Explaining Myanmar’s Foreign Policy Behavior: Domestic and International Factors

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Executive Summary

Along with the dawn of a changing external environment, Myanmar is experiencing and reacting to new challenges and opportunities. Today’s Myanmar is seeking foreign aid and economic assistance; reviving economic and foreign policies; focusing on strategic cooperation and actively engaging international organizations; balancing, managing and expanding relations; acting in passive and reactive mode in its dealings with the strategic weight of major powers; and demonstrating its commitment to democratization and legitimacy in the international arena.

This paper explains these behaviors based on three sets of strategies: hedging, engaging and balancing relationship. In its hedging strategies, Myanmar acts impartially, seeking to avoid direct conflict by not taking sides with any major power. Engagement strategies explain Myanmar’s taking more active foreign policy approach in engaging with the international community. And balancing strategies are especially evident when Myanmar focuses on bilateral ties that need to be normalized and strengthened for mutual benefit.

This paper studies the underlying internal and external factors by investigating how Myanmar’s domestic politics and the international system shape its foreign policy behavior. The analysis is based on James N. Rosenau’s ‘Pre-Theory’ analytical framework for analyzing foreign policy at two levels: state and systemic. At the state level, internal factors like regime change, state institutions, lack of legitimacy and security concerns shape Myanmar’s foreign policy behavior by influencing the foreign policy approaches of the government in responding to and managing domestic conflicts. At the systemic level of analysis, external factors like the changing external environment and the varying strategic approaches of the major powers have an impact on how the government deals with external pressures and opportunities.

Finally, three policy recommendations are offered: (1) Myanmar’s foreign policy should focus on strategies involving foreign assistance, to improve domestic conditions and political stability; (2) Myanmar should favor hedging strategies, which can provide greater space and more strategic options, with less external pressure; and (3) Myanmar should be more active
in multilateral cooperation, and should encourage major powers to cooperate more in Myanmar instead of competing against each other.
Introduction

A state’s foreign policy can be explained in terms of two main levels: (1) the state level, which accounts for the influence of the internal environment: how state institutions, shifts in domestic politics and economics shape the approaches of the state; (2) the systemic level, focusing on the influence of the external environment in defining a state’s behavior toward other states in the international sphere.¹

This paper examines how Myanmar’s domestic politics and the international system shape its foreign policy – a crucial issue for policy-makers and students of Myanmar politics. Starting with the assumption that, in view of its domestic political instabilities, Myanmar may fruitfully be conceptualized as a weak state, the paper analyzes Myanmar’s position in international politics – discussions that have clear foreign policy implications. Utilizing James N. Rosenau’s ‘Pre-Theory’ framework for analyzing foreign policy behavior (see Andriole, Wilkenfeld & Hopple 1975) this paper notes how Myanmar is acting as a weak state, with many unresolved internal political issues leading to instabilities and confrontation with the strategic weight of powerful nations, regionally and further afield.

I begin by defining Myanmar as a weak state facing challenges like poorly developed state institutions, lack of legitimacy and difficult economic conditions. Next, drawing on the literature on the foreign policy behavior of weak states, I analyze Myanmar’s foreign policy actions in light of three sets of strategies: hedging, engagement and relationship balancing. Finally, the paper explores the roles of domestic politics and the international system in shaping Myanmar’s foreign policy behavior. Management and responses to the strategic approaches of major powers and the unstable domestic politics are discussed, in terms of the three sets of strategies.

¹ According to James N. Rosenau, there are five explanatory variables of foreign policy behavior: idiosyncratic, role, government, societal and systemic. See Rosenau, 1966: 27–92. Based on this, scholars like Jeanne A. K. Hey, who studies the foreign policy of weak states and Maung Aung Myoe, a veteran Myanmar’s foreign policy analyst, have categorized the five variables into three levels: individual, state, and system. ‘Individual’ level focuses on the first two variables, ‘state’ level emphasizes the second two variables, and ‘system’ level refers to the last variable. (For more, see Hey 2003: 10; Myoe 2011); Since this paper focuses on domestic and international factors in explaining Myanmar’s foreign policy, it deals only with the state and systemic levels of analysis.
Defining Myanmar as a weak state

To define Myanmar as a weak state, we must examine various aspects of political, economic and social norms. A weak state can be identified through the level of government accountability, military capability, economic prosperity, and the population and size, to mention only a few factors. Myanmar shows many symptoms of a weak state: mass poverty, sluggish economy, fragmented society, weak institution and internal legitimacy, unresolved internal conflicts, political instabilities, and inability to manage external and internal threats.

The weakness of Myanmar can be measured in terms of two critical challenges: regime change and threats. Democratization has come along with regime change, accompanied by weak state institutions and lack of domestic legitimacy. First, Myanmar set about discarding the old military institutions, transforming them to fit into a new democratic set-up. This newly converted institution is fragile because it is not yet fully developed. Lack of institutional capacity results in inadequate responses to the demands of the public and of democracy. Second, the lack of full domestic legitimacy leads to frustrated political ambitions nationwide, the potential of threats, and insufficient rule of law.

Another critical challenge comes from the threats confronting Myanmar. The most prolonged issues here concern the leverage of the military, and decades of insurgency and civil conflicts. Obviously, the military institution is a key influence on the internal affairs of Myanmar, given its “locked in” position (Bunte 2014). According to the 2008 Constitution, the military is entitled to reserve 25% of seats in parliament, to manage its own affairs, and to take control over security affairs such as the ministerial posts for defense, home affairs and border affairs. However, the military remains an impediment to democratization, due

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2 Weak states, as referred to as small states, small powers and small nations, are characterized by low incomes, poor infrastructure, the size of geographic and population, the capacity of institution, the vulnerability of domestic conditions, and the capacity of military. See Handel 1990: 7; Hey 2003: 10; Rana, 2011: 61–69)
3 “Newly democratizing countries often experience a weakening of central state institutions because their old institutions have eroded and their new ones are only partially developed.” (Mansfield & Snyder 2002: 301.)
4 ibid
5 Constitution Art. 109, 141, 20.
to its strong political and economic role and aggressive style of conflict management. With
the formal roles reserved for the military according to the Constitution, combined with the
informal role that developed historically, political culturally and culturally, there are also
speculation as to the possibility that the military could take over power in the future. The
aggressive behavior of the military in internal conflicts has become a serious threat (Gerin
2015) that is linked to the second security challenge: decades-long conflicts between ethnic
armed groups and the military. The lack of trust and escalation of disagreement in managing
border areas and natural resources exacerbate tensions between the two sides, becoming a
serious threat not only to the nation, but also to regional stability.

In sum, the instabilities currently facing Myanmar are caused by regime change and the
prolonged threats and internal instability. These instabilities have made Myanmar a weak
state that has a long way to go to improve its state building and democratization. Defining
Myanmar as a weak state can help us understand not only the domestic political situation
but also the country’s foreign policy behavior.
Explaining Myanmar’s Foreign Policy Behavior

Ever since independence in 1948, Myanmar has had the same fundamental national interests: strengthening national security, enhancing national development, building regional community and international standing; and the same core principles of its foreign policy: independent, active, and non-aligned. On the other hand, Myanmar’s international behavior has varied, depending on its responses to specific situations. Especially since 2011, there have been major changes in how Myanmar responds to and engages with world affairs and manages its external relations, compared to its behavior during the period of military rule. Today’s Myanmar is seeking foreign aid and economic assistance; it has been reviewing its economic and foreign policy in dealing with external opportunities; focusing on strategic cooperation and actively engaging international organizations; balancing, managing and expanding relations; acting in passive and reactive mode in encounters with dominant external powers; and generally demonstrating its commitment to transition. All these actions of foreign policy behavior can be examined in terms of three sets of strategies: hedging, engaging and balancing relationships.

Hedging

Hedging is also referred to as a strategy of “betting on both sides” (Mingjiang & Kemburi 2015: 72) and “wait and see” (Shao Binhong 2014: 165). By remaining in a middle position, flexible to all competing major powers, and postponing its response until the uncertain factors dissolve, this set of strategies not only enables more strategic options but also reduces the risk (Goh 2005: 2). On the basis of its foreign policy principles, Myanmar finds ways to position itself vis-à-vis the major powers so as to benefit its national interests, and with the least risk. In other words, Myanmar attempts to avoid potential damage and risk by cultivating a middle position: implementing straightforward and extreme policies that favor only one major power could bring undesirable outcomes. In a changing external environment, Myanmar’s diplomatic behavior focuses on diversifying external relations by integrating with ASEAN, welcoming foreign direct investment, normalizing relations with the USA and the EU, and reconsolidating its ties with India and with Japan. Myanmar is even presenting itself as an “attractive power” with its geographic significance serving as a gateway to the Indian Ocean for China, a bridge to Southeast Asian countries for India, and,
as regards the USA, as a strategic location to counterbalance the rise of China. Having said that, Myanmar extends its foreign relations by establishing bilateral and multilateral ties, and setting diplomatic and economic policies through various forms of cooperation, to spread its bets. Myanmar aims to be flexible and cooperative with all, and avoid confrontation with the major powers. It may seek closer ties with the USA, but through a slow process of rapprochement. Myanmar may also maintain a strong relationship with China, but making it clear that it is not to be seen as a satellite state of China. All these characteristics of foreign policy behavior fall within the set of strategies called *hedging*.

**Engagement**

The next set of strategies for explaining foreign policy behavior is “engagement”. Democratic reforms generated new opportunities in Myanmar’s external environment. For example, towards Myanmar the USA has evinced a reciprocal foreign policy strategy of “action-for-action”, based on Myanmar’s demonstration to its commitment to fostering further reforms like democratization and basic human rights (U.S. Department of State 2012). Myanmar’s new credentials on domestic reforms have generated new opportunities from the USA. Myanmar’s “engagement” strategy has two purposes. Firstly, it defines Myanmar’s reintegration into the international community for economic liberalization, foreign aid and support, and for a better reputation. This first purpose of the engagement strategy focuses on regionalism and establishing constructive ties (Myoe 2006: 3). Due to past bilateral tensions, like unstable relations with Thailand over territorial claims, Myanmar has chosen to engage with ASEAN, in order to resolve bilateral tensions in multilateral and regional forums (ibid: 9) Embracing regionalism can also enhance Myanmar’s economic and security by strengthening constructive relations in the region (James 2004). A further purpose of the engagement strategy is regional stability and security, where Myanmar’s engagement with ASEAN can assist in managing and resisting the influence of China. Amitav Acharya (1999: 129) has defined a strategy of engagement as “a deliberate policy of socialization of a rising power.” Here, Myanmar focuses on cooperating with ASEAN so as to encourage China to participate in regional integration and socialization, to take constructive responsibility as a regional power (Goh 2005: 36). Myanmar, through ASEAN, is attempting to develop a sense of diplomatic partnership between ASEAN and China,
socializing China into the “ASEAN way.” This sense of engagement behavior has enhanced regional processes and multilateral ties through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and ASEAN+3 (ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea).  

Balancing

Diversifying strategic options by “betting on both sides” and integrating into the region by engaging constructive relationships are not sufficient approaches for Myanmar’s foreign policy objectives. Myanmar still needs to maintain its traditional characteristics in multilateral and bilateral relations, as electively practiced towards certain countries from time to time, even while Myanmar was completely isolated. Maintaining bilateral ties defines the third set of strategies called “balancing relationships.” This comes to the fore when Myanmar preserves stable relationship with major powers in order to achieve reciprocation and harmony for longer-term strategic considerations. For example, bilateral tensions between China and Myanmar rose after U Thein Sein government achieved a series of democratic reforms and favored relations with the USA. Internal and external changes have damaged China–Myanmar relations. However, Myanmar has made clear its desire to maintain stable bilateral relations with China. During the 2013 meeting between the presidents of the two countries, U Thein Sein stated that Myanmar would maintain a mutually beneficial friendship and a comprehensive strategic partnership. Further, he welcomed Chinese enterprises, and promised that Myanmar would play a positive role in promoting cooperation between China and ASEAN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2013).

In this regard, Myanmar also tries to maintain good relations with China, to ensure stable bilateral relations with mutual cooperation building on strategic and interdependent relations for long-term benefit.

In essence, from 1948 to this day, Myanmar has been following the same principles of foreign policy. However, the ways in which it has responded, acted and set about managing its international affairs have varied, depending on the issues and the circumstances. Not

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6 For more information about the cooperation between China and ASEAN, see http://asean.org/
7 On the definition of balance in relationships, see Huang & Shih 2014: 18–22.
least in view of its changing internal and external environment, Myanmar is not acting as it did when it was isolated from the international community. The country’s foreign relations behaviors are changing, and can be defined in terms of the above-mentioned strategy sets: hedging, engagement, and relationship balancing. In line with “hedging,” Myanmar’s actions have involved expanding and normalizing relations with the West, and withdrawing its reliance on China, but Myanmar takes care not to be too close to the West. “Engagement” defines Myanmar’s behavior in establishing multilateral ties with ASEAN in order to foster security and enhance economic development through regionalism and constructivism. Engagement also applies to Myanmar’s actions in encouraging China to participate in regional integration, cooperation and activities; and in welcoming China into the “ASEAN way.” Finally, “balancing relations” is seen in Myanmar’s strengthening its bilateral relations with the major powers.

State Level Analysis

At the state level, the behavior of a state can be analyzed in terms of domestic politics. This involves identifying domestic political conditions such as the political system, government structure, economic and social needs; and their influence on how the state acts (Myoe 2011) Domestically oriented explanations are based on the “linkage” and interaction between domestic and foreign affairs. Domestic factors like economic capacity, national interests, national security, and regime change are seen as central in explaining a weak state’s foreign policy behavior.

Having defined Myanmar as a weak state that has unstable domestic political conditions and having analyzed its foreign policy behavior in the two sections above, analysis of the domestic factors affecting its behavior is now in order. As a weak and vulnerable state, Myanmar must give priority to basic national interests: national security, national development, economic prosperity, democratization, peace and stability. An “inward-looking” foreign policy focused on internal affairs has been Myanmar’s chosen policy and foreign policy orientation (Pederson 2014: 54). However, like any weak state, Myanmar is not able to afford the expansion of national interests beyond its domestic needs, which are the sources of what make Myanmar a fragile state; and those national interests that are
based on domestic needs must be prioritized. Here Myanmar aims to achieve such objectives as building regional community, seeking foreign aid, improving its international image, enhancing border stability, and economic and diplomatic foreign policy. All these reinforce the assumption of an engagement strategy.

Regime change has brought both opportunities and challenges to Myanmar’s new economic and political landscapes. Following the third wave of democratization, also known as the post-authoritarian transition in Third World countries, three stages can be identified: liberalization, democratization, and democratic consolidation (Huntington 1991: 9). At the stage of liberalization, reforms focus on institutional development, political freedom, and economic reforms. Former President of Myanmar, U Thein Sein, is portrayed as a “reform icon” for his efforts in a series of reforms: these included releasing political prisoners and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, establishing a human rights commission, heeding the will of the people, and holding free and fair elections. After this stage, the process continues to the second stage, democratization, where a whole new government is elected and more democratic procedures are implemented. This was evident in Myanmar when NLD won 77% of seats in the 2015 elections, with democracy measures focusing on peace, appointing new ministers and forming a cabinet with a reduced number of ministries. Finally, the last stage, which Myanmar has not yet reached, is one of consolidating democracy, where democratic institutions and liberal norms become normal, integral parts of political life. Myanmar is currently in the second stage of democratization, and its new government must confront various challenges to Myanmar as a vulnerable state with weak institutions and lack of full domestic authority.

The link connecting foreign policy behavior and domestic institutions, both government and civil, is a form of bureaucratic union. As it works its way through the post-authoritarian period, Myanmar has weak institutions as well as low capacity levels within the government. Criticisms of NLD’s government usually concern its lack of experience or expertise in formulating appropriate policies and implementing them. Due to institutional weakness which generates poor capacity in public management in various ministerial departments for implementing administrative procedures, Myanmar’s bureaucratic capacity is still inadequate. Thus, the country’s weak state institutions are directly linked to the limitations
of its bureaucracy and foreign policy approach through the lack of competence in formulating and employing administrative procedures for the ministries charged with carrying out the daily tasks of the government. Myanmar must develop complex organization routines and administration in order to improve its foreign policy approaches and bargaining position, as it currently has very limited information and capacity to formulate higher-level foreign policy or apply long-term strategies. This situation pushes Myanmar to take a neutral position, maximizing advantageous cooperation with minimum risk, and taking care not to implement policies that favor only one major power. Myanmar tends to favor hedging behaviors such as betting on both sides, taking a neutral stance, and waiting to respond rather than being pro-active – due to lack of experience, expertise, information and capacity, all of these being challenges that result from having weak bureaucratic institutions.

Myanmar’s weak state institutions also lead to a lack of domestic legitimacy concerning issues such as human rights issues, inefficient rule of law with an incompetent police force, and political instabilities not in line with democratic discipline. This lack of domestic legitimacy is a core vulnerability, since the tensions in society are massive. The pressure of these tensions – ethno-religious and ethnic conflicts, and political instabilities – on the one hand, and on the other the pressure exerted in particular by the USA in its promotion of democratic value and human rights, bring Myanmar face to face with demands from the domestic and foreign fronts. For instance, human rights issues in Rakhine State has come into the spotlight among human rights watchers. The discrimination, human rights violation, and indeed ill-treatment towards Rohingya people have become a concern for the USA in promoting human rights in Myanmar. At a news conference during his recent visit, US Secretary of State John Kerry urged Myanmar to consider human rights issues, especially in Rakhine State. Myanmar’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Daw Aung San Suu Kyi responded by requesting “space” on this matter, and encouraged the USA to cooperate with and support Myanmar in search of a peaceful solution (US Department of State 2016).

This indicates that Myanmar’s behavior towards the USA can be interpreted through the lens of hedging and engagement strategy. First, Myanmar adopts hedging behavior to distance itself from the pressure and to prevent US interference in Myanmar’s domestic
politics. The nationalist elements of Myanmar are like ticking time-bombs when it comes to a sensitive issue like extreme nationalist activities in Rakhine State. If the Myanmar government should rush in to handle this issue with urgency just because of pressure from Washington, massive riots by nationalist mobs could ensue. As Myanmar lacks domestic legitimacy due to poor resources, an incompetent police force and weak government institutions, it would not be easy to handle this matter along the lines used by the previous government. A wiser approach is for Myanmar to hedge the US pressure and find its own space for handling its own affairs.

Second, establishing domestic legitimacy requires a solid and smooth democratic transition without interruptions and disturbances. In order to maintain its democratization process, Myanmar needs engagement strategies that can encourage every great power to support Myanmar’s transformation.

Myanmar’s foreign policy has traditionally been oriented largely to internal security and domestic stability. A paramount foreign policy objective is to enhance national security. Two main elements of security challenges shape the country’s foreign policy behavior: the influence of the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw), and civil conflicts.

When Myanmar formulates its foreign policy, the aim is often to manage internal conflicts and promote the political role and objectives of the Tatmadaw – in particular, the security of the Tatmadaw and its interests. Such policy has been called “domestic political-security imperative” foreign policy (see Haacke 2006: 18). Myanmar encourages its neighbors to practice policies of non-interference, to reduce the criticisms of Tatmadaw’s pursuit of security and confrontation with ethnic armed groups.

The second security challenge concerns ethnic insurgencies. Due to the tensions between Tatmadaw and various ethnic armed groups, Myanmar’s immediate neighbors have called a quest for the pursuit of peace. Tensions between the Tatmadaw and other armed groups have caused instability, and not only within the country: they also threaten regional peace and stability, disrupting border trade and causing refugee influxes. These political instabilities and internal vulnerabilities press Myanmar to demonstrate its capabilities of
self-reliance by employing flexible diplomacy based on internal politics and the situation at home.

Overall, Myanmar’s foreign policy actions are prioritized according to the internal situation. From this perspective, Myanmar’s behavior can be explained as managing and responding to the domestic political instabilities which also represent Myanmar as a weak and vulnerable state. A weak state like Myanmar has no capability to expand its national interests beyond the state, such as promoting its political and social values abroad. In essence, Myanmar’s national interests are limited to its domestic needs; thus its foreign policy objectives, orientation and actions are shaped by these needs and limitations.

Systemic Level Analysis

The previous section discussed how domestic conditions influence Myanmar’s foreign policy behavior. This section will show several ways in which also the international system is involved. Myanmar’s management and responses to its foreign affairs have resulted from the influence of the international system. Historically, the influence has come from the worldviews of the country’s leaders. After World War II, the colonial experience lay at the root of the increasingly nationalist worldviews held by Myanmar leaders, bringing extreme isolationism and xenophobia. Moreover, the changing setting of international system during the Cold War raised fears of being entangled in power confrontations between conflicting blocs. To avoid such a situation, Myanmar pursued a neutral position, and a closed-door foreign policy. External constraints have long shaped Myanmar’s actions. Today’s changing landscape has created both pressures and prospects for its approaches to foreign policy.

A continuing primarily explanation for Myanmar’s foreign policy behavior is its geographical significance. The geo-strategic importance of the country accounts the rivalry for regional domination between major powers and their strategic ambitions. Myanmar is an open gate to Indian Ocean for China, a connecting bridge to Southeast Asia for India and the USA, and for Japan, a strategic containment blueprint toward China. All these major powers have their own strategic ambitions for utilizing Myanmar as a strategic buffer, and their differing approaches can affect how Myanmar acts and responds to them.
First of all, concerning China and Myanmar, we should note China’s ‘Two-Ocean’ strategy (see Yonghong and Hongchao 2014: 8). In its search for regional influence, China needs Myanmar to enhance its growing military and economy power through geopolitical assistance. Gaining regional influence and sea power on the South China Sea as the one ocean strategy, and accessing the Indian Ocean through Myanmar as the other ocean strategy, would allow China to expand its regional influence throughout Southeast Asia.

Secondly, Myanmar is vital for India’s ‘Look-East’ policy (now upgraded to ‘Act-East’) as the land bridge between India and the ASEAN countries (see Chairman’s statement 2014). Connecting ASEAN through Myanmar would provide India with a better trade route and greater access to ASEAN markets. Moreover, Myanmar and India share a 1,643km border, between India’s northeastern states and Myanmar. Distant from India’s heartland, these states need stability and economic development.

Thirdly, US interests in Myanmar are understood as concerning strategic access to restrain China’s strategic foothold in the region, rather than purely economic interests. For the USA, Myanmar is strategically located to serve as a springboard for implementing its dual containment policy aimed at limiting the regional influence of both China and India (Yonghong and Hongchao 2014: 9). Washington has been promoting democracy and human rights, encouraging India to cooperate with Myanmar for domestic political stability in order to create more strategic options for Myanmar, providing it with foreign policy options to reduce the influence of China.

Finally, Japan, as a firm US ally, is attempting to unite other major powers in order to balance China. Like the USA, also Japan seeks to promote democracy in Myanmar through “value-oriented” diplomacy focused on promoting the values of freedom, human rights, and market economy, to strengthen foreign policy cooperation (Aso: 2006). This could help Myanmar to improve its bargaining position in multilateral cooperation.

Given the considerable role of Myanmar vis-à-vis major powers and their aims of balancing regional power by utilizing its strategic location, it could be said that Myanmar finds itself
entangled in the major-power rivalry for regional influence. Viewed from the perspective of national interests and strategies, Myanmar’s responses to the approaches of major powers can be explained in terms of the three sets of strategies presented above.

Thus, Myanmar’s external environment can explain many of its actions on the international scene. At first glance, Myanmar’s responses to major powers appear to be evidence of a *hedging* strategy, in line with the country’s tradition of focusing on flexible diplomacy, with Myanmar as “Nobody’s enemy, but everybody’s friend.” Maintaining good relations with all major powers allows Myanmar to cultivate a middle position, balancing relations to avoid the risk of becoming a satellite state to one major power. Hence, this interpretation is that Myanmar has sought to remain impartial in order to improve its bargaining position as a result of having good relations with all major powers.

In addition, the international system creates cooperative opportunities where Myanmar’s behavior can be interpreted as *engagement* towards the Southeast Asia region. Myanmar’s pursuit of regional integration and its “engagement” strategy towards ASEAN have two advantages in economic and security terms. The first advantage, and the main driver of Myanmar’s desire to integrate in the region, is developing closer, constructive economic ties with ASEAN. As Myanmar is transforming into a democratic country, it implements more liberal economic policies and participates as a fully integrated member of ASEAN in order to foster regional economy. Moreover, Myanmar participates in regional security and stability approaches, helping it to counteract China’s strategic weight.

Finally, Myanmar’s changing foreign relations have led to a greater focus on stronger bilateral ties with each of the major powers. From 2011 onward, Myanmar has been working to establish new relations and has also normalized previously damaged relations. Compared to situation during the era of military rule, Myanmar has rapidly improved relations with its external environment, both non-state actors and majors power accord Myanmar better treatment. That being said, however, it is still essential for Myanmar to employ a *balancing of relationships* strategy in order to affirm and strengthen its ties with major powers.
Conclusions

As a weak state, Myanmar has limitations on the formulation of its foreign policy and fewer strategic options due to its internal vulnerability as well as to external constraints. Domestic and international factors are crucial in shaping Myanmar actions on the international arena. This paper has highlighted the country’s weaknesses and explained its foreign policy behavior in terms of three strategies – hedging, engagement and balancing relationships – with analysis at the state level and the systemic level.

At the state level of analysis, Myanmar’s foreign policy approaches have an “inward-looking” orientation. Myanmar is a weak state, with unstable domestic conditions that cannot be ignored, also as regards its foreign policy objectives. Such internal factors have led Myanmar to seek foreign assistance, strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties, and pursue regional integration; and the positive political changes bring in external support. Today’s Myanmar needs to prioritize domestic affairs in order to create a stable political environment. Also its foreign policy must focus on dealing with internal demands.

At the systemic level of analysis, Myanmar faces the strategic weight of major powers in a hegemonic context. The US containment strategy aimed at limiting Chinese dominance in Southeast Asia, Japan’s power-balance approach, the ‘two-ocean’ strategy of China, and the Act-East policy of India – all these approach Myanmar differently. Consequently, Myanmar has favored hedging strategies. It intends to implement better and more long-term strategies in responding to the major powers, although the government must constantly take care not to become entangled in a dangerous situation involving big-power rivalries. Foreign assistance from Japan and the West are aimed at creating more foreign policy options for Myanmar, so as to reduce its reliance on China and to balance Chinese influence. Myanmar is well aware of the importance of maintaining good relationships with its neighbors – and not least with China, despite the challenges.
Policy Recommendations

With the perspective of Myanmar as a weak state, the following recommendations are offered here.

1. First, Myanmar should employ strategies for securing its national interests with priority to what the country really needs. This includes achieving foreign policy objectives to pursue the goals of nationwide peace, democracy and human rights, national development, and economic liberalization. Myanmar’s strategies should aim to seek foreign assistance and utilize opportunities for fostering economic growth, strengthening state institutions, and the pursuit of peace, disciplined democracy and a stable political environment.

2. Myanmar’s foreign policy should focus on hedging strategies, involving a neutral position, avoiding international conflicts, judiciously waiting to respond to issues, and maintaining good relations with all the major powers. Its pragmatic approaches should favor hedging strategies because of the advantageous foreign policy implications: hedging strategies create a space and strategic options for Myanmar in its dealings with major powers. In view of the strategic weight of the powers that Myanmar must deal with, its vulnerability is testimony to the inefficacy of international legitimacy under conditions of strategic asymmetry. Myanmar should enhance its international legitimacy by demonstrating its independent and non-aligned foreign policy. In order to maintain an impartial stance and avoid provocation, Myanmar should not implement straightforward policies that favor only one major power. However, it should avoid dependence on only one major power, and seek to retain some detachment from the major powers: essentially, not becoming entangled in major power relations in the region. A neutral position can enable Myanmar to distance itself from the major powers and avoid the dangers of having to satisfy the demands of a dominant power.

3. Myanmar should take a more active role in multilateral cooperation. Amidst the regional influence rivalry of major powers, Myanmar should act as a transitional gateway that can ease tensions between rival major powers and encourage them to cooperate constructively.
With its geopolitical significance, Myanmar should pursue “attractive power”\(^8\) appealing to the strategic ambitions of the major powers. This could enhance Myanmar’s bargaining position as strategic cooperation partner to China, as an economic gateway for India to the ASEAN market, and as a containment partner of the USA and Japan as regards China. Further, Myanmar should incorporate engagement strategies with strong elements of multilateral cooperation, where it can accommodate cooperation with state actors as well as non-state actors to foster economic liberalization and domestic political stability. Also important is the type of conference diplomacy actively practiced in 1950s, when Myanmar was “a major cosmopolitan center in Southeast Asia by being the sites of international meetings and visits by foreign leaders and experts” (Chi-Shad Liang 1990:222). In 2017, Myanmar will host the 13th ASEM Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (ASEM FMM13) in its capital city, Nay Pyi Daw (see Chair’s Statement 2016). This provides an opportunity for Myanmar to demonstrate its commitment to taking an active role and improving its international legitimacy, promoting its international image. Myanmar’s engagement policy toward the major powers through multilateral ties will eventually further its international reputation – while also creating a peaceful environment with fewer strategic tensions and more cooperative and constructive relations, with diversified foreign policy options and an improved bargaining position.

\(^8\) In the pursuit of “attractive power,” weak states can exploit their importance to other countries in ways that enhance their foreign policy success. See Hey 2003: 4.
References


