmar's electoral process and engaged with its political stakeholders, each for their own economic and geopolitical interests, they look to be trying to evade any accusation of electoral meddling in and around the 2020 general election. Both nations require the legitimacy of Aung San Suu Kyi beyond the general election, though only one of them, India, appears to be pushing for a democratic means to keep her in office.

Findings and Recommendations

Findings

1. Although China, a superpower neighbor, is quite influential, Myanmar is far from being a helpless puppet of China as some describe it to be. Myanmar needs China and vice versa. The anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar, concerning its projects and investment, is escalating. While President Xi Jinping's visit was vital in Sino-Myanmar relations, it is not expected to be a contributing factor towards a second landslide victory in the forthcoming election for the ruling NLD.
2. China has shown a greater interest in the general election than had been the case historically, particularly with regard to its association with the election commission. As China's global and regional influence continues to rise, its impact and dominance on forthcoming polls are likely to mount either directly or indirectly.

3. China engages with major political parties and ethnic parties that are willing to maintain good ties. It also provides strategic assistance and support to some parties, including ethnic parties, and their leadership. The driving force for China's engagement in Myanmar is undoubtedly its strategic economic interests.
4. The Election Commission of India (ECI), with the support of Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), has undertaken a four-year-long capacity building programme (2017 – 2020) for the officials of Myanmar's UEC, through an MoU in the Fields of Elections, signed on September 6, 2017. India also prioritizes and extends its engagements with Myanmar by all workable means.

Recommendations

For Myanmar Government

1. Myanmar should review its ties with China and formulate smarter and more proactive policies and strategies with regards to its influential neighbor. It should focus on having a practical and workable long-term plan that prioritizes neutralizing undue Chinese influence.
2. Myanmar should also continue to develop its strategic ties with India which would serve to balance the impact that China can have in Myanmar's internal politics.
3. Myanmar should also review its overall foreign relations, and plan to enhance its good relations with other regional partners, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand and Vietnam.
4. Myanmar's parliaments and its committees should continuously monitor and analyze its bilateral and multilateral relations, investment and trade partnerships with all countries, so as to be able to take corrective measures before serious problems develop.
5. Myanmar's Election Commission should enhance its understanding of the electoral mechanisms of the U.S., U.K. and other democratic countries in the E.U., as well as regional and ASEAN nations, to further strengthen its capacity to establish truly democratic institutions and hold free and fair elections.
6. The Government of Myanmar, parliaments, and political parties should consider supporting the development of China and India studies centers since knowledge and information about China and its projects are quite critical for political decision-making.
7. Chinese economic and development projects, including the Myitsone project, remain a challenge to bilateral relations, and a sustainable solution is still not in sight. The parliamentarians and the parties should be encouraged to actively debate the pros and cons of Chinese projects during the election campaigns and in future sessions of parliament.

For China

8. China should further strengthen the people to people layer of relations whenever it engages politically and socio-economically with communities within Myanmar. However, the extensive efforts made by China in Myanmar might be flexible, sincere, transparent and accountable. Moreover, China should also assist Myanmar in holding the free and fair elections successfully.
9. China should heed Myanmar's preference to keep economic projects and political support as separate discussions, and not trade the former for the latter. Not doing so will compromise China's integrity in the eyes of Myanmar's citizenry.
10. China should consider the Myitsone Dam project as a bargaining chip for neutralizing the rising anti-Chinese sentiment among Myanmar's community. If China unilaterally decides to cease the Myitsone Dam project, the move will serve to lower anti-Chinese actions.
11. China should cooperate with Myanmar in a mutually beneficial way for the building of a Myanmar-China community with a shared future in a transparent and accountable manner in the interest of the peoples of both countries.

For India

12. India should further develop its effective and efficient cooperation with Myanmar in all strategic areas, especially Myanmar's electoral process, development, investment and trade. It should also look forwards to enhance its multilayered engagement with Myanmar community.
13. India should expand its engagement with political parties, prioritizing its ties with the ethnic political parties based in Rakhine State, Chin State and Sagaing Region. It should start the capacity building programs, exchange programs and study tours for the political parties.

For International Donors

14. The United States, the United Kingdom and other western nations should assist Myanmar in holding free and fair elections; in strengthening political institutions; in expanding space for civil society organizations; and in solidifying the 4th estate.

Conclusion

Myanmar needs the right partners as well as good neighbors for ensuring its prosperity and development. In terms of partners further afield, the U.S, Japan, Australia, and South Korea are most critical. With the combined effort and assistance of friendly nations, and the tactical support of its immediate neighbors, as well as democratic countries within ASEAN, 2020 should mark the holding of free and fair elections, and demonstrate Myanmar's ability to build a Democratic Federal Union. A free and fair election will also bring Myanmar closer to ending the civil war.

Myanmar should consider moving away from its reliance on dependent diplomacy concerning China as early as possible. Consolidating its democracy through the assistance of India and other nations should give it a stronger position from which to do so. Without that, such a scenario would force Myanmar into an unhealthy cycle of economic and political dependency on China.

While doing so, Myanmar should heed its strategic position during the current stand-off between the United States and China. Playing its cards well is even more critical given the compounding factors of COVID-19, the South China Sea, and the trade war.

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13. New Light of Myanmar newspapers
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Appendix

1. List of Leaders and Political Parties invited to attend the meeting with President Xi Jinping on January 17, 2020
 - a. Dr Aung Moe Nyo, National League for Democracy Party
 - b. U Than Htay, Union Solidarity & Development Party
 - c. Sai Kyaw Nyunt, Shan Nationalities League for Democracy Party
 - d. U Thar Tun Hla, Arakan National Party
 - e. U Maung Khaing, Ta-Arng (Palaung) National Party
 - f. Khun San Lwin, Pa O National Organization
 - g. U Shwe Minn, Lisu National Development Party
 - h. U Thein Tun, National Unity Party
 - i. Sai Ai Pao, Shan National Democratic Party
 - j. U Thu Wai, Democratic Party (Myanmar)
 - k. No Than Kap, Chin National League for Democracy Party
 - l. U Shwe Mann, Union Betterment Party
 - m. U Ko Ko Gyi, People's Party
 - n. Manam Tu Ja, Kachin State People Party
 - o. U Khin Nu, Arakan Front Party
 - p. U Thet Tun Maung, National Democratic Front Party
 - q. Kam Lam Khup, Zomi Congress for Democracy

Remark: Manam Tu Ja did not join the meeting with President Xi Jinping as of his acute health reason.

2. Questions prepared for the online interviews with the stakeholders
 - a. How do you think about the China-Myanmar relations in the post-election scenario? Whether the bilateral relationship is likely to be closer and more strategic or not? Whether Chinese influence on Myanmar is going to be high or not?
 - b. How do you observe the state visit of President Xi Jinping? Whether China-Myanmar relations reached the climax during his visit? Whether his visit was a right stimulus for the possible supermajority victory of the ruling NLD party in the forthcoming election?
 - c. How do you view about the role of the U.S., E.U., Japan and India for neutralizing China's dominance in Myanmar? Whether the active engagement of U.S., E.U., Japan and India with Myanmar are a strategic tool for minimizing Chinese influence in Myanmar?
 - d. How do you think about China's engagement with the political parties, including Ethnic Political Parties (EPP) before the general election? Whether China is supporting some political parties, including EPP? What is your view on that case?
 - e. What is your opinion on China's relations with the NLD party and USDP party? How do you think which party is vital for China, NLD or USDP?
 - f. Whether China has been supporting some political parties, including some ethnic political parties (EPP), some local NGOs and media? Whether that is a smart strategy for China to consolidate his influence in Myanmar?
 - g. Is it true that China is engaging with ethnic political parties than before? What is your view on such engagement with ethnic parties?

Notes

¹ <https://www.uec.gov.mm/>

² It consists of Shan State, Kachin State, Mon State, Kayin(Karen)State, Rakhine(Arakan)State, Chin State and Kayah State.

³ Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping invited U Ne Win, then Chairman of the BSPP Party and his official visit to China in May 1985 made a distinct turning point in the Sino-Myanmar relations.

⁴ US appointed a high-ranking special envoy to Myanmar in August 2011. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar in December 2011. Foreign businesspeople flocked to Yangon by 2012 and Microsoft's Bill Gate arrived Myanmar in March 2012.

⁵ A high-ranking EU delegation visited Myanmar in June 2011. EU suspended its sanction in April 2012 and lifted in 2013.

⁶ The Rohingya crisis is an ongoing conflict in the northern part of Myanmar's Rakhine State (Arakan State), it has attracted intense international attention over the last three years, after wide-scale violence by the Tatmadaw against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017, in response to attacks carried out by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), led to profound atrocities and prompted a massive exodus of refugees to Bangladesh. For further reading, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/292-myanmars-rohingya-crisis-enters-dangerous-new-phase>

⁷ Western countries have criticized Myanmar's handling of the Rakhine crisis and called for investigations into ethnic cleansing and Myanmar has become more alienated from the West because of differing perceptions of the Rohingya crisis. (China's Role in Myanmar's Internal Conflicts by USIP - 2018; page 32 and 33)

⁸ <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/26237/question+no4062+act+east+policy>

⁹ <https://mea.gov.in/rajya-sabha.htm?dtl/31673/QUESTION+NO3692+NEIGHBOURHOOD+FIRST+POLICY>

¹⁰ Bamar is the biggest ethnic group in Myanmar and resides in most areas of seven regions.

¹¹ Shan is the second largest ethnic group in Myanmar and the majority resides in Shan state and southern Kachin state. Both states are bordering with and significant for China.

¹² Rakhine is the ethnic group residing in the western state, bordering with Bangladesh and India.

¹³ Three female parliamentarians from NLD, SNLD and ANP parties, a senior leader each from SNLD and KSP party, a former parliamentarian who was a member of BCP, a retired diplomat who is close to China, a doctorate in China Studies, two political prisoners who were the members of the underground cell of the BCP

¹⁴ <https://www.uec.gov.mm>

¹⁵ Chi-shad Liang, Burma's Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice, P. 67

¹⁶ KUDO Toshihiro, China's Policy toward Myanmar: Challenges and Prospects

¹⁷ Ten Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) including Karen National Union (KNU) and Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) have already signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Seven EAOs including Kachin Independence Army and United Wa State Army, based along the border with China have not signed the NCA yet. China keeps close relations with the NCA non-signatory EAOs.

¹⁸ The 771 km long crude oil pipeline extends from Madè Island on the west coast of Myanmar to Ruili in China's Yunnan Province, running through Rakhine State, Magwe Region, Mandalay Region, and Shan State. The 793 km long gas pipeline starts at Ramree Island on the western coast of Myanmar and ends at Ruili in Yunnan. Two pipelines are running in parallel.

¹⁹ It is China's diplomatic policy that aims to strengthen relationships with its neighboring countries including ASEAN member nations. The aims are the peaceful negotiation to resolve border conflicts and improve relations, construction of companion and cooperative relations and bilateral dialogue, participation in multilateralism and promotion of joint conflict resolution and improvement in economic and trade cooperation. For further reading, China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia: Harmonious worldview and its impact on good neighbor diplomacy by Tsai Tung-Chieh, Hung Ming-Te and Tony Tai-Ting Liu (2011) in Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia

²⁰ In 1999, the Chinese government launched the third wave of the "Go West" campaign, known as WDS. This led to the implementation of some concrete policy measures by the Chinese State Council in October 2000, to promote the economic development in Western China. For further reading, The Evolution, and Impact of China's Regional Policy: A Study of Regional Support Policy for Western China by Xiang Deng, Zheng Lu, and Xuezheng Chen

²¹ The principles are the mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; to abide mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; respect for mutual equality and to work for mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence.

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- ²³ The China containment policy is the alleged goal of the U.S. government foreign policy to diminish the economic and political growth of the People's Republic of China. The policy, first begun under Foreign Service Officer, George F. Kennan, to fight the cold war (1947–1989) with the Soviet Union, and reduce its power in Asia, has continued to date under succeeding administrations.
- ²⁴ China-Burma Ties in 1954: The Beginning of the Pauk Phaw Era by Fan Hongwei
- ²⁵ Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence by David I Steinberg & Hongwei Han
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- ³³ Modern China-Myanmar Relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence by David Steinberg & Hongwei Fan
- ³⁴ Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Burmese Premier U Nu agreed to abide five principles of peaceful coexistence in June 1954. China assured not to support the armed struggle of the BCP. As Mao's statement during meeting with U Nu in 1954, the party to party relations between the CCP and BCP did not resurface until the mid of 1960s.
- ³⁵ Maintenance of law and order; prevailing peace and tranquility in the country, providing secure and smooth transportation, striving for the better conditions of food, clothing, and shelter of the people and rendering necessary assistance to the private and the cooperatives sector and holding of a multiparty general election after fulfilling above responsibilities were the original doctrines.
- ³⁶ Myanmar's Armed Forces seized the power on 18th September 1988 and formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).
- ³⁷ Handling Relations with Myanmar in a Chinese Way: A Personal Reflection by Cheng Ruisheng
- ³⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/burma0508/6.htm>
- ³⁹ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/annual-report-myanmar-burma-2010/>
- ⁴⁰ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/688730.shtml>
- ⁴¹ <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cemm/eng/sgxw/t1303949.htm>
- ⁴² https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1353790.shtml
- ⁴³ <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2001/Dec/23744.htm>
- ⁴⁴ <https://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=announcement/19/01/2020/id-20537>
- ⁴⁵ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1733685.shtml
- ⁴⁶ China and Myanmar signed the MoU on BRI in May 2017.
- ⁴⁷ China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is China's second bilateral economic corridor. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed the establishment of the CMEC during his meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in November 2017. The CMEC, taking the shape of a 'reverse-Y', will connect China's southwestern province of Yunnan to Mandalay in Central Myanmar, and then east to Yangon and West to Kyaukpyu, Rakhine State.
- ⁴⁸ <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/myanmar-successfully-renegotiates-debt-ownership-terms-kyaukphyu.html>
- ⁴⁹ Myanmar's President formed the Union Election Commission on 30th March 2016 as of provisions described in sub-section(a), section 9 of the Union Government Law and sub-section(e), section 3 of the Union Election Commission Law.
- ⁵⁰ She paid a visit to Myanmar on behalf of Mr. Song Tao, Minister of the International Relations Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China who is one of the crucial persons in China's relations with Myanmar.
- ⁵¹ It is the focal department to extend friendly ties with the parties of the neighboring and fraternal countries.
- ⁵² New Light of Myanmar newspaper, 30 October 2019, www.uec.gov.mm
- ⁵³ The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) was established on December 15, 1949 and the first Institute devoted to people-to-people diplomacy of the People's Republic of China.
- ⁵⁴ New Light of Myanmar newspaper 3rd December 2019; www.uec.gov.mm; www.mm.china-embassy.org
- ⁵⁵ <http://www.cpifa.org/article/content/view?id=1470>
- ⁵⁶ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1721747.shtml

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- ⁵⁷ <http://www.cpifa.org/article/content/view?id=1470>
- ⁵⁸ http://www.srd.yn.gov.cn/jggz/jgjsgzdt/201912/t20191206_909254.html
- ⁵⁹ http://www.srd.yn.gov.cn/jggz/jgjsgzdt/201912/t20191206_909254.html
- ⁶⁰ Kachin State, Shan State, Wa Self-administered Division, Kokang Self-administered Region
- ⁶¹ It was a political party, formed on July 4, 1962 by the senior military officials who led a coup and a ruling party from 1974 to 1988 during the totalitarian rule in Myanmar.
- ⁶² The party was formed on August 15, 1939 as an underground party. The first Secretary of the CPB was Thakin Aung San, a father of Myanmar's State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Thakin Than Tun, the first Chairman of the CPB, is her uncle.
- ⁶³ Unidentified sources of some leaders of the ethnic parties who held talks with the diplomats
- ⁶⁴ <http://www.nld-official.org/>
- ⁶⁵ <https://xinhuanews.com/myanmar/politics-law-military/17568-2018-07-11-11-33-46>
- ⁶⁶ <https://xinhuanews.com/myanmar/politics-law-military/17568-2018-07-11-11-33-46>
- ⁶⁷ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/military-chief-asks-visiting-chinese-diplomat-for-continued-support.html>
- ⁶⁸ First Visit in December 2016 and second in November 2017
- ⁶⁹ <http://www.usdp.org.mm/>
- ⁷⁰ https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english/news/201908/t20190803_101095.html
- ⁷¹ <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/2642-usdp-signs-deal-with-china-party.html>
- ⁷² The United Wa State Party: Narco-Army or Ethnic National Party? By Tom Kramer
- ⁷³ The elections shall not be held in Mongmao township, Pangwaun township, Naphang township and Panghsang township of Wa region, located under the control of the UWSP/UWSA.
- ⁷⁴ The FPNC consists of the Arakan Army (AA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA).
- ⁷⁵ Unidentified EAO Sources
- ⁷⁶ The Arakan Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army are the members of the alliance which maintains friendly relations with China.
- ⁷⁷ <https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/>
- ⁷⁸ Chi-shad Liang, Burma's Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice
- ⁷⁹ Burma-India Relations: Betrayal of Democracy and Human Rights by Burma Campaign UK in March 2007
- ⁸⁰ Sino-Burmese Relations 1949–1953: Suspicion and Equivocations by Fan Hongwei
- ⁸¹ Chi-shad Liang, Burma's Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice, P. 129
- ⁸² <https://www.mcgkolkata.org/index.php>
- ⁸³ Indo-Myanmar Relations: Triumph of Pragmatism by Bibhu Prasad Routray
- ⁸⁴ J N Dixit, "Road to Mandalay", Telegraph, 22 March 2006
- ⁸⁵ Myanmar-India Political Relations in Post 1990s by Tun Tun Oo
- ⁸⁶ Realpolitik of India and Myanmar: The Road Ahead by Debamitra Mitra
- ⁸⁷ Myanmar-India Political Relations in Post 1990s by Tun Tun Oo
- ⁸⁸ Joint Statement July 27, 2010, Ministry of External Affairs of the Republic of India
- ⁸⁹ Annual Report 2019-2020, Ministry of External Affairs of the Republic of India
- ⁹⁰ India's Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report (2015-2016)
- ⁹¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/india-welcomes-myanmar-s-suu-kyi-led-transition-towards-democracy/story-cVJSUww4VsHNFeHvXcoobP.html>
- ⁹² The Global New Light of Myanmar Newspaper on 12th October 2016
- ⁹³ <https://www.mea.gov.in/index.htm>
- ⁹⁴ <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/7976-myanmar/>
- ⁹⁵ MoU in the Field of Elections between ECI and UEC
- ⁹⁶ Ibid.,
- ⁹⁷ Ibid.,
- ⁹⁸ www.uec.gov.mm
- ⁹⁹ <https://eci.gov.in/home/>
- ¹⁰⁰ India's Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report (2019-2020)
- ¹⁰¹ <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/10309-iiidem-organizes-a-5-day-capacity-building-program-on-%E2%80%98electoral-technology%E2%80%99-for-officials-of-union-election-commission-of-myanmar/>

¹⁰² Mizoram is a state in northeastern India, with Aizawl as its capital city. It shares a border with Chin State of Myanmar.

¹⁰³ <https://www.facebook.com/PuNoThanKap>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/major-powers-beat-path-prominent-kachin-partys-door-northern-myanmar.html>