

Myanmar's post Election Foreign Policy

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Executive Summary

This paper's main objective is to explore the likely direction of Myanmar's foreign policy after the historic election won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Laureate, a democratic icon and a long-term opposition leader. To this end, the paper analyses key statements by the new leadership. Further, it zooms in on a number of areas in domestic politics with particular relevance for the direction of foreign policy: unresolved projects with China (in particular concerning hydro-power), human rights issues, and the peace process in which many donors are involved – and links these issues to the question of Myanmar's socio-economic development. The paper concludes that Myanmar's foreign policy “will continue in line with fundamental principles from the time of independence, but will also focus more on domestic matters of relevance to foreign policy”. Myanmar will continue to pursue a balanced foreign policy, regionally and internationally.

The general election held late last year represents a historical landmark in Myanmar's democratic transition. The international community is watching the new government's foreign policy to see where it goes. Here are some pointers. The focus of the outgoing government was on reintegrating with the international community, but the new government will not need to reset relations with the West. This is related to two important factors. First, the reputation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi rests firmly on her record as a Nobel Peace Laureate and as an international icon of democracy. Second, the previous administration already developed Myanmar's relations with the West and Myanmar will now need to re-engage with

China. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will therefore need to convince the West to continue its support, ease the remaining sanctions imposed on Myanmar and invest heavily in the country – while also re-establishing relations with neighbouring China. Against that backdrop, this paper explores the concept of Myanmar's foreign policy as articulated by the country's leadership, and then turns to domestic factors that may influence the foreign policy direction. The government led by the NLD was formed on 31 March 2016. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is arguably the most popular leader ever in Myanmar and controls two ministries: Foreign Affairs and the Office of the President. She also serves as the State Counsellor. This is a considerable responsibility, with the day-to-day running of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and policy recommendations of the Office of the President. Many have worried that having such heavy responsibilities might interfere with her work on priority tasks such as the peace talks.

On 18 April, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi delivered a 16-minute Myanmar New Year message which emphasized four areas of domestic policy: national reconciliation, internal peace, drafting of a constitution aimed at establishing a democratic federal union, and improving the quality of life for the population. In order to clarify the trajectory of Myanmar's foreign policy, a formal foreign policy pronouncement was issued in the capital city, Nay Pyi Taw, on 22 April 2016 where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pledged that the government would adopt a people-centred policy, emphasizing the relations between peoples of different countries, creating friendly and cooperative relations between them. For Myanmar, people-to-people diplomacy is particularly important for improving relations with big powers through fostering positive images of a nation in democratic transition. It faces a range of challenges and conflicts which some institutions and countries have misinterpreted in terms of human rights and migration.

Under such circumstances, it is essential to pursue people-to-people contacts

to improve the understanding of the actual situation in Myanmar and the country's external and internal policies. After many years of isolation of Myanmar from the world – and of the world from Myanmar – the country needs more visits, exchanges and interactions with leaders, scholars, students, civil society organizations and not least tourists from other countries. Careful attention should be given to practical arrangements, including an effective immigration policy for foreign scholars.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's first pragmatic approach can be seen in inviting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Nay Pyi Taw, only a few days after the new government was formed. This invitation is linked to domestic factors, especially the important Myitsone Dam Hydro Power Project. Myanmar–China relations became strained under the U Thein Sein government (2011–2015) due to suspension of this project. This Project will become a major test for new government. At the domestic level, the importance of terminating the project, rather than suspending has been highlighted in journal articles, websites and social media, under headings such as 'Let Irrawaddy flow as Irrawaddy water' and, 'Do all you can to prevent Myitsone'. In this context, instead of taking time to consider the issue, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will need to clarify how she intends to resolve this issue without damaging relations with China. A pragmatic approach to China would be well-advised to include positive cooperation in the area of tourism, instead of resuming the project. As for China, if it truly wants to maintain friendly relations with Myanmar, it should avoid playing the Myitsone Dam card. Another highly controversial issue is most Myanmar Buddhists hold that the Muslim community in Rakhine is outsiders who emigrated from Bangladesh, and refer to them as 'Bengalis'. It would be advisable for the international community to show understanding by supporting both communities without bias, recognizing that it is difficult for Myanmar to mature in democratic practices and liberalism

within such a short time-frame. The new government will need to negotiate with the US to ease the remaining sanctions. As of this writing, some sanctions have been eased, while other measures have been retained, to discourage human rights abuse and arms trade with North Korea. The sanctions decision came before Secretary of State Kerry's visit to ASEAN in May 2016.

However, in her meeting with John Kerry in Nay Pyi Taw, State Counsellor Suu Kyi politely said that the US's sanctions were understandable and did not pose a big problem. Myanmar's post-election foreign policy will continue in line with fundamental principles from the time of independence, but will also focus more on domestic matters of relevance to foreign policy. If Myanmar is to be more deeply involved in international affairs, the NLD-led government will have to deal with a series of tricky domestic balancing acts: these include balancing environmental degradation vs economic development; non-renewable natural resource exploitation vs ethnic demands; universal human rights vs the rights of individual citizens; outside intervention through foreign aid vs national sovereignty; and the desires of ethnic populations vs domestic security concerns. Otherwise, the government's 100-day plan for short-term achievement and the first five years of the democratically elected NLD-led civilian government will be in vain.

Notes

(Available at [http://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=content/Myanmar %E2%80%99s-post-election-foreign-policy](http://www.moi.gov.mm/moi:eng/?q=content/Myanmar%E2%80%99s-post-election-foreign-policy))