Chapter 6
Approached to China: Myanmar’s China Policy (2016–2020)

Since NLD assumed office in March 2016, Myanmar’s China policy has experienced with adjustments due to the changing external environments and domestic politics. Externally, the rising tensions in the SCS indicated high risks of getting involved in Sino-US power rivalry for Myanmar. Internally, the deepening cooperative relations between the democratic government and the military ensured the stability in Myanmar while the Rohingya refugee crisis deteriorated Myanmar’s relations with the West. Given this, the Burmese democratic leaders have pursued China’s help for economic development and diplomatic protection while continuing to counterbalance China by practising an active neighborhood diplomacy and multilateralism.

6.1 Rising Tensions in SCS

At the end of the second term of Obama administration, the strategic significance of Southeast Asia in U.S. ‘Rebalancing’ strategy continued to increase. As Obama said at the US-ASEAN Summit in February 2016, the U.S.-ASEAN partnership was on a new trajectory that will carry us to even greater heights in the decades ahead.¹ In practice, the US has committed to push forward the TPP and get more deeply involved into the SCS disputes, so as to reinforce its predominance and contain China’s rise. In February 2016, the US and some Southeast Asian countries eventually achieved an agreement on implementing TPP, a major step to strengthen America’s economic presence in Southeast Asia and balance China’s rising influence in the region. As Obama claimed the TPP would let America, not China, lead the way on global trade.² After the SCS Arbitration was released by Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in July 2016, the US has employed various policy instruments to deter China’s legal activism in SCS. These mainly included the accusation of China for violating

¹The White House [1].
²The Washington Post [2].
international law and militarising the artificial islands in SCS, and the conduction of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) near the islands occupied by China.

U.S. assertive behavior have not only been viewed with hostility by the Chinese government, but have also been criticised by Chinese nationalists who launched anti-American movements on the Internet. In October 2016, a survey by the Pew Research Center indicated that more than half of the Chinese interviewees (52%) think that the US is trying to prevent China from becoming an equal power; only 29% believe that the US is willing to accept China’s rise. In addition, just under half (45%) say the US is a major threat, which is the highest percentage among the seven potential threats tested in the survey. Moreover, China has taken a series of countermeasures to safeguard its economic and strategic interests in Southeast Asia and reduce U.S. military deterrence in SCS. First of all, China accelerated the negotiation process of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in order to counter TPP. Second, China refused to accept the SCS Arbitration by condemning the arbitration process and the tribunal’s ruling as illegal and illegitimate. From Chinese perspective, the entire process and ruling were created and manipulated by the US and other powers to weaken China and foment disorder in the region. Third, the Chinese PLA enhanced its military deployment in SCS, and monitored and warned away the U.S. warships which illegally ‘invade’ Chinese territorial waters, so as to maintain the territorial sovereignty and deter U.S. expansion in the region.

Since Donald Trump took office in January 2017, Southeast Asia has continued to be a focus of U.S. policy towards Asia. Soon after the function of the new government in Washington, the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defence Secretary James Mattis visited Southeast Asia in August and October 2017 respectively. Later, Trump initiated his first Southeast Asia trip and proposed the ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy in which the ASEAN remains vital when he attended the US-ASEAN Summit in November 2017. This grand strategy aiming at expanding attention on the maritime space, building closer relationships with allies and partners, strengthening the rule of law, civil society and transparent governance, and promoting private sector-led development, which was widely seen as a counterbalance to BRI. This perception was further consolidated in Chinese society since the new U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the US will provide 113 million USD to support digital economy, energy, and infrastructure and another 300 million USD to reinforce security cooperation throughout the region in July and August 2018 respectively. It is evident that the US is committed to enhance its economic and military presence in the region, so as to contain China’s rise. In the meantime, the Trump administration upgraded its military deterrence in SCS by sharply increasing the FONOPs, building Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Japan, Australia and India, and strengthening defence cooperation with Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, resulted in global concerns over the military conflicts in SCS. What’s more,

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3 Wike and Stokes [3].
4 Swaine [4].
5 US Department of Defence [5].
6 US Department of State [6, 7].
the US has not only accused China of pushing territorial ambitions even during the COVID-19 pandemic, but overtly supported the claimant states to challenge China in SCS. In March 2019, Pempeo personally claimed that the Philippine-claimed disputed territory falls under the provision of the mutual defence treaty. In the recent maritime standoff between China, Vietnam and Malaysia over offshore gas and oil exploration, Pempeo criticised China for exerting military pressure and coercing its neighbors in the SCS and urged the ASEAN countries to call out China’s aggressive behavior in the maritime region. In addition, the U.S. warships maintains persistent presence near the drilling facility with the aim to oppose China’s coercive and unlawful actions in SCS. U.S. deep involvement and provocative actions in SCS caused China’s forceful countermeasures mainly including the strong responses and extensive military exercise. Since the Sino-US competition have intensified over the past years, Myanmar has been faced with a more restrictive inclusive external environment than ever before.

6.2 U.S. Criticism and China’s Assistance

The restrictive inclusive external environment imposed high risks and low benefits for Myanmar, among which the first and foremost is the difficulty in maintaining balance between China and the US. Since Trump became president, the Myanmar-US relationship has stagnated because of the declining significance of Myanmar in America’s Southeast Asia policy and their disputes over the Rohingya issue. In fact, Myanmar was excluded from Trump’s first Asia tour and other senior U.S. officials’ Southeast Asia trips, such as Tillerson in August 2017, Mattis in October 2017 and January 2018, and Pompeo in August 2018. Moreover, the Rohingya refugee crisis has sparked a major dispute between the US and Myanmar and has dominated the cool Myanmar-US relations. So far, the US has revived sanctions on the Burmese officers, suspended military cooperation with the Burmese army, and imposed pressures on Myanmar government to push the democratic process forward. It has led to a popular resistance against the US in among the Burmese elite and citizens. It is in this context that Myanmar has hardly advanced warming relations with the US and thus to counterbalance China. Additionally, although the US pledged to increase investment and provide development aids to Myanmar after the inauguration of the democratic government in March 2016, the capitals and aids from the US have been actually decreased. Given this, Myanmar has to rely on China, ASEAN, Japan, India and Russia to reduce American pressures while stimulating economic growth.

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7 Gutierrez [8].
8 Nguyen [9].
9 Chatmas [10].
10 According to Murray Hiebert, the US has no focus on Myanmar except the Rohingya refugees. Interviewed with Murray Hiebert, Senior Associate [11].
11 Interviewed with Murray Hiebert, Senior Associate [11].
Second, the anti-Chinese sentiment in Burmese society have been slightly reduced because of China’s active public diplomacy and the growing significance of Chinese investment for Myanmar. On one hand, China has expanded people-to-people exchanges and provided a large number of development aid to Myanmar with the aim to improve its poor national image and build up mutual trust between the two peoples. Meanwhile, the Chinese companies have shared more responsibilities for developing the local communities, and enhanced the transparency of the projects by inviting the journalists coming from all around the world to do interviews. In addition, they invested few new big natural resource exploitation projects since 2016, which also contributed to the declining resentment of Chinese investment in Myanmar. On the other hand, the Burmese elite who are committed to modernise the country has increasingly realised the significance of Chinese investment. Given the decreasing domestic pressures, the Myanmar government has a strong incentive to enhance economic cooperation with China.

Third, China continues to be the main diplomatic shelter for Myanmar during the Rohingya refugee crisis started from the mid-2017 as well as an indispensable mediator in the peace talks in northern Myanmar. In practice, China has not only offered its key support for Myanmar reducing the mounting pressures from the West, but helped to bring about an agreement on repatriating the Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh between Myanmar and Bangladesh and proposed a three-stage path to resolve the Rohingya issue thoroughly. Besides, knowing that the peace process will be a top priority for the NLD government, China would like to play a larger, more positive role in national reconciliation to approach the democratic government.

6.3 Increasing Domestic Challenges

The Burmese new government has not only inherited its predecessor’s legacy but also encountered new challenges, chiefly including the ethnic conflicts and religious tensions in minority areas, and the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic as well as its adverse effects on national economy. Shortly before the establishment of the democratic government, the Myanmar military renewed its offensives against

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12 Interviewed with Professor Yin Myo Thu at University of Yangon [12].
13 Interviewed with Senior Engineer Guo Yu at Chinese State Power Investment Corporation (CPCI) [13].
14 According to my interviews with many Myanmar scholars since 2017, they emphasised that the government officials want to attract Chinese investment to promote the economic development while the local farmers are discontent with Chinese investment. Interviewed with Professor Yin Myo Thu at University of Yangon [12] and Interviewed with Dr. Myint San, Vice Chairman of Dawei SEZ Management Committee of Myanmar [14].
15 Three-stage Path: first, to effect a ceasefire on the ground, to return to stability and order; second, find a workable solution for the return of refugees; third, to work toward a long-term solution based on poverty alleviation. See Lee [15].
16 Yun [16].
the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), which led to escalated conflicts in northern Myanmar. Therefore, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto leader of the democratic government, made national reconciliation the cornerstone policy of her government and took the lead in promoting the peace process. In July 2016, she chaired the new established National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC) and held three rounds of ‘21st Century Panglong’ conferences, attempting to achieve a peace agreement with the ethnic groups. However, due to the determining role of the military in peace talks, she could not really lead the peace process and thus to reach the ceasefire agreement. What’s more, it is quite difficult for her to remove the deep distrust and dispute between the military and the ethnic armed groups during the endless conflicts in the past decades. Given this, some analysts even concluded that the Myanmar government could not solve the ethnic issue, though Aung San Suu Kyi expected to do it.\footnote{For instance, Professor Li Chengyang at Yunnan University said that the NLD government could not address the ethnic issue at the conference of “Myanmar Situation in 2017 and Sino-Myanmar Relations”, Kunming, December 28, 2017.}

The tensions between the Burmese Buddhist and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State eventually evolved into bloody conflicts in October 2016 and August 2017, causing global outcry over the human rights abuse of the Burmese military and great pressures on the democratic government. Despite the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi established the Central Committee for Rakhine State Peace, Stability and Development and an independent Advisory Commission on Rakhine State in May and August 2016, respectively, and reached an repatriation agreement with the Bangladesh government on resettling the Rohingya refugees, Myanmar has continued to be criticised by the West. In the meantime, the terrorist attacks from the Rohingya insurgent group called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in northern Rakhine State constitute an abiding and clear danger to Myanmar.

Given the escalated ethnic conflicts and rising crisis of Rohingya refugees, rumours started to spread in Myanmar that a rift had emerged between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing. To be sure, there have been many disputes over the 2008 Constitution, national reconciliation, and Rohingya issue between the Myanmar government and military. But in spite of these disputes, the cooperative relationship between them has still been remaining. First of all, the NLD has actually taken only few measures to review the Constitution until the January 2019 when it proposed the formation of a joint committee on constitutional amendment in the parliament. Nonetheless, the NLD would not to engage in the kind of counterproductive activity that could provoke a military coup, which is the bottom line of the constitutional amendment.\footnote{Moe [17].} For instance, although the soldiers rejected all substantive changes in the proposed constitutional amendments in parliament in March 2020,\footnote{\textit{The Economist} [18].} the NLD did not only not protest against the military but insist on pushing forward the constitutional amendment within the parliament. Second, Aung San Suu Kyi shifted from refusing to accept the NCA reached by the previous government and several ethnic
groups, and agreed to push forward the peace process based on it after the NLD seized power. Third, despite a huge amount of stress from the international community, Aung San Suu Kyi has refrained from criticising the Tatmadaw, which is suspected of engaging in a campaign of brutal suppression in Rakhine state. This reflects her willingness to avoid challenging the military on an issue about which many people in her party do not care. In addition, Aung San Suu Kyi has frequently engaged with Min Aung Haing and stood with the Tatmadaw in the Rohingya refugee crisis, intending to build harmonious relations with the military.

Since the NLD formed a cabinet in March 2016, the country has experienced more flooding, an earthquake, and a slowing economy locked into falling commodity prices. To improve the business environment and thus to attract more foreign trade and investment, the NLD government has initiated administrative and economic reforms. Yet, the Burmese economy has suffered from natural disasters, low agricultural and gas exportation, slow investment flows, and most importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 risks inflict long-term economic pain on Myanmar which relies heavily on international trade, investment, and technology.

### 6.4 Aung San Suu Kyi: Democratic Leader

Although Aung San Suu Kyi is not qualified to become president in the 2008 Constitution, she is the de facto leader of the Burmese democratic government. As a foreign minister, Aung San Suu Kyi is in charge of foreign affairs, and thus dominating Myanmar’s diplomacy. Nevertheless, the Burmese generals would not support any change in foreign policy that could threaten Myanmar’s unity, stability, or sovereignty. Therefore, one cannot ignore the profound influence of the military on Myanmar’s foreign policy towards China, especially in the security area. In this context, it is necessary to analyse the personalities of both Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Mlaing and their influences on Myanmar’s diplomacy.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who is the youngest daughter of Aung San, Father of the Nation of modern-day Myanmar, was born in Rangoon in 1945. She received a university education in India and the United Kingdom (UK), graduating from the University of Delhi in 1964 and the University of Oxford in 1968. She then worked at the UN for three years, and married Michael Aris, a British scholar, in 1972. She was unknown to the public until August 1988, when she first became involved in the power struggle against the military regime in Yangon. Since then, she has been at the centre of Myanmar’s political struggle.

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20Kurlantzick [19].
21McCarthy [20, p. 142].
22Chau [21] and Bharat [22].
23Selth [23].
24Silverstein [24, p. 1007].
Owing to various advantages that Aung San Suu Kyi enjoys, she has accumulated a high reputation that no other person has achieved among the Burmese people, and has grown into the opposition leader in Myanmar. For instance, she is the daughter of her father, the national hero Aung San, one of the few unstained political leaders of the past. She has also won the hearts and minds of Burmese society by reaching out to ordinary people and delivering public speeches to them, and openly criticising the military government. Due to her prolonged struggle against the Burmese junta, she remained under house arrest for almost 21 years until 2011 when she was elected as a member of parliament. From then on, she shifted from criticising the junta to engaging with it, and won the general elections in 2015 and established a democratic government in the following year.

Her prominent family background, overseas study experience, and long power struggle against the military jointly shaped her unique personality. First, given her close relations with Aung San, she is the most popular leader among the Burmese people. Second, she is perceived as a pro-West Burmese leader due largely to her close connections with the West. She is also a pro-democracy leader with a strong will because of her long resistance against the dictatorship in Myanmar. Third, she is described as a pragmatic leader who would like to cooperate and compromise with the military rather than confronting it, as well as a reformist who has initiated a number of reforming policies. However, she is also denounced as a ‘democratic dictator’ in Myanmar, as she vowed to make all the decisions in Myanmar’s new government. Indeed, Aung San Suu Kyi is highly stubborn in that she does not like to listen to the advice of veteran politicians and retired military officers. Given her high reputation in the democratic movement and the international community, no one within the NLD can openly challenge her authority. Thus, Aung San Suu Kyi will remain the most important political figure in the near future in Myanmar. Due to the close connections between Aung San Suu Kyi and the West and her deep democratic values, she would prefer to further reintegrate Myanmar into the world and improve relations with the West. At the same time, the pragmatic leader would also like to maintain friendly relations with Myanmar’s neighbours, China and India in particular. This policy should be guaranteed by her popularity and authority in the Burmese society and government.

6.5 Min Aung Hlaing: Conservative Leader

Yet, her efforts might be undermined by Min Aung Hlaing. Actually, the Burmese democrats perceived Min Aung Hlaing as a conservative leader who is an obstacle to improving human rights, democratic reform, peace, modernisation, and ameliorating

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25Hlaing [25, p. 364].
26Cartalucci [26].
27Hlaing [25, p. 365].
health and education in Myanmar. Min Aung Hlaing was born on 3 July 1956 in Tavoy, Tenasserim Division, and came from a civil service family. He studied law at the Rangoon Arts and Science University from 1972 to 1973, and enrolled in the Defence Services Academy in the 19th Intake in 1974. After graduation, he went on to command positions in Mon State, and was promoted to commander of the Triangle Regional Command in 2002. He was mostly unknown to the public until he led an offensive against the MNDAA in Kokang in 2009. Subsequently, he rose to the top leaders of the Burmese military, and eventually became the command-in-chief in 2011 and the senior general in 2013.

Min Aung Mlaing has been heavily accused of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya people by many human rights organisations since the terrorist attacks in Rakhine State in August 2017. He is also a hardliner, essentially blocking any attempts at compromise, especially in political and security affairs. For instance, he has defended the military’s continued role in national politics and refused to make compromises with the government on the constitution amendment. He has monopolised the security affairs and taken a tough stance towards the ethnic rebels, and rejected foreign interference in the ethnic conflicts. It is because of his intransigent position on democratic transition and human rights, Myanmar has to some extent been isolated by the West again. Yet, it is unsafe to say Min Aung Mlaing is a conservative with a reputation as a hawk like Than Shwe who took an aversion to the oppositions as well as the West. Actually, he is willing to share power with NLD, and support its efforts of diversifying diplomatic relations on the basis of the assurance of military privileges. In short, Min Aung Mlaing is the main barrier to NLD’s engagement with the West and monopolises the military affairs on the one side, and, on the other, he would give back to NLD’s active diplomacy in the economic and political area.

6.6 Myanmar’s Assessment of External Environments

As Aung San Suu Kyi said in April 2016, Myanmar will adopt an independent, non-aligned, and active foreign policy, and has dealt closely and warmly not only with neighbouring countries but also with the other states of the world. In practice, Myanmar has practiced an active neighbouring diplomacy and multilateralism by conducting frequent foreign visits to neighbouring countries and the Western powers, and actively participating in regional and international forums, in order to reintegrate itself into the international community. However, it was thrust into the centre of international concern when the Rohingya refugee crisis hit in mid-2017. The Burmese democratic leaders who have been faced with mounting Western pressure, therefore,

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28Farmaner [27].
29Min Aung Mlaing [28].
30Farmaner [29].
31The New Light of Myanmar [30].
have to be alert for U.S. interference and the deteriorated relations between the US and the Myanmar military as well as their adverse political consequences. In fact, the Burmese general has a long standing perception that the country is threatened by the subversive activities jointly conducted by anti-government forces and the West. For this reason, the democratic government has forced to take a tough position on Western criticism and avoid criticising or even pressing the Tatmadaw, so as to maintain cooperative relations with the military. In addition, the America’s favourable image among Burmese society has been damaged due to U.S. Ambassador Scot Marciel’s use of the word Rohingya as a designation for the Rakhine-based Muslim ethnic group as well as U.S. constant criticism. In this context, the US has became a major threat to Myanmar again, led the latter to approach to China.

Given the rising ethnic conflicts between 2016 and 2017, the Burmese authorities strongly suspected that China is behind the insurgent groups that attacked civilian targets and security outposts in northern Myanmar. Nonetheless, the Myanmar government has fully understood that China holds the key to success for its national reconciliation process, and it is necessary for it to positively engage with China. Meanwhile, the Burmese generals’ concerns about Chinese interference in the ethnic conflicts have been eased due to China’s great efforts of cutting down connections with the Kokang forces, pressuring the ethnic groups to participate in peace talks, and prohibiting Chinese individuals from becoming involved in the ethnic clashes in northern Myanmar. Moreover, they were aware of China’s growing discontent with Myanmar military’s escalating offensives in the border areas as well as their damaging effects on the security and stability in Chinese peripheral territories. Given this, the Myanmar military has pursued cooperation with China on pushing forward the peace talks and border management.

Since the NLD established a democratic government in March 2016, the base of Myanmar’s foreign policy has consisted of receiving foreign assistance and promoting the socio-economic development of the country. To achieve this goal, Myanmar has initiated a series of economic and administrative reforms, and made great efforts to expand trade, investment, and aid from regional powers and Western countries. For instance, during her China tour in August 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi called on China to promote more trade and investment cooperation that would create employment opportunities for Burmese locals, intending to reduce local resistance towards Chinese investments. But in spite of that, Myanmar has been increasingly aware of China’s ambitions in the country via the mega-projects with strategic importance under BRI and CMEC. In August 2018, Deputy Finance Minister Set Aung, who was appointed to lead the Kyaukpyu project negotiations in May of this year, said that the project size has been scaled down tremendously due to the fear of ‘debt trap’, where countries are pressed into making sovereignty-surrendering concessions.

32 McCarthy [20, p. 145].
33 Ibid.
34 Myoe [31, p. 103].
35 Sein [32].
36 Myanmar State Counselor Office [33].
when they are unable to service their BRI-related debts. With the spread of COVID-19, Myanmar would increase its dependence on China, economically and politically on one hand, and maintain the balancing act among great powers and thus to avoid the dominance of China on the other hand.

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6.7.1 Revived Close Bilateral Economic Relations

Since the inauguration of the new government in March 2016, Myanmar has taken a number of measures to revive the close economic relations with China. First and foremost, Myanmar resumed the controversial mega-projects funded by Chinese companies except the Myitsone dam soon after the function of the democratic government. These mainly included the Sino-Myanmar oil pipeline, the Kyaukpyu SEZ, and the Letpadaung mining project. The Sino-Myanmar oil pipeline which was suspended during the Thein Sein era was opened in April 2017 when a transportation agreement on Sino-Myanmar Crude Oil Pipeline was signed by both sides during Myanmar President Htin Kyaw’s China tour. On 19 May 2017, China received its first consignment of crude oil from Myanmar via the Sino-Myanmar crude oil pipeline, indicating the full operations of the gas and oil pipeline. So far, the carrying capability of the Sino-Myanmar oil pipeline has increased to 1000 tons per year, nearly half of its full-load capability.

Another project is the deep-water port and industrial park in Kyaukpyu SEZ in Rakhine State. On 30 December 2015, an international group including the state-owned China International Trust and Investment Corp. (CITIC), China Harbor Engineering Company, China Merchants Holdings, Yunnan Construction Engineering Group, China TEDA Investment Holding, and Thailand Charoen Pokphand Group won the bid and obtained approval from the Burmese government to develop the Kyaukpyu SEZ. According to CITIC’s introduction, the project, which requires an initial investment of 8.3 billion USD and a total investment of 89.2 billion USD over 35 years, consists of a petrochemical industrial zone, a railroad complex, a logistics centre, export processing industries, multi-purpose terminals, and residential areas, all covering 120 km² of land and 70 km² of waterways. The construction for the project was originally planned to begin in February 2017, but it failed to start. In April 2017, a new agreement on constructing the Kyaukpyu SEZ was signed by CITIC and the management committee of Kyaukpyu SEZ, in which both sides agreed to carry out the environmental and social assessments as soon as possible so that the construction can start in 2018. Five months later, both sides reached a consensus.

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37 Kapoor and Thant [34] and Lintner [35].
38 Dunn et al. [36, p. 38].
39 Lee and Lone [37].
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on the equity distribution of the Kyaukpyu port in which CITIC takes a 70% stake.\(^{40}\)
In November 2018, a scaled-down framework agreement on the construction of the Kyaukpyu deep-water port, the most important part of the Kyaukpyu SEZ, was signed by both countries. According to the new deal, both sides agreed to narrow down the port, which is decreased from an earlier version of 10 billion USD and 10 berths to a 1.3 billion USD terminal with two deep water berths respectively.\(^{41}\) In addition, an environmental and social impact assessment (ESIA) will be commenced in a year, and new industrial zones will be negotiated and “about three framework agreements will be made”.\(^{42}\) Then, the ESIA was initiated in July 2019, and the shareholder agreement and concession agreement were signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Myanmar trip in January 2020, but the construction work hasn’t started yet.

The NLD government approved the Wanbao Mining Company’s request to resume the Letpadaung project on 5 May 2016, even the local protesters accused the government for going against the investigation report led by Aung San Suu Kyi.\(^{43}\) What’s more, the project was publicised as a national project that was beneficial to the economic development of Myanmar. As U Ohn Win, Union Minister for Natural Resources and Environment, said the government is expected to collect about 20 million USD from the project between 5 May 2016 and 31 January 2017.\(^{44}\) There are four reasons could explain Myanmar’s decision of restarting the Letpadaung project, in which the first and foremost is that such policy would not be concerned for general public and thus causing national protests since only the local communities against it.\(^{45}\) Second, the site of the project was far from the ethnic conflict zone, which prevented the ethnic parties from getting involved in the disputes over the project. Third, the Thein Sein government had not officially announced its intention of suspending the project, and the investigation commission led by Aung San Suu Kyi suggested continuing the project in accordance with the recommendations. Fourth, the NLD government expected to attract further investment from China to maintain economic growth by resuming the mining project.

So in fact, the NLD government, in addition to reopen the controversial projects, has also supported the new projects proposed by China. For example, Myanmar agreed to jointly build the CMEC during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Myanmar trip in November 2017. The new proposed multifunctional infrastructure starts from Yunnan, goes down south to the central Myanmar city of Mandalay, and further extends east to the new city of Yangon and west to the Kyaukpyu SEZ, forming a three-pillar giant cooperation pattern.\(^{46}\) In July 2018, a 15-point MoU on building the CMEC was reached by Myanmar and China, in which both sides agreed

\(^{40}\)Lee and Aung [38].
\(^{41}\)Marex [39].
\(^{42}\)Chau et al. [40].
\(^{43}\)Htwe and Wai [41].
\(^{44}\)Thant [42].
\(^{45}\)Interviewed with Professor Yin Myo Thu at University of Yangon [12].
\(^{46}\)Beining and Shuqun [43].
to collaborate on many sectors including basic infrastructure, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, transport, finance, human resources development, telecommunications, and research and technology, and form working groups and joint committees to implement the project.\textsuperscript{47} As the early harvest results of the CMEC, the MoU on the feasibility study on the construction of the Muse-Mandalay railway was signed by the state-run Burma Railway Company and China Railway Second Board Engineering Group Co. Ltd in October 2018. Under the MoU, the feasibility study—which will assess the environmental and social impact of the project—will be conducted within two years, and will go into operation after the approval from the Myanmar government. In January 2020, China handed over to Myanmar the Muse-Mandalay Railway Feasibility Study Report, which is an initial phase of the strategic railway.

During State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s China tour in May 2017, Myanmar reached a MoU on building Myanmar-China Border Economic Cooperation Zone. Later, the two sides set up a joint committee which are responsible for building the border economic cooperation zone, and decided to implement the Ruili-Muse border economic cooperation zone first. During Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Myanmar visit in January 2020, both sides agreed to accelerate negotiation of the framework agreement on the Ruili-Muse cross-border economic cooperation zone.\textsuperscript{48}

Soon after the establishment of the democratic government, Myanmar approved a 3 billion USD and 100,000 barrels-per-day refinery in Dawei, the largest refinery in Myanmar, to the Chinese state-owned Guangdong Zhenrong Energy Corporation in April 2016. According to the formal deal, the Chinese company has a 70% stake, and three Burmese firms, including Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited, Myanmar Petrochemical Corp., and the Yangon Engineering Group, will split the remaining 30% share.\textsuperscript{49} In the meantime, Myanmar received 1 billion RMB from China which was used to promote the development of health, education, and agriculture in the border areas of Myanmar in 2016.\textsuperscript{50}

6.7.2 Properly Handled the Myitsone Dam Conundrum

The NLD government has been caught in a two-way dilemma in which China has repeatedly claimed and lobbied to resume the Myitsone Dam while the Burmese people has protested against the resumption of the project. On one hand, Aung San Suu Kyi has fully considered China’s feelings and future cooperation with China, thus finding a resolution to the issue without damaging relations with China.\textsuperscript{51} On the other hand, she has to please the public so that the ruling power could be consolidated. Therefore, she has adopted a risky balancing tactic in which her government

\textsuperscript{47} Consult-Myanmar [44].
\textsuperscript{48} Lwin [45].
\textsuperscript{49} Aizhu [46].
\textsuperscript{50} Global New Light of Myanmar [47].
\textsuperscript{51} Sein [32].
expressed the desire to gradually solve the Myitsone Dam conundrum, while avoiding delivering clear signs or making final decisions of the project in order not to trigger national protests.

In July 2016, three months after the establishment of the democratic government, the possible solutions to the Myitsone Dam was hotly discussed in Myanmar. According to *Myanmar Frontier*, there were four options: (1) cancel the project and be liable to pay 800 million USD in compensation; (2) resume work and earn 500 million USD a year in revenue once the dam was completed; (3) do nothing and pay 50 million USD in interest for as long as the project was suspended; or (4) abandon the Myitsone project and work together on mutually agreed hydropower projects.  

The first three choices were well known and widely seen as not being feasible, while the fourth option seemed to be supported by Myanmar government, as the state-run newspaper *Kyemon* (Mirror) published an editorial supporting this proposal on 24 July 2016. However, it is extremely difficult for the Chinese government to abandon the Myitsone project due to economic and political considerations. Actually, some Chinese scholars have a high expectation from the NLD and suggested it appoint a commission to consider the merits and weaknesses of big infrastructure projects.

One month later, President Htin Kyaw announced a 20-member investigation commission consisting of parliament members and experts to scrutinise the Myitsone Dam as well as other hydropower projects on the Irrawaddy River. It was the first actual step taken by the NLD government to address the Myitsone Dam issue on the eve of Aung San Suu Kyi’s first China tour. Five days later, the Chief Minister of Kachin State, together with officials of the investment companies from Myanmar and China, toured the site of the Myitsone Dam. During this visit, the officials from the Myanmar Power Investment Corporation pledged to build a road and a park on the banks of the Irrawaddy River to create a better future for the area, intending to win support of the local government and residents. The following day, Aung San Suu Kyi told Chinese Premier Li Keqiang that her government would seek a resolution on the Myitsone Dam issue that would serve the interests of both sides through energy administration cooperation. It seems that Aung San Suu Kyi attempted to reduce the political significance of the Myitsone Dam by putting the dam on the agenda of the energy sectors of the two countries and thus preventing it from adversely affecting bilateral ties.

NLD’s optimistic statements on and practical actions to solve the Myitsone Dam raised national concerns over the possible reconstruction of the Myitsone project. The NLD members, opposition parties, political groups in Kachin State, and environmental and human rights organisations reminded the public of the considerable consequences of reviving the dam. As an editorial article published on the *Irrawaddy* warned, ‘resuming the project would seriously tarnish Suu Kyi’s claims to moral and political leadership in Burma, and may even prompt a revolt among her own party
members in the NLD’. The Burmese public had already blamed the disregarding of the people’s will in the government’s decision-making process on the Myitsone dam issue. It therefore demanded more transparency and participation. The KIA and local political parties in Kachin State were strongly against the restart of the Myitsone Dam and constantly pressured the government to listen to locals’ voice.

Given the fast-growing domestic criticism, the NLD government deliberately reduced the pace of solving the Myitsone issue and waited for the strong grievance at home to abate. Aung San Suu Kyi carefully dominated the Myitsone issue by emphasising heavily on the determining role of the investigation commission to assure the public of a fair and transparent final result while removing the dissonance from various domestic groups. In October 2016, the investigation commission prepared to submit the first report to the government. Some commission members disclosed that the consensus among its members was against moving forward with the project, but refused to release any information about the first assessment without the permission of the government. It is evident that the commission attempted to pressure the government to cancel the Myitsone Dam. However, Deputy Director General for the President’s Office Zaw Htay clarified that the decision on the Myitsone Dam depended only on the Commission’s report and was independent of the government. Eventually, the investigation commission submitted its first interim report without any policy recommendations to President Htin Kyaw on 11 November 2016, and announced that it would continue to conduct further interviews and assessments on the socio-environmental impacts until the final report was ready. But the commission did not provide a start date or deadline for the final report and neither did the president give the commission instructions on when the report was to be submitted, indicating Myanmar’s efforts of cooling down the Myitsone issue.

The Myitsone dispute warmed up again at the beginning of 2017 due to the wide-spread speculation that China may discard the Myitsone Dam and seek other interesting projects. In February 2017, the New York Times revealed that ‘officials close to Aung San Suu Kyi have said that negotiations were underway for Myanmar to pay China, or apply the money to other projects, if the dam is not built’. Later, rumors of the abandonment of the Myitsone Dam spread fast in social networks. On 5 April, only one day before President Htin Kyaw’s China visit, the Reuters reported that China was going to abandon the Myitsone project in exchange for other infrastructure projects, including smaller hydropower projects and the deep sea port of Kyaukpyu. On the same day, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying clarified that the Myitsone Dam was a commercial cooperation project, and said that China would communicate with Myanmar to properly address the problems

56 The Irrawaddy [52].
57 Tun [53].
58 Mon [54].
59 Ibid.
60 Mon [55].
61 Ives [56].
62 Lee and Myint [57].
and difficulties in the process of cooperation and sustain the sound development of bilateral cooperation at a regular press conference. According to China’s latest statements on the Myitsone Dam, at least two key points can be concluded. First, China has defined the Myitsone Dam as a lawful commercial project which would be handled through business channels. Second, China would like to negotiate with Myanmar to solve the issues in the cooperation process of the Myitsone project rather than simply cancelling or resuming the dam.

It appears that there was a major shift in China’s policy towards the Myitsone issue in which China wanted to focus on solving the consequent issues from the possible suspension of the Myitsone Dam, especially Myanmar’s compensation for reneging on the terms of the contract, rather than overtly asking Myanmar to promote the implementation of big projects. The main reasons are the following. First, Yunnan, the main buyer of the electricity from the Myitsone Dam, now has an oversupply of electricity and needed to export its growing electricity holding to ease the excess hydropower capacity. Second, China fully realised that there would be strong national resistance against government’s decision of resuming the Myitsone project. Third, China was anxious about Myanmar’s swing to the US due to their disputes over the Myitsone issue. Fourth, China expected to implement other projects at the expense of cooling down the Myitsone issue and waited for an opportunity to solve it.

Nonetheless, China had to maintain its pressure on the Myanmar government before finally solving the Myitsone issue, so that it could get enough returns and thus saving face. In May 2017, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang discussed the Myitsone Dam with Aung San Suu Kyi at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing. During which he hoped that Myanmar would properly handle the Myitsone issue to guide cooperation expectations and boost the confidence of enterprises. Once again, Li’s statements confirmed that any way that Myanmar employed to address the Myitsone issue would please the Chinese enterprises which have been reluctant to make new investments in a political climate that could be averse to their interests. Otherwise, bilateral cooperation would be suffered. Myanmar understood China’s pragmatic attitude toward the Myitsone issue and wanted to bargain with China on the possible compensations, while making the deal not only fair but also transparent for the public by leaning on the commission’s report. As Myanmar Foreign Affairs Director Kyaw Zay Ya said before Htin Kyaw’s China tour, the final decisions will depend on the commission’s report and recommendations.

Yet, it has seemed that China renewed the hope that the Myitsone Dam would be restarted as the China-Myanmar relationship has been on the upswing since the outbreak of the Rohingya refugee crisis in mid-2017. During a visit to Kachin State in December 2018, China’s ambassador to Myanmar Hong Liang said the Myitsone Dam was crucial for both Beijing and Naypyidaw, and any further delays could

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63 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People’s Republic of China [58].
64 Zhong Xin Wang [China News Agency] [59].
65 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People’s Republic of China [60].
66 TNI [61, p. 3].
67 Mang [62].
hamper bilateral relations. Later, a statement published by the Chinese Embassy in Yangon said “If this issue fails to be resolved … it will seriously hurt the confidence of Chinese entrepreneurs to invest in Myanmar … the two sides should find an acceptable solution as soon as possible”. It also claimed that the Kachin political leaders and social organisations has a ‘positive attitude’ toward the dam, led to a widespread speculation that China wants to revive the controversial project. In addition, two or three Chinese works has still stationed at the Myitsone site, indicating that China has never abandoned the Myitsone Dam without compensation.

Four reasons could explain China’s significant change in the Myitsone issue, in which the first and foremost one is the implementation of CMEC and BRI. According to Joe Kumbun, who is a Kachin based analyst, China has tried to provide full electricity to the cross-border economic cooperation zone and the industrial zones in northern Kachin by restarting the Myitsone Dam, so as to push forward the CMEC and BRI. Second, China is using its support for Myanmar in the face of mounting international pressures over the Rohingya crisis to try to resume the Myitsone Dam and push forward with others. Third, China has been getting very upset about the nine years-long suspension of the Myitsone Dam and the slow progress on the resolution to it.

But in spite of that, the Myanmar government has made little progress on the investigation of the Myitsone project, and avoided releasing the assessment report and sending a clear message to the public due to the powerful local resistance. In fact, there has been an increasing concern about the Myitsone Dam in Burmese society soon after the Former Chinese Ambassador Hong Liang’s Kachin visit in December 2018. In January 2019, three Kachin political leaders Rev. Hkalam Samson overtly argued China’s claims that the Kachin people were not opposed to resuming the project were false and misleading. Later, in April, prominent environmentalists, activist and writers formed a nationwide committee to oppose the project and warned the government that there would be further resistance if the dam is revived. The growing criticism was escalated as rumors that a final decision on the controversial Myitsone Dam may also be on the agenda for the coming visit from Chinese President Xi Jinping in January 2020. In order to prevent the Myitsone Dam from being revived, nearly 40 civil society organisations, mostly based in Kachin State, issued an open letter to Xi on January 15, two days before his planned visit to Myanmar. The letter said that the Myitsone project lacks transparency and that proponents have failed to respect local customs and cultural values or listen to local voices, and called on Xi to permanently terminate the suspended Myitsone Dam project. Given the rising pressures from the local communities and the main

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68 Zhou [63].
69 Interviewed with Staff Du Nvni at Upstream Ayeyawady Confluence Basin Hydropower Co., Ltd. [64].
70 Kumbun [65].
71 Ibid.
72 Lwin [66].
73 Ibid.
focus of the COVID-19 and coming elections, the NLD government is unlikely to make any big decisions on the Myitsone Dam before the 2020 elections. In the meantime, Myanmar would continue to push forward BRI and CMEC with an attempt to distract China from the Myitsone Dam. In this sense, the Myitsone issue would still be a headache in the bilateral ties between Myanmar and China.

6.7.3 Built Myanmar-China Community with a Shared Future

Myanmar has successfully upgraded the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership with China by conducting frequent high-level visits and exchanges at other levels, building bilateral dialogue mechanism, and embracing Chinese initiatives in the past five years. In April 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was invited to visit Myanmar, the first senior foreign official to come to the country after the new government was established. During the visit, he expressed China’s great willingness to continue to be a good neighbour, good friend, and good partner to Myanmar, and called both sides to facilitate high-level exchanges as soon as possible in order to jointly map out the next steps in bilateral comprehensive cooperation. Aung San Suu Kyi too pledged to work with China to strengthen high-level exchanges and economic cooperation in order to improve bilateral relations. Her positive responses have, without question, not only reduced China’s considerable concerns over Myanmar’s alienation from China, but also paved the way for the close interactions between the two countries in the near future.

Four months later, a joint press release was issued during Aung San Suu Kyi’s first China trip as the State Counsellor of Myanmar. The first and foremost point of the visit was that both sides affirmed the ‘good neighbour’ policy. In fact, Aung San Suu Kyi has repeatedly assured China of a friendly foreign policy in an attempt to reduce China’s deep suspicions about her close connections with the West ever since her first China visit as the Chairwoman of the NLD in June 2015. In practice, Myanmar has constantly supported Chinese efforts to safeguard its core interests like the one-China principle, China’s anti-fragmentation position on Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. China also provided help in Myanmar’s democratic transition, economic and social development, as well as national reconciliation.

Besides, the two sides agreed to make further progress in their comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership by increasing friendly exchanges between parties and peoples at all levels, maintaining close coordination in multilateral forums, and promoting trade and investment cooperation. Such partnership was reinforced

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74 Xin Hua Wang [Xinhua Net] [67].
75 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People’s Republic of China [68].
76 Ibid.
77 Myanmar State Counselor Office [33].
78 Ibid.
during the high-ranking visits between the two countries in the following years. These mainly included the consensus on closely coordinating on multilateral platforms such as the UN and China-ASEAN summit during President Htin Kyaw’s China tour in April 2017, the promise to push forward BRI and cooperation on promoting the peace talks and addressing the Rohingya issue during Aung San Suu Kyi’s three China trips in May and November 2017 and April 2019 respectively. During Xi Jinping’s Myanmar visit in January 2020, Myanmar not only signed a total of 33 memorandums of understanding (MOUs), agreements, exchange letters and protocols with China in the areas of infrastructure development, railways, industrial and power projects, trade, investment and human resources, but supported Myanmar’s approach to the Rohingya crisis. Moreover, Myanmar agreed to build a community with a shared future with China, an updated version of the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between Myanmar and China.

In the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar and China has supported one another, resulted in a more cordial relationship than ever before. As early as February this year when China was in the most difficult conditions, Myanmar donated numbers of masks and other medical materials to China. In May when Myanmar suffered from the COVID-19, China also provided medical supplies and sent two batches of medical experts for Myanmar’s COVID-19 fight. What’s more, Xi Jinping promised to continue to provide firm support and help within its capabilities based on Myanmar’s needs during separate phone calls with Myanmar’s President Win Myint. The Myanmar President stressed that Myanmar would deepen their cooperation in various fields to advance the Myanmar-China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.

In addition to high-level visits, party-to-party exchanges between NLD and CCP and parliament exchanges have gained a stronger momentum since the democratic government was built. In June 2016, a delegation comprising NLD members paid a 10-day study visit to China, the first party-to-party exchanges between NLD and CCP since the formation of the democratic government. Before that, Aung San Suu Kyi led a senior delegation to visit China in June 2015. Later, member of the Central Executive Committee of the NLD, Aung Moe Nyunt undertook his first China trip in January 2017. During the visit, he reiterated that NLD attached high importance to developing relations with CCP, and hoped to learn from the CCP’s experience of party governance, state administration, and how to comprehensively develop bilateral communication and cooperation. Ten months later, Aung San Suu Kyi travelled to China for the third time to attend the High-level dialogue between the CCP and the world’s political parties. In the meantime, some young party members of NLD have been trained in Chinese academic institutions in Beijing and Yunnan such as the Institute of Myanmar Studies at Yunnan University. Additionally, parliament exchanges between Myanmar and China have also been observed, mainly included

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79 Lwin [45].
80 CGTN [69].
81 Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) [70].
82 International Liaison Department of CPCCC [71].
Speaker of the Amyotha Hluttaw, the upper house of the Myanmar parliament, Mahn Win Khaing Than’s China trip in June 2018.

The two countries has tried to institutionalise the bilateral ties by establishing trust-building mechanisms and various working groups. In November 2016, the Myanmar-China Foreign and Defence 2 + 2 High-level Consultation was built to discuss the national reconciliation and other security issues. So far, both sides have held four rounds of consultation in Naypyidaw and Kunming, attempting to minimise the adverse effects of the ethnic conflicts on cross-border projects and maintain peace and stability in border region. In January 2020, the two sides reached several agreements on establishing a working group of the promotion of smooth trade and a Friendship-Province/Region Relationship between Yunnan Province and Yangon Region, as well as a local cooperation mechanism under the framework of jointly implementing the CMEC between Yunnan Province and Mandalay Region, in order to enhance economic cooperation between the two countries. In addition, Myanmar agreed to establish a tripartite working group mechanism to evaluate the Rohingya repatriation process on the ground with China and Bangladesh in September 2019, intending to properly address the Rohingya refugee issue with the help of China and thus to reduce its international pressures.

Ever since NLD seized power, Myanmar has actively participated in China-led initiatives. It restored the strategic projects financed by Chinese companies and approved Chinese new proposal-CMEC, so as to promote pragmatic cooperation within the comprehensive strategical cooperative partnership. In August 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to work with China to reinforce mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields when Chinese President Xi Jinping suggested docking development plans between China and Myanmar. Eight months later, President Htin Kyaw reached an agreement with China on the long-stalled Sino-Myanmar oil pipeline during his first official visit to China on 6 April 2017, the first significant decision made by Myanmar to enrich its strategic connotation to the cooperative partnership. Since then, Myanmar has accelerated economic cooperation with China mainly including the formation of the Implementation Committee of BRI in November 2018, the final deal on the construction of Kyaukphyu port and dozens of other agreements on BRI projects in January 2020.

### 6.7.4 Sought China’s Assistance to Address Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya refugee crisis in Rakhine State has emerged as another main trouble for Myanmar since the mid-2017. Internally, the ethnic and religious tensions between the Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims threatened national security and challenged social governance of the democratic government. Externally, Myanmar’s relations with the West and the Islamic world have been undermined. The beleaguered nation

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83Lwin [45].
84Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People’s Republic of China [72].
has no choice but to seek foreign assistance, while China seized the good opportunity to revive the cordial relations with Myanmar. In practice, China has defended Myanmar on the global stage and promised to provide necessary assistance since the rise of the Rohingya issue. Given this, Myanmar got Chinese support for rejecting the West’s attempts to bring the Rohingya issue to the UN, and accepted Chinese proposal of a three-phase plan for resolving the Rohingya issue and achieved agreement with Bangladesh on repatriating the Rohingya refugees with the help of China. It also received development assistance from China to improve the living conditions of the Rohingyas and develop the poor Rakhine State. In a recent three-day hearing into allegations of genocide at the UN’s highest court in December 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi was backed by China as Wang Yi toured to Myanmar to show support on the eve of her UN trip. During Xi’s historical visit to Myanmar in January 2020, Aung San Suu Kyi asked China to continue to maintain justice for middle and small countries including Myanmar, while Xi promised to maintain justice for Myanmar on the international stage and support Myanmar in safeguarding its national sovereignty and legitimate interests. Owed to the close coordination and cooperation on the Rohingya issue, Myanmar has built a more intimate relationship with China than ever before.

But in spite of that, Myanmar invited the Philippine diplomat Rosario Manalo to chair the Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE) in August 2018, an independent agency aims at investigating the 2017 crackdown that prompted hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee the country and submitting reports to the Myanmar government, so as to relieve the external pressure and reduce its heavy reliance on China’s diplomatic support. Meanwhile, the US is carefully navigating support for the Rohingya while maintaining a positive relationship with Myanmar as it battles China for influence over the Southeast Asian nation. In fact, although the US has pressured Myanmar to create necessary conditions for the safe and voluntary return of the Rohingya people to their homeland and maintained visa restrictions and financial sanctions on the senior Burmese generals, it has continued to employ an engagement strategy that has recognised the positive steps undertaken to date and to incentivize further reform. So far, the US remains the leading contributor to the humanitarian response to Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar and Bangladesh. With the new fund of 59 million USD in March 2020, the total humanitarian assistance for this crisis is nearly 820 million USD since the outbreak of violence in August 2017. In that case, Myanmar would continue to look for Chinese help to resist U.S. pressure while accepting U.S. assistance and keeping contact with it as well.

85 Baijie [73].
86 Kiedrowski [74].
87 Quadir [75].
88 U.S. Department of State [76].
89 Ortagus [77].
6.7.5 Cooperated with China on Ethnic Issue

Although the NLD government prioritised the national reconciliation and actively promoted the peace talks, it was marginalised by the Tatmadaw which continued to control power in the non-Burmese borderlands and monopolise border affairs.\textsuperscript{90} Therefore, the NLD government was motivated to cooperate with China on pushing forward the peace talks and increase its leverage in peace process. China also has high expectations of NLD in the role it will play in Myanmar’s national reconciliation and fully supported NLD in its efforts to politically resolve the ethnic issue. During Aung San Suu Kyi’s China visit in August 2016, she appreciated China’s positive and constructive role in its national reconciliation while China supported Myanmar’s political dialogue with the ethnic groups.\textsuperscript{91} Soon after the visit, the NLD government sought China’s help in persuading many ethnic armed groups to participate in the first ‘21 Century Panglong Conference’ which was organised by NLD to achieve National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with the ethnic groups at the end of August 2016. Moreover, it invited Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Special Envoy for Asian Affairs Sun Guoxiang, who is the mediator between the Myanmar government, military and the ethnic groups, to observe the conference. However, as the military excluded MNDA, TNLA and AA which had not signed NCA with the government from participating in the Panglong conference, the peace process suffered a setback. Additionally, the UWSA representatives withdraw from the conference in advance as they claimed that they suffered unfair treatment at the hands of the Myanmar military, which was suspected to have given the UWSA representatives observer status rather than formal member status. It is evident that the Myanmar military has taken ownership of the peace talks in which it supported the political dialogue between government and the submissive ethnic groups while repressing the Kokang rebels. Given the hardlines of the Myanmar military, clashes between the government troops and the ethnic forces were renewed in the following months.

Besides, the Myanmar military discontent with China’s interference in the peace process. In September 2016, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing told General Xu Qiliang, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission (CMC), the two countries have been sticking to the stance of mutual respect and mutual support, intending to remind China of Myanmar’s concerns over Chinese involvement in the ethnic conflicts. He also did not respond to China’s suggestion of supporting the constant efforts of the Myanmar government and military to achieve Myanmar’s national reconciliation and domestic peace as soon as possible through peaceful negotiation.\textsuperscript{92} Realising that, Chinese President Xi Jinping assured that China respects Myanmar’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and hopes the country will achieve national reconciliation as early as possible during Min Aung Hlaing’s China trip in November 2016.\textsuperscript{93} It is noted that China did not mention the peaceful negotiation,

\textsuperscript{90}TNI [61, p. 26].
\textsuperscript{91}Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People’s Republic of China [78].
\textsuperscript{92}Panyue [79].
\textsuperscript{93}Jianfeng [80].
which was a goodwill made by China to appease the Myanmar military. Whereas Min Aung Hlaing did not respond positively as he only said Myanmar stands ready to work with China to safeguard stability of their border areas.

The ethnic fighting intensified again after the surprising attacks in Laukkai launched by MNDAA and its allies on 6 March 2017, which resulted in a Chinese victim in Kokang district. Faced with pressures from the nationalists from both China and Myanmar, China took a series of diplomatic, economic, and military measures to mitigate the tensions in the border region. One week after the ethnic conflict, Sun Guoxiang travelled to Kunming to severely criticise MNDAA’s military adventures and pressed it to announce a unilateral ceasefire immediately during the meetings with MNDAA leaders and UWSA representatives. What’s more, he suggested the UWSA release a statement degrading the conflict, thereby reining in the MNDAA and its allies. He also tried his best to convince the UWSA of the benefits of the NCA and advised the UWSA to sign it. Yet, the UWSA representatives refused to sign NCA and suggested that China instead persuade the Myanmar military to stop attacking the ethnic armed groups. It clearly indicated the decreasing Chinese influence on the ethnic armed groups, which have challenged Chinese interests in the border areas by launching strikes against the government forces. As a punishment, China suspended the bank account that the Kokang group had in the Chinese state-owned Agricultural Bank of China after the meeting between Chinese ambassador to Myanmar Hong Liang and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. At the end of this month, the Chinese PLA staged an air-ground live-fire drill without a deadline along Sino-Myanmar border in an attempt to test the border forces’ capabilities in rapid manoeuvring, precise destruction, vertical blockades, and joint strikes. Chinese military analysts believe that the PLA intended to deter the ethnic insurgents from challenging Chinese economic and security interests in the border areas, and it has already prepared to deal with any emergencies spilling over the border by ending the conflict within Myanmar.

There are two main motivations for China’s harsher stance on the ethnic armed groups. Firstly, the ethnic groups have shifted from being positive links between China and Myanmar to major obstacles that have been harmful to China’s economic and security interests in Myanmar. Hence, China has to punish the ethnic fighters for military adventurism near the trading post and Chinese projects in the border region on one hand, and on the other hand it attempted to press them to make compromises with government and thus to restored stability in the border areas. Actually, the Chinese scholar estimated that the ethnic armed groups would eventually under control of the Myanmar military, and the only way for them to survive is building political parties and participating in the national reconciliation. Secondly, China has been faced with pressures from the Myanmar military which criticised Chinese individuals and weapons for involving in the ethnic conflicts. Given this, China cut off

94 *Mian Dian Zai Xian [Myanmar Online]* [81].
95 Ministry of Information of Myanmar [82].
96 *Xin Hua Wang [Xinhua Net]* [83].
97 Interviewed with Associate Professor Zhu Xianghui at Yunnan University [84].
the financial connections between Chinese banks and the ethnic forces and improved the management of border areas in order to reduce the Myanmar military’s concerns over Chinese assistance to the ethnic rebels.

After the March conflict, all parties in Myanmar focused on the preparation for the second “21st Century Panglong Conference” in May 2017. The Peace Committee held meetings with the representatives of the ethnic groups with China’s assistance to discuss the possibility of their participating in the Panglong conference and their attitude on signing NCA. The military promised to negotiate a ceasefire agreement with the ethnic groups during the Panglong Conference. China hoped to see a more substantive political dialogue through the conference and thus to sustain the peace in the border areas.98 Hence, Chinese representative Sun Guoxiang advised the ethnic leaders to participate in the Panglong Conference and sign NCA on one hand, and persuade the Myanmar government and military to accept MNDAA and its allies which have not signed NCA to attend the conference on the other hand. Owing to these endeavors, 37 agreements were signed at the conference. Nonetheless, the UWSA, MNDAA, and other ethnic groups in northern Myanmar refused to sign NCA and insisted on achieving another agreement that would be suitable for the practical situation in northern Myanmar with government. It’s not surprising, their claims were rejected by the military which has already excluded any non-NCA schemes. Given this, the UWSA was forced to change its previous negative stance on the NCA and switched to seeking a revised NCA based on its own principles through the peace talks. The limited achievements at the second Panglong Conference indicated the deep-rooted distrust and irreconcilable dispute between the military and the ethnic groups, as well as the decreasing Chinese influence in the peace process. The peace process had not gained much traction at the third session of Panglong Conference held in Naypyidaw in July 2018 because the fundamental issues pertaining to political and security aspects remained absent from the conference.99 Moreover, small-scale military clashes between the ethnic fighters and government forces were ongoing during the meeting, thereby adversely affected the political atmosphere.

Nevertheless, both the military and the ethnic groups have been pressured to stop the fighting and restart peace talks. For one thing, the Myanmar army failed to win a decisive victory on its ongoing war with the ethnic forces in the rainy season, and for another, it was accused heavily by the West of its human rights abuses in the Rohingya communities and was asked to stop military offensives in northern Myanmar by China which has repeatedly claimed for the peace and stability along China-Myanmar border and called on political dialogue between the Myanmar military and the ethnic minorities. In the meantime, the ethnic groups released a truce declaration and received positive assessment from China and the Myanmar government. Given this, the Myanmar military soon issued an statement of stop all the military actions in northern Myanmar between 21 December, 2018 and 30 April, 2019 in order to please China and the Myanmar government. In spite of the lingering conflict between the government troops and the ethnic groups in the

98 Chongkittavorn [85].
99 Anand [86].
following years, the Myanmar military extended the ceasefire deadline for three times and thus reduced the pressures from China. The recent one is a unilateral ceasefire that will last until August 31 and cover the whole country except areas where terrorist organisations are based announced the Myanmar military by in May 2020.\textsuperscript{100} It means that clashes between government forces and AA, a terrorist group declared by Myanmar in March 2020, would not be stopped even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, since AA is a member of the Brotherhood Alliance which is composed of MNDAA, TNLA and AA, the ethnic conflict might extend from the Western Myanmar to northern Myanmar after the end of the COVID-19. As China expects to jointly safeguard peace and stability of the border areas with Myanmar and thus to create favorable conditions for promoting economic development of border areas,\textsuperscript{101} it would continue to press the Myanmar military to stop the fighting and force the ethnic groups to return to the conference table. In that case, the Myanmar military would resist pressure from China while pursuing China’s help of persuading the ethnic groups to sign NCA.

6.8 Continued to Counterbalance China

6.8.1 Active Neighbourhood Diplomacy and Multilateralism

Although the NLD government continues to adhere to the “independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy” that the previous government announced, the policy will be implemented through multiple tracks in diplomacy with a possibility of stronger focus on people-to-people contacts and multilateralism than regime survive.\textsuperscript{102} Given this, regional cooperation and neighbourhood diplomacy have occupied the priorities on the diplomatic agenda of Myanmar, through which it can not only obtain political support and economic assistance from neighbouring states and regional and international institutions, but offset the risks of its overdependent on China. In the past five years, Myanmar has made great efforts to deeply integrate itself into ASEAN, built closer ties with its Asian neighbours and great powers, tried to improve relations with the West, and actively participated in multilateral organisations like UN.

The shifting of regional dynamics forced Myanmar to gradually warm up to ASEAN to avoid getting involved in the China-US power rivalry. What’s more, the major domestic challenges such as the ethnic conflicts, illegal immigrants and economic downturns demand better cooperation with neighbouring countries. In this context, Aung San Suu Kyi chose Laos as the destination for her first official visit in May 2016 with President Htin Kyaw. The surprising Laos trip reflected the high significance of ASEAN in Myanmar’s diplomacy as Laos held the rotating chair

\textsuperscript{100}Weng [87].
\textsuperscript{101}Xinhua Net [88].
\textsuperscript{102}Myoe [31, p. 89].
of ASEAN that year. One month after the Laos trip, Aung San Suu Kyi initiated her second official visit to an ASEAN country-Thailand to sign three important agreements on border and labour cooperation in order to enhance the people-to-people exchanges along the border and allow Burmese migrant workers to work legally in Thailand.\(^{103}\)

After the global outcry about the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017, Myanmar has sought ASEAN’s diplomatic support through policy coordination. It accepted ASEAN’s role of mediator between the Myanmar government and the Rohingya Muslims by inviting the Philippine diplomat to investigate the Rohingya case. In June 2018, the new nominated President Win Min paid his first official visit to Thailand which would assume the ASEAN chairmanship in the next year. It was a positive sign for Myanmar’s warming sentiment towards the regional bloc, ASEAN. In the following years, Myanmar has maintained frequent high-level visits with its ASEAN neighbors with the aim to build closer relations with them. While the ASEAN supported Myanmar’s efforts to address the Rohingya issue and voted against the UN resolutions proposed by the West to condemn Myanmar’s crackdown on Rohingyas. In February 2020, UN failed to take action on International Court of Justice’s order against Myanmar on Rohingyas due to China and Vietnam rejection.\(^{104}\) In the meantime, Myanmar has actively participated in the multilateral meetings and forums inside and outside ASEAN in order to promote regional integration and enhance the national prestige. These mainly includes ASEAN summit, East Asia summit, APEC, Asia-Europe meeting, BIMSTEC meeting, Mekong-Japan summit, Mekong-South Korea summit, Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI).

India is another pillar of Myanmar’s neighbourhood diplomacy in which it serves as a main source of diplomatic support, foreign trade and technical assistance for Myanmar, as well as a counterbalance to China. India also expressed great willingness to maintain its good relations with the incoming new government after NLD won a landslide victory in the general elections in November 2015.\(^{105}\) Since the establishment of the new government, New Delhi wanted Aung San Suu Kyi to pay an official visit to India, but she made a pragmatic decision to visit China.\(^{106}\) Nonetheless, the Myanmar government conveyed that Aung San Suu Kyi will be coming to India later this year to attend the BIMSTEC meeting.\(^{107}\) Moreover, ten days after Aung San Suu Kyi’s China trip, President Htin Kyaw toured to India to sign four MoUs and issue joint statement with India in order to step up overall bilateral engagement with India and thus to counterbalance China’s influence. The most important message conveyed to President Htin Kyaw was by Indian Prime Minister Modi, who in his statement said, “at every step of the way, 1.25 billion people of India will stand by you-both as partners and as friends.” This message was both in context of bilateral ties as well as in the regional context of providing counterpoise

\(^{103}\)Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand [89].

\(^{104}\)ALJAZEERA [90].

\(^{105}\)Mizzima [91].

\(^{106}\)The Irrawaddy [92].

\(^{107}\)Economic Times [93].
to China’s increasing influence in Myanmar’s affairs. In October 2016, one month after Htin Kyaw’s India tour, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi went to India to enhance the bilateral ties and thus to rebalance its strategic relations with powerful China. In the following years, Myanmar has followed the practice of balancing act between China and India through high-level visits. For instance, Myanmar invited Indian Prime Minister Modi to visit the country in September 2017, five months after Myanmar President Htin Kyaw’s first China tour in April this year. After her two China trips in May and December 2017 respectively, Aung San Suu Kyi came to New Delhi to pay her second state visit to India in January 2018. In return, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind initiated a five-day Myanmar trip at the end of this year. During the visit, India handed over the first 50 units of prefabricated houses built in Rakhine State under the Rakhine State Development Programme funded by the Government of India, intending to woo Myanmar away from China by increasing its involvement in the Rohingya crisis which it has carefully respond to and often said it is a bilateral issue between Bangladesh and Myanmar. In May 2019, Myanmar’s new President Win Myint was invited to attend Modi’s oath-taking ceremony for second term, the only one top leader from the ASEAN states to attend the ceremony. Before that, Aung San Suu Kyi finished her fourth China trip to attend the second BRI summit for international cooperation at the end of April 2019. Soon after Chinese President Xi Jinping’s historical visit to Myanmar in January 2020, President Win Myint went to New Delhi to sign 10 MoUs on protecting wildlife, cooperating in medical researches, and providing development programmes in Rakhine State with India in February this year. Owing to the joint efforts of both sides, Myanmar has developed a comprehensive partnership with India in all areas that could complete with China.

Due to the similar democratic value and the common interests both sides share, the Burmese democratic government had enough momentum to push for the rapid development of the bilateral ties with Japan. Ever since its establishment, the democratic government has been committed to integrate Myanmar into the democratic world, which coincides with Japanese Premier Abe’s “values-oriented diplomacy”. As Abe said he expressed respect for Myanmar’s efforts on nation building under the leadership of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi who shares the fundamental values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and rule of law with Japan during Aung San Suu Kyi’s first Japan trip in November 2016. Moreover, Myanmar has long sought to attract Japanese investment and aid for economic and social development and viewed the robust bilateral ties with Japan as a counterweight to China. While

108 Sajjanhar [94].
109 The Irrawaddy [92].
110 Myanmar President Office [95].
111 Dixit [96].
112 Myanmar President Office [97].
113 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [98].
Japan is eager to seek opportunities in meeting Myanmar’s extensive infrastructure and development needs and thus to compete with China in Southeast Asia.\(^{114}\)

In November 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi initiated her first official visit to Japan as State Counsellor. Before that, she has already been to China in August, the US in September, and India in October this year. It means that Japan ranked fourth as a destination for Aung San Suu Kyi’s foreign trip after she became the leader of Myanmar. During her first visit to Japan, Myanmar received 40 billion yen (5-years) economic assistance on supporting advances in national reconciliation, and another 800 billion yen (5-years) on promoting the development of public and private sectors.\(^{115}\) Half a year after his China trip, Myanmar President Htin Kyaw paid his first state visit to Japan in December 2017, during which he received Abe’s support for Myanmar’s independent investigation on the alleged human rights violations in Rakhine State.\(^{116}\) It is worth noting that Myanmar did not respond to Japan’s intention to contribute to the stability and prosperity of Myanmar and the region under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,\(^{117}\) reflecting Myanmar’s reluctance to provoke China by participating in the Indo-Pacific Strategy which is perceived as a counterbalance to China. In October 2018, Aung San Suu Kyi went to Tokyo to take part in the 10th Mekong-Japan Summit. She was assured by Abe that Japan would contribute to enhancing connectivity and improving the lives of the Burmese people, which met with Myanmar’s ‘people-centred’ foreign policy. Abe, for the first time, promised to encourage the ethnic armed groups who had not yet signed the ceasefire agreements to sign them promptly,\(^{118}\) in order to deepen its involvement in the national reconciliation in Myanmar. What’s more, he said Japan plans to begin construction of housing and other infrastructure in two villages in the northern Rakhine State in late November and will also support improvement of roads, electricity,\(^{119}\) and water supply for the entire State. It reflected Japan’s intention of competing for influence with China, which proposed the “three steps” solution to the Rohingya issue in November 2017. On a recent visit to Myanmar in July 2019, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono vowed to provide full-fledged support for Myanmar’s democratic nation-building, the national reconciliation in northern Myanmar and the repatriation of Rohingya refugees and economic and social development in Rakhine State in particular.\(^{120}\) So far, Japan is the only foreign state that has deeply involved in both the peace process and the Rohingya issue in Myanmar except China, which indicates Japan’s strong desire to deepen bilateral ties with Myanmar and counter China’s influence in the country.

Myanmar-Russia relations have developed rapidly and the bilateral cooperation has been expanded into many areas beyond the defence cooperation. As Russian

\(^{114}\)Funakoshi and Lies [99].
\(^{115}\)Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [98].
\(^{116}\)Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [100].
\(^{117}\)Ibid.
\(^{118}\)Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [101].
\(^{119}\)Ibid.
\(^{120}\)Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan [102].
President Vladimir Putin said, there is a good potential for the development of Russia-Myanmar relations which applies to the economy, politics and military-technical cooperation at his meeting with Myanmar President Htin Kyaw in Moscow in May 2016.\textsuperscript{121} During the meeting, both sides discussed a number of issues of bilateral cooperation, mainly including Russian investment in the Burmese energy market, the resumption of an airline between Yangon and Moscow, Russia’s technical assistance to Myanmar, and various training programs offered by Russia.\textsuperscript{122} Since the outbreak of the Rohingya refugee crisis, Russia, together with China, jointly prevented America from passing UN resolutions to take against Myanmar in UNSC. In December 2018, Russia and China boycotted talks on a British-drafted resolution on addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis.\textsuperscript{123} One year later, Russia voted against a draft resolution on the human rights situation in Myanmar approved by the UN.\textsuperscript{124} It is worth noting that Russia is the only great power except China to oppose the UN resolution on criticising Myanmar on the Rohingya issue at every turn. Russia, therefore, has continued to be a strong backer of Myanmar on UN since NLD came to power.

Despite the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi made a successful visit to the US in September 2016, the bilateral ties have been locked in the Rohingya refugee crisis after Donald Trump was elected as the American President. The Trump administration has not only sharply reduced the bilateral exchanges with Myanmar, but also applied diplomatic pressures on the country. For instance, Aung San Suu Kyi is the last of the leaders of larger Southeast Asian nations to whom a top official of the new administration has not yet reached out.\textsuperscript{125} In addition, there has been no high-level visits between the two countries since Aung San Suu Kyi’s first state visit to America in September 2016. Moreover, the US proposed and supported UN resolutions to condemn the Myanmar government and military, and criticised the Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi on ASEAN Summit. In October 2018, the US successfully requested briefing that accused Myanmar military of genocide against the Rohingya minority on UNSC.\textsuperscript{126} One year later, the US strongly supported the UN resolution on Myanmar’s abuse of Rohingya for approving by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The limited engagement from the US coupled with continued criticism about Myanmar’s crackdown on Rohingya prompted Myanmar to look to China for support and assistance.

Due to the close connections between the Burmese democrats and EU, Myanmar expected to build robust ties with EU in order to promote democracy and economic and social development. While the EU is committed to push forward the democratic process and improve the human rights situation in Myanmar through close cooperation with NLD. As the Joint Communication released in June 2016 showed, EU

\textsuperscript{121}TASS [103].
\textsuperscript{122}Myanmar President Office [104].
\textsuperscript{123}Nichols [105].
\textsuperscript{124}United Nations [106].
\textsuperscript{125}Hiebert [107].
\textsuperscript{126}United Nations [108].
engagement strategy vis-à-vis Myanmar including the following areas: (1) democracy, rule of law and good governance; (2) the peace process; (3) human rights; (4) poverty reduction and sustainable development; (5) economic engagement; and (6) working together with Myanmar in ASEAN and the region.127 In this context, Aung San Suu Kyi made her first Europe visit in May 2017 to seek EU’s support for Myanmar’s democratic transition as well as its understanding on Myanmar’s Rohingya crisis. However, she failed due to the disagreement on whether an international mission from the UN should investigate the alleged atrocities against Rohingya Muslims by the government security forces between she and EU’s top diplomats.128 Since then, the Myanmar-EU relations have been beset by the Rohingya refugees. The EU has continued to pressure Myanmar to implement the recommendations of the UN report on Rakhine State while the Burmese leaders refused to do. The EU has also supported the UN resolution of condemning Myanmar and revoked Aung San Suu Kyi’s award. Given West’s growing concerns about the Rohingya refugees, the Myanmar-EU relations would continue to be contested in the near future.

6.8.2 Promoted Regional Economic Integration

Liberalising the economy and integrating it into the global market has continued to be a priority for the democratic government led by NLD. In the past five years, the NLD government launched the Myanmar Sustainable Economic Development Plan, issued the Myanmar Companies Law, and held the Myanmar Investment Conference, so as to promote trade and investment cooperation with foreign countries. From 2016 to 2018, the total value of Myanmar-ASEAN trade was 28.16 billion USD, which was slightly behind China whose trade with Myanmar was 28.61 billion USD in the same period.129 Additionally, ASEAN is the first largest source of import of Myanmar while China is No. 1 export market for Myanmar. Except ASEAN, Myanmar has resumed close trade connections with EU which has become the third largest trade partner for Myanmar and a main export market for Myanmar goods. The Myanmar-EU trade has increased from 1.12 billion USD in 2016 to 1.86 billion USD in 2017, and then decreased to 1.49 billion USD in 2018.130 In the meantime, Japan and India have continued to be the main trade partners for Myanmar as well. The total amount of Myanmar’s trade with Japan and India between 2016 and 2018 were 5.05 and 4.21 billion USD respectively.131 Nonetheless, Myanmar’s overall foreign trade has decreased dramatically since the Rohingya refugee crisis in mid-2017. Not only Myanmar’s trade relations with ASEAN and China have been adversely affected, but its trade cooperation with EU has been reversed. In October 2019, EU

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127 European Union [109].
128 The Global New Light of Myanmar [110].
129 Collected from Statistical Database [111].
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
announced a plan to consider a temporary Generalized System of Preference (GSP) withdrawal after a monitoring mission’s visit to Myanmar.\footnote{Sainsbury \[112\].} Given this, Myanmar’s trade relations with EU would be further damaged in the coming years. What’s more, the US, the world’s largest economy, has been marginalised in Myanmar’s foreign trade due to Myanmar’s crackdown on Rohingya Muslims.

In a similar vein, Myanmar’s efforts of attracting foreign investment to modernise the poor country have also been severely undermined by the religious tensions in Rakhine State. Additionally, the worsening conflict between the Tatmadaw and AA, an internet shutdown in northern Rakhine, and accusations of land grabs did not encourage investors.\footnote{Chau \[113\].} In that case, the total value of Myanmar’s FDI was decreased from 6.65 billion USD in 2016 to 1.76 billion USD in 2018,\footnote{Collected from Statistical Database \[111\].} among which the major foreign investors such as ASEAN and China cut off their investments in Myanmar heavily. Given the adverse effects of COVID-19 on the global economy, Myanmar would be faced with the economic recession internally and the declining FDI as well as market demand externally.

### 6.8.3 Enhanced Military Capability

Myanmar has been engaged in an active program of defence diplomacy due to its closer economic and political ties with the military powers mainly including China, Russia, India, as well as the Western countries. By conducting military to military exchanges, participating in military drills, receiving training programs and purchasing weapons, Myanmar has strengthened defence cooperation with those states and thus enhanced its military capability of defending external threats. Moreover, Myanmar has reduced its heavy reliance on Chinese military resource by diversifying its military relations and expanding defence cooperation. The Myanmar military has also got critical political support from the defence partners by maintaining its close relationship with them.

Soon after the establishment of the new government in Yangon, Myanmar’s defence Minister Sein Win toured Moscow to promote the bilateral contacts and military-technical cooperation in April 2016. Two months later, the two sides reached a new military cooperation agreement, which established a legal framework for collaboration in a range of areas such as military medicine, military education, anti-terrorism, peacekeeping, and naval cooperation.\footnote{TASS \[114\].} It is evident that the bilateral military ties between Myanmar and Russia have gone from strength to strength as the political contacts have been activated between the two countries in recent years. More than one year after Sein Win’s Russia trip, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing went to Moscow, a first official visit led by the top leader of the Myanmar military
to Russia since the democratic government was established. He was believed to gain Russia’s support for the Myanmar military which was accused for seeking the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya minority in the Rakhine State. In the next few months, he went to New Delhi and Beijing in July and November 2017 respectively, attempting to win support from these two most important partners.

In January 2018, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu travelled to Myanmar to reach an arms deal where Myanmar would purchase six Su-30 fighter jets from Russia. In addition, the two sides also reached an agreement on the entry of Russian warships into Myanmar’s ports, expecting to launch exchange of visits for naval fleets between the two countries. Then, Min Aung Hlaing attended the opening ceremony of 8th Moscow Conference on International Security in April 2019, during which he visited the Admiralteyskie Veryf submarine shipyard and discussed purchasing an advanced submarine with the deputy chief of the Russian navy. Shoigu, again, stated that Russia considers Myanmar to be a reliable ally and strategic partner in Southeast Asia and Asia–Pacific, reflecting Russia’s growing demands for gaining a big foothold in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean through the robust Russia-Myanmar military relations.

Myanmar has also sought Russia’s help of modernising Tatmadaw by receiving various training programs and purchasing advanced weapons from Russia. During Sein Win’s Russia trip in April 2016, the cooperation on training Burmese military personnel was proposed by Russian Defence Minister Shoigu. In June 2017, Russian Ambassador to Myanmar Nikolay A. Listopadov said around 6000 Tatmadaw students have graduated from the Russian universities and some have received post-graduate and doctoral degrees. Due to the growing number of Russian weapons in Myanmar army, more and more technical personnels would come to Russia to receive trainings, the weapon training in particular. In spite of the economic downturns, the Tatmadaw has remained a high-level of defence budget to execute its ambitious arms acquisition program where Russia is a main supplier. From 2016 to 2019, Myanmar imported a total amount of 144 USD million-worth of weapons from Russia, which is nearly half of those between Myanmar and China in the same period. These weapons mainly included 75 Yak-130 trainer/combat aircraft, 6 Su-30MK FGA aircraft, and 16 RD-33 Turbofan. It reflected that the Myanmar military has increasingly relied on air power and high technology from Russia because of the poor quality and shortage of spare parts and follow-up services of Chinese-made weapons.

In the meantime, Myanmar has strengthened defence cooperation with India, another major partner for Tatmadaw. In the past years, Myanmar has maintained close military to military exchanges, conducted joint military exercise, and procuring a great number of weapons from India. In July 2017, when Indian and Chinese

136 Parameswaran [115].
137 Myint [116].
138 Mizzima [117].
139 Ye [118].
140 SIPRI Arms Transfers Database [119].
141 Myoe [120, p. 30].
troops are locked in a continuing stand-off near the Sikkim along India-China border, Senior General Min Aung Mlaing paid a eight-day visit to New Delhi to expand defence cooperation with India. His long trip in India raised concerns about the fast growing military relations between Myanmar and India and its following strategic consequence in Chinese society as India is ready to further crank up military supplies to Myanmar to counter Chinese strategic inroads into the country. In addition, the Tatmadaw is also believed to impose pressure on China which was criticised for interfering in the ethnic conflicts in northern Myanmar by Burmese generals. One year later, Min Aung Mlaing travelled to India to increase the bilateral military ties and better border management after Indian troops’ cross-border military attacks on two camps being run by Naga and Meitei rebel groups in Myanmar’s territory. In a recent visit to India led by Min Aung Mlaing in July 2019, the two countries signed a new MoU on deepening military-to-military ties in the areas of training, maritime security, and joint surveillance. Given the closer naval cooperation under this new agreement, both sides would raise the bilateral military ties to a new level in the coming years. As China is expanding its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, Myanmar’s increasing maritime cooperation with India would not only give India the capacity to monitor China’s naval collaboration closely, and also give Myanmar the continuing opportunity to diversify its military dependency away from China and act as a balance of influence within Myanmar’s Navy.

Myanmar has established a number of bilateral mechanisms with India, such as the annual dialogue between the two navies, to institutionalise the defence cooperation between the two counties. It also intends to maintain a balance between China and India by building military cooperative mechanisms with them respectively. What’s more, before participating the first China-ASEAN joint naval exercise held in Zhanjiang in 2018, Myanmar has already conducted repeated military exercises with India in various fields including joint operation, training, and logistics support. So far, the two armies have held seven rounds of India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol Exercise (CORPAT), three rounds of India-Myanmar Bilateral Army Exercise (IMBAX), and two rounds of India-Myanmar Naval Exercise (IMNEX), which started from 2013, 2017 and 2018 respectively. The Myanmar fleet has regularly joined in the multi-lateral military drill led by the Indian Navy such as the ‘Milan’ exercise in 2012. Followed by the frequent port calls to Myanmar made by the Chinese naval fleet, the Indian warships have also visited Myanmar to enhance exchanges. In recent years, the Indian Missile Corvette INS Khanjar and Sumitra called at Yangon in August 2018 and February 2019 respectively.

India has become the third biggest supplier of weapons for Myanmar in the past decade, just behind China and Russia. From 2016 to 2019, Myanmar purchased a total of US$ 112 million-worth of equipment from India, mainly including a US$ 37.9 million deal of procuring Shyena ASW torpedos from India in 2017 (delivered in July 2019), 6 HJT-16 Kiran-1 Trainer aircraft in 2018 and one diesel-electric Kilo

142Pandit [121].
143Panda [122].
144Peng [123, p. 595].
submarine in 2019.\textsuperscript{145} The two countries also talked about ‘training Myanmar sailors on top of the courses taught to its army officers at elite Indian defence institutions’ during Myanmar Navy chief Admiral Tin Aung San’s India trip in September 2017.\textsuperscript{146} In December 2018, it was announced that India would donate six HAL HJT-16 Kiran jet trainers to the Myanmar Air Force, and station a team in Myanmar to help train their pilots and ground crew.\textsuperscript{147} It indicated that Myanmar tries to modernise its Tatmadaw by making good use of the advanced Indian weapons and high-technology rather than completely depending on China.

Myanmar’s defence cooperation with the West has gain a stronger momentum than ever before due to the improved political ties between them in the early years of the NLD era. Soon after the establishment of the democratic government in Myanmar, General Mikhail Kostarakos, Chairman of the EU Military Committee, toured Naypyidaw in June 2016, attempting to exert positive influence on Tatmadaw, a key political player in the democratic process in the country. Five months later, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing paid a reciprocal visit to Brussels where he assured his European counterparts that the Myanmar military would protect democracy and its role would be re-evaluated when there is a sound guarantee to the nation and its citizens, and asked for non-lethal assistance from the EU in building a “Standard Army”.\textsuperscript{148} His first European trip, of course, was viewed as an public diplomacy effort through which he wanted to reduce West’s concerns about the key political role of Tatmadaw and promote the bilateral defence cooperation.

However, Myanmar’s efforts of developing a working military relationship with the West have suffered a great setback due to the alleged ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Tatmadaw in Rakhine State. The EU initially suspended invitations to Burmese senior military officers and decided to review all the practical defence cooperation in October 2017, and then extended and strengthened its arms embargo on Myanmar and prohibited the delivery of military training and cooperation with the Myanmar army in April 2018 and imposed sanctions on seven military, border guard and police officials in June this year.\textsuperscript{149} Although one of the sanctioned generals was dismissed and another left the army, the EU has extended the arms embargo and prolonged sanctions against high-ranking officials of Tatmadaw.\textsuperscript{150} So far, the EU has still maintained a ban on selling weapons to Myanmar as well as the sanctions on the senior Burmese generals.

In the meantime, Myanmar-US military ties have also been locked in the Rohingya refugee crisis. The US has not only imposed economic sanctions on the Burmese security forces and issued travel ban on the Burmese senior generals, but freezed

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\bibitem{145} SIPRI Arms Transfers Database [119], Myint [116] and The Economic Times [124].
\bibitem{146} Routray [125].
\bibitem{147} Sainsbury [112].
\bibitem{148} The Irrawaddy [126].
\bibitem{149} European Union [109] and DW [127].
\bibitem{150} Emmott and Slodkowski [128] and Al JAZEERA [129].
\end{thebibliography}
any U.S. assets held by those targeted and prohibits Americans from doing business with them.\footnote{Agence France-Presse [130].} In addition, the US also proposed resolutions at UN to condemn the Myanmar military over human rights abuses against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State. In light of Tatmadaw’s rejection to U.S. accusations and the ongoing conflicts in Rakhine State, it is unlikely that the US would ease sanctions against the Tatmadaw and re-engage with it in the near future.

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