

Research Article

Shifting the US-Myanmar under Trump Administration and its Geopolitical Implication

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the shifts in the US-Myanmar relations during Trump administration compared to that of Obama administration, what factors affect such shifts, and how they posit important geopolitical implication. Under Trump administration, the US-Myanmar relations largely revolved around the Rohingya crisis, which shaped the relations between the two nations 'substantially uncomfortable'. The factors affecting the changing relationship are the temporal dimension of Rohingya crisis, civil-military relations under NLD government, as well as Trump's 'American First' foreign policy, which contributed to the declining of strategic engagement towards Indo-Pacific region where Myanmar is located. This caused an important geopolitical implication: the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar.
Keywords: Myanmar, the US, NLD, Trump, Obama, China, Rohingya crisis.

I. Introduction

Myanmar's location—of geopolitical importance—makes it the focus of interest for the world's major powers, including the United States and China (Yonghong & Hongchao, 2014). Myanmar's political and economic liberalization since 2011 enjoyed the US attention and strategic engagement under Obama administration. However, since President Trump took office in 2017, the US-Myanmar relations have significantly shifted

compared to the Obama era. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the shifts in the US-Myanmar relations during Trump administration compared to that of Obama administration, what factors affect such shifts, and how they posit important geopolitical implication.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the US-Myanmar relations under Trump administration will be stated in a nutshell. Second, three major factors affecting the changes in the relations will be elaborated. It is then followed by the discussion on the major geopolitical implication of such shift: the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar.

II. The US-Myanmar Relations under Trump Administration

Briefly revisiting the historical developments, Myanmar was the 'spotlight' nation during Obama administration as the crucial feature of the administration's rebalancing to Asia (Slaughter, 2015). Although the reform in Myanmar was led top-down by the former military generals who formed a political party themselves, and then won the general election, the administration believed that the engagement policy and the opening up of the country would reduce its dependency on China, and enhance its possibility to deepen its relations with ASEAN as well (Slaughter, 2015). The engagement policy of the US is evidenced by the two visits President Obama made to the fledgling democracy – as official six-hour State visit in 2012 and to attend ASEAN Summit where Myanmar was the host in 2014 (Einhorn, 2014).

The policy played a supportive role in the acceleration of the country's democratization momentum. One of the most

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fundamental milestones was that National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party and democratic force formed and led by democratic icon and Nobel Peace Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi since 1988, participated and won parliamentary seats in the 2012 By-Election. NLD then won landslide victory in 2015 General Elections, gaining both legislative and executive powers of Myanmar. Cheering the success of the engagement policy, in the final days of his Administration, Obama lifted US sanctions on Myanmar by terminating an emergency order that deemed the policies of the former military government a threat to US national security, month after the meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who then became a de facto leader, State Counselor and Foreign Minister of Myanmar (Brunnstrom, 2016).

Since Trump took office in 2017, the only high-level visit to Myanmar was undertaken by the former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, on a mission to resolve Rohingya crisis (VOA, 2017). In a ministerial joint press conference, he stated that he was “deeply concerned by credible reports of widespread atrocities committed by Myanmar’s security forces and by vigilantes who were unrestrained by the security forces during the recent violence in Rakhine State” and called Myanmar to initiate a credible and impartial investigation into the matter (Slodkowski, 2017). He then labelled the crisis in northern Rakhine state amounted to ‘ethnic cleansing’ on his return (The Independent, 2021). In addition, during the meeting in the annual ASEAN Summit in Singapore, Vice President Mike Pence pressured Myanmar’s State Counselor on the handling of the Rohingya crisis that he was “anxious to hear about progress in resolving the crisis, which stems from a violent military crackdown in Myanmar’s Rakhine state that the United Nations has called ethnic cleansing” (Armangue, 2018). State Counselor, who was reluctant to speak out for the Rohingya issue

since she was in the opposition position, held a firm position in defending the military crackdown and opposing to conduct international investigation, which then gradually made the US attention to Myanmar ‘sporadic’ (The Independent, 2021).

As the US saw the crisis as contrary to its fundamental values, the legislation of Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) described the nation’s grave concerns over disturbing human rights developments in Myanmar (Congressional Research Service, 2019). (Briefly speaking, ARIA is the comprehensive framework for the US policy in the Indo-Pacific.) The actions the US took in the later years extended to targeted sanctions towards the top military generals who “were responsible for extrajudicial killings of Rohingya Muslims, barring them from entry to the United States” and expressed their concerns over the Myanmar government for not taking appropriate actions to hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations (Brunnstrom & Wroughton, 2019). These sanctions were claimed to be the balancing act between retaining some engagement and intensifying efforts to pressure Myanmar government to promote accountability (Parameswaran, 2019b).

When the US and the West were deeply skeptical on how the NLD administration handles the crisis, the latter also strongly denounced the former’s approach to Rohingya Crisis. Myanmar condemned the sanctions towards the generals; that the then government Spokesperson U Zaw Htay insisted that such US actions (sanctions) will not contribute to resolving the problem in Rakhine but rather worsen the existing problems and challenges (RFA, 2019). When the case was brought in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as Gambia accused Myanmar of violating the 1948 Genocide Convention of military clearance operations in Northern Rakhine,

State Counselor herself led a legal team to defend the case; claiming that “Myanmar’s delegation defended the country ‘to the best of their ability’ against genocide charges at the ICJ” (Tha, 2019).

It is found that there were fundamental disagreements between the US and Myanmar on the Rohingya crisis. On one hand, the US was uncomfortable on the lack of NLD government to take accountability towards the military generals in such extensive humanitarian and human rights crisis of the decade; and on the other, Myanmar was also uncomfortable with the US approach to Myanmar regarding the crisis. The recent developments and shifts in the US-Myanmar relations, therefore, would be too strong-opinionated to label as ‘clashes’, but certainly would be fair enough to describe as ‘substantially uncomfortable’.

III. Factors affecting the shifts in the US-Myanmar Relations

There are several factors affecting the shifts in the US-Myanmar relations under Trump administration leading towards ‘substantially uncomfortable’. In this paper, three of them are considered worth discussing: the temporal dimension of Rohingya crisis, civil-military relations under NLD government, and Trump’s ‘American First’ foreign policy.

a. The temporal dimension of Rohingya crisis

The origin and historical contestations of the crisis can be dated back to centuries ago, if not decades. The contemporary escalation of the conflict can be traced back to 2012 by the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman which sparked the tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine (BBC, 2014). Several clashes occurred between the communities in other regions after the 2012

incident. Since then, many Rohingya people fled to other states, including Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and that thousands of Rohingya fleeing the country in 2015 received much regional and international attention towards the crisis (Pagano, 2016). The peak of the event was the major clashes that broke out in August 2017 when a militant group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) claimed their responsibility on attacking the police and army posts in the region. As a result, Myanmar government declared ARSA ‘terrorist organization’ and the military conducted a brutal operation towards ARSA that caused the deaths of thousands of Rohingyas, the destruction of hundreds of Rohingya villages, the forced migration of several thousands of Rohingyas to flee Myanmar (Albert & Maizland, 2020), which occurred just months after Trump assumed office. Such temporal coincidence made the US-Myanmar relations revolving around the Rohingya humanitarian and human rights crisis.

b. Civil-military relations under NLD government

NLD was formed along with 8888 Revolution, a revolution against the socialist and dictatorial political regime. It then won landslide in 1990 General Elections, yet the military declined to transfer power and continued to rule for 20 years up until 2010. When the military initiated top-down democratization by conducting General Election in 2010, NLD made a decision to boycott. Later, the party decided to participate in the 2012 By-Elections, becoming powerful Parliamentary opposition till 2015 when the party won the General Elections landslide that year. Since then, the NLD as a government had to deal with the constitutionally-empowered military, which enjoys independence from the civilian control and ensured its role in politics

through 2008 Constitution (claiming 25 per cent of the total seats in Parliament as quota, maintaining three crucial cabinet positions of Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs, claiming the majority seats in the nation's highest body of National Defense and Security Council, the constitution being unamendable without the military's approval, among others) (Yhome, 2020), in areas including national reconciliation and peace process (Mang, 2015) and Rohingya crisis (Parameswaran, 2020). These wide and complex internal political dynamics and the underlying factors, including the context of civil-military relations of the country, play an important factor on understanding how the NLD government approached towards the crisis, especially why Nobel Peace Prize Laureate defended the generals amidst international pressure as well as in the ICJ (Parameswaran, 2019a).

c. Trump's 'American First' foreign policy

In addition to Rohingya crisis and the NLD government's response to it, President Trump's unconventional approach to foreign policy compared to his predecessors also serves as a major contributing factor to the shifts in the US approach towards Myanmar. Trump's 'American First' foreign policy was a reversal to the previous interventionist foreign policy adopted by his predecessors, claiming the latter as wasting America's economic resources while the benefits are not cost-effective for American citizens (Beckwith, 2016), and seeing them as 'failures' (Curran, 2018). Taking on more nationalistic posture, he also threatens towards the strategic engagement towards its allies in Europe and Asia, as well as towards the regional and international security architectures. Withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate change, Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and even threatening to leave from NATO

(Stepansky, 2021), and technological and trade war with China are some of the most significant examples of the shifts in the US foreign policy under Trump.

In the context of Indo-Pacific region, Trump's 'American First' foreign policy is widely believed that would end Obama's 'Asia Pivot' policy, as the former is very keen to draw back from commitments to allies (Pillalamarri, 2016). The foreign policy decision of the withdrawal from TPP amplified such belief, as TPP is the crucial pillar of strategic pivot to Asia under Obama administration that combines economic architecture with America's strategic interests. On the other hand, some argued that Trump's foreign policy in Indo-Pacific has some strategic continuations from that of Obama's Pivot to Asia (Abdollahpour, 2019; Auslin, 2019) as well as to counterbalance China as it is seen as a 'revisionist' state attempting to restructure the international order (Saha, 2020). They refer to the legislation of ARIA which is seen as the US continues to play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific to promote its security interests, economic interests and values in the region (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

Despite the arguments that Trump's foreign policy had some continuations to Asia's Pivot policy, it is generally accepted that the strategic engagement to the region both bilaterally and multilaterally substantially declined under Trump administration. Overall, Trump's 'American First' foreign policy has weakened its ability to achieve its interests and its position in the regional balance of diplomatic, economic and military power in Indo-Pacific region (Heer, 2021). As a snapshot, Trump's absenteeism to the annual ASEAN meetings and East Asian Summits, which President Obama used to attend regularly, was widely regarded as declining strategic engagement to the region (Rogin, 2020); thus, President Trump's scattershot approach to foreign policy has weakened American

influence in regions like Southeast Asia (Chong, 2020). The declining engagement in the region provided the power vacuum for China, as China has taken advantage of Trump's abandonment of TPP to engage with other nations in the region and negotiate – which is obvious in the signing a new Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with 14 other Asian nations (Walt, 2021), where Myanmar included.

IV. Geopolitical implication of shifting the US-Myanmar Relations

Obama's foreign policy of Pivot to Asia in general and reengagement with Myanmar in particular is shifting US geostrategic interests to balance China's rising power status. It is argued that under Pivot to Asia, the most noteworthy policy shift of the US is Myanmar where the policy shifted fundamentally from isolation to engagement (Shambaugh, 2013). Frequent political contacts, relaxing sanctions and encouraging liberalization are more of strategic interests and less on economic or trade interests: to provide Myanmar with more strategic options without excessive reliance on China so as to maintain the 'balance of power' in the Indo-Pacific region (Yonghong & Hongchao, 2014).

In the case of the US-Myanmar relations under Trump administration, not only the escalation of the Rohingya human rights crisis made the US attention revolved around the issue but Trump's 'American First' foreign policy also contributed to the declining of strategic engagement towards Indo-Pacific region where Myanmar is located. These factors not only cause 'substantially uncomfortable' relations between the two nations but also posit important geopolitical implication: the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar.

This notion is viable because while the West continuously condemned the Myanmar government and the military by demanding transparency and accountability in handling the crisis, China supported Myanmar under the titles of protecting its sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security; and stressed the issue and fear of terrorism (notably ARSA attacks) in Rakhine state (Joy, 2018), instead of emphasizing the human rights issue as the US did. China's support is extended in the multilateral institution by watering down the forms and content of UN Security Council Presidential Statement on the Rohingya crisis in favor of Myanmar. One Chinese statement cited that State Counselor expressed her thanks to China for extending help to Myanmar, especially the constant understanding and support for the Myanmar peace process and the Rakhine issue (Reuters, 2018). The deviation in foreign policy approaches between Washington and Beijing in Rohingya crisis is obvious, and that Beijing scores political credit by backing Myanmar government in line with its approach to the crisis, while Washington lets Naypyidaw closer to Beijing. Apparently, Myanmar's internal political crisis pushed towards China as a buffer against international outrage (Park, 2020).

In addition to China backing Myanmar in the Rohingya crisis, China's support to the latter's peace process, perhaps the most important policy priority of the NLD administration, also made Beijing and Naypyitaw even closer (Myint, 2020). China is geopolitically and historically significant actor in Myanmar's peace process, due to its ties with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) along Myanmar-China border; and that China gains from the peace process as these conflicts are the potential obstacles for China's grand geostrategic ambitions in the country (Sun, 2017).

These political developments serve as a gigantic geopolitical asset for Beijing,

essentially because Myanmar is a country geopolitically vital for China's growing regional and global power as the latter's two crucial geopolitical strategies – 'Two-Oceans' and 'Strings of Pearls' – intersect; and in addition, Myanmar plays a pivotal role for China in the successful implementation of China's mega infrastructure project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Julian, 2021). A proof of closer relationships between two nations is evidenced in the visit of President Xi Jinping to the small neighboring country in January 2020 and the signing of a total of 33 Memorandums of Understanding including Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone, which is pivotal in the implementation of BRI by boosting its presence in South Asia and balancing India (Lwin, 2020).

V. Conclusion

In sum, when the US-Myanmar relations flourished under Obama administration, the relations became 'substantially uncomfortable' under Trump. These shifts in the US-Myanmar relations are contributed by the temporal coincidence of the escalation of the Rohingya crisis and the beginning of the Trump's administration, the complex context of civil-military relations in Myanmar, and 'American First' foreign policy. However, when Trump persistently regarded China as 'strategic competitor' due to the latter's 'repressive vision' and pursuing economic aggression designed to weaken America (Sevastapulo, 2017), the fundamental geopolitical implication of the shifting the US-Myanmar relations, which is the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar, would not be a geopolitically favorable outcome for the US, as the goal of Obama's engagement with Myanmar itself is to geo-strategically balance China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region.

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