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"Myanmar-China Relations: Historical Development and Strengthening

Public Diplomacy"

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Introduction (Background)

Myanmar-China relationship has been described as "Pauk-Phaw" (Kinsfolk) friendship valued between the two countries. It has a long history of friendly relationship premised upon the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. Myanmar together with China and India are the founders of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence that provide the foundation of Myanmar's foreign policy. Myanmar expects that the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs should form the basic upon which a country's foreign relations should be regulated and Myanmar formulated her China policy in this context.

Myanmar occupies a strategic position in terms of geopolitics and Myanmar serves as a land bridge between South Asia, Southeast Asia and beyond. It is sandwiched between India and China. Since nature has put us in a way that Myanmar and China are neighbors, we cannot choose neighbors, neighbors will remain neighbors. As the Chinese say, "a close neighbor is better than a distant relative."

We noted China's "Good Neighborliness Policy and now Myanmar NLD government also evolves a new neighborhood approach. Sustaining the focus on the neighborhood is important not only for the well-being of Myanmar but also for the wide region. For mutually beneficial relationship to exist both ends of the relationship must co-exist and Public Diplomacy is vital. We have to think in terms of mutual respect and understanding and recognize the importance of people-to-people connectivity.

Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, its relations with China has been mainly based on the internal as well as external environment. The changing nature of international system and domestic politics made some development and changes in Myanmar-China relations throughout history. Myanmar-China relations have never been easy and have been subjected to numerous strains over the years. During the period since 1948 there have been ups and downs between the two countries' relations. The historical development of Myanmar's China policy is emphasized on goals and strategies and the factors that have shaped it.

Historical Development of Myanmar-China Bilateral Relations

Historical development of Myanmar-China relations can be divided into periods as of 1948 to 1962; 1962 to 1988; 1988 to 2011; and 2011 to date. The relations between Myanmar and China during the period 1948 to 1962 were not smooth enough. There were some complex problems due to the Kuomintang Aggression and Burma Communists Party (BCP) problems in the early 1950s.

Myanmar was the first non-communist as well as the first Asian country to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC). Myanmar has maintained the "One-China" policy– that Taiwan is part of the mainland China –consistently ever since her recognition of the PRC.

A milestone in Myanmar-China relations in 1954 was having an opportunity to discuss border demarcation and reached an agreement to settle the issue in a friendly spirit at an appropriate time through normal diplomatic channels. The Boundary Treaty between Myanmar and China was signed on 1st October 1960.

During the Cold War when the ideological conflict between the East and the West bloc was at the peak Myanmar declared the policy of "positive neutrality" in its conduct of foreign relations and stated that it would not deviate from its policy and emphasized on the self-reliant policy.

There were tensions between Myanmar and China mainly concerned with the Chinese Cultural Revolution because of the overseas Chinese problems in Myanmar and BCP problems. The anti-Chinese riot of 1967 in Myanmar was a turning point in the bilateral relationship. At the same time, Chinese government openly gave support to BCP. China adopted a dual-track approach towards Myanmar by endorsing party-to-party relations between the China Communist Party (CCP) and Burma Communist Party (BCP), in addition to State-to-State relations.

In the Post-Mao era, government-to-government relations between Myanmar and China gradually improved. By late 1979 signs of changes in Chinese foreign policy towards Myanmar became more apparent partly due to the evolving security environment in Southeast Asia.

Since 1988, Myanmar-China relationship has marked by a shift from "delicate friendship" to "genuine cooperation". Since the early 1990s the United States and other Western countries have imposed an increasingly harsh sanctions on Myanmar. Myanmar has been forced to look elsewhere for friends. Diplomatic isolation and

economic sanctions imposed including the arms embargo by the West have inevitably drawn Myanmar closer to China. In the early 2008 Myanmar-China bilateral relationship began to enter a difficult phase. Myanmar was uneasy with China's increasing contacts with anti-government activists and organizations. But China tried to fine-tune bilateral relations and clear up any misunderstanding that might have existed between the two countries.

In 2010, the domestic political landscape of Myanmar led to the emergence of democratically elected government and the international community welcomed the process of democratization. The democratic reform in Myanmar unveiled a series of unpleasant uncertainties for China and the bilateral relationship was faced with challenges.

In 2016, the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, just days after the NLD government was sworn in signalled the world that China and Myanmar relationship is vital. Both countries are serious about engaging and improving the two countries' relationship which is very important politically, socially and economically.

Different Views on Myanmar-China Bilateral relations

Myanmar-China bilateral relations can be viewed in the context of a study of neutralism in Myanmar's foreign policy. Up to the late 1980s it is in a similar context. Intimate relations has developed since 1988 and its regional strategic and security implications has seen as an attraction. Myanmar-China relations since 1988 has been marked by a shift from "delicate friendship" to "genuine cooperation" which holds an optimistic view of closer and more stable relationship between the two countries. Some scholars view recent developments in Myanmar's relation with China as "playing with fire". A number of questions has been raised concerning Myanmar's regional role and asks whether the country has surrendered her traditional foreign policy of neutralism and has become a strategic pawn or pivot player for "China. Some view Myanmar is unlikely to play the role of an independent or pivotal player in regional security affairs, given its role in China grand strategy for the next century. Some argues that Myanmar has been overwhelmed by China and is being "sinicized". Others suggest that Myanmar government can successfully manage her relations with China and there is every indication that Myanmar will eventually attempt to draw back from China and try a more balanced position. Optimists predict a closer, genuine and mutually supportive strategic relationship. All these views do contribute to the better understanding of Myanmar-China relations, they do not adequately reflect the complexity and realities of

the bilateral relationship. Myanmar-China relations need to be examined in the wider context of overall foreign policy.

Myanmar has constantly repositioned her relations with China to her best advantage. Myanmar's China policy has always been located somewhere balancing and bandwagoning, and the juxtaposition of accommodating China's regional interests and resisting Chinese influence and interference in Myanmar's internal affairs has been a hallmark of Myanmar's China policy, and this will likely remain unchanged.

With the growing significance of Myanmar to China geopolitical and geostrategic terms as well as in the context of its own drive for modernization and economic development, China will base its diplomacy on the good neighborliness policy, mutual benefit, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. Myanmar will also continue to conduct her China policy in the context of the traditional "Pauk-Phaw" friendship that will allow Myanmar flexibility in her foreign relations.

Whenever we exchange views on Myanmar-China Relations we notice that the Chinese think Myanmar is seen turning to be "Pro-West". Some think the direction of Myanmar's foreign policy would be underway and the pendulum of Myanmar's balancing diplomacy is swinging back to the east and so on and so forth. And in the future, China and Myanmar may no longer be as close as before. But Myanmar has shown the World that State Counsellor and Foreign Minister Daw Aung San Suukyi's first visit was to China than to U.S, a historic visit that could well shape Myanmar-China relations for many years to come. We hope that the new NLD government has the wisdom to create favourable conditions for making a great leap forward in the country's development in the near future as well as to make sound and stable development of Myanmar-China relations to have everlasting Pauk-Phaw friendship.

Public Diplomacy

In International Relations for a multipolar age a model of soft power is an attractive way of exercising power. Government can engage with citizens of foreign countries directly with a process known as "Public Diplomacy".

We learnt that China and Myanmar use education as a form of "soft power" to increase its people-to-people connectivity. China has established in Myanmar two "Confucius Institute"— a global network of cultural and language –learning institutions linked to universities and high schools. Myanmar and China inked a "reciprocal" deal to establish "Culture Centres" in both countries.

Myanmar and China sign MOUs on educational exchange programme which is a new start for the future exchange programmes. Myanmar University of Yangon and Yangon University of Foreign Language (YUFL) sign MOUs respectively with the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) of China on educational exchanges and strengthening ties between the two nations. The MOUs included the exchanges of students, faculty members, scholars and administrative staff as well as research cooperation in the field of mutual interests and sharing of academic materials and informations.

Myanmar's YUFL has been offering Chinese language programmes ranging from language proficiency courses to doctoral degree programmes to encompass the teaching of Chinese to Myanmar students.

Initiating people-to-people relationship can bring mutual benefits for both countries. China has arranged several friendship tours targeting various political parties in Myanmar, civil society organizations, such as, the 88 generation student's peace and open society, as well as local media groups to China, aiming to build better understanding between the two countries. In 2012, Chinese scholars on Public Diplomacy visited Myanmar and had comprehensive and frank exchanges of views on furthering people-to-people contacts between China and Myanmar.

Relying on Public Relations, Public Diplomacy and Corporate Social Responsibility programs the two countries aim to improve the image on the ground and relations in the local community. We can see the strategy of cultural diplomacy or the Buddhist diplomacy. The Sacred Buddha relics China possesses are a unique diplomacy instruments. The sacred tooth relics of Buddha which was conveyed to Myanmar for obeisance showed how Buddhist cultural exchange plays an important part in Myanmar-China friendly relationship, enhancing the understanding and mutual trust between the two countries' peoples. The "tooth relic diplomacy" was a great success which China played rather well in Myanmar.

The Public Diplomacy was further boosted in May 2012, when China campaign "Deep Fraternal Friendship" in Yangon. The program consisted of Five Key components: a medical assistance program "Brightness Action" for cataract patients the establishment of a Sino- Myanmar Ophthalmology Centre, the donation of computers to local elementary and secondary schools, a business forum targeting local small businesses, and large artistic performances "Linked by Mountains and Waters" to compliment the friendship between the two peoples.

Recently the T.V drama titled legend of Southwest Dance and Music jointly filmed by China and Myanmar artistes tell us how 1313 years ago, the prince of the kingdom and his dance group travelled all the way from Myanmar to the capital city of Tang dynasty. It tells us about the generations - long friendship between China and Myanmar.

Historically, China have been publishing news in English and Chinese but now China started publishing news in the Myanmar language. Much of the reporting is shared on Facebook, a platform that has – in many respects – became synonymous with the interest in Myanmar. Xinhua is not the only Chinese State-run media outlet with a presence in Myanmar. CGTV, a broadcaster, has a bureau. The Chinese government has made news from its state media enterprises as accessible as possible.

In countries that China deems to be of strategic importance, including Myanmar, CGTV pays for its videos to be "promoted" on Facebook, as the social network is banned by China's strict internet censorship.

The Chinese Embassy in Yangon has even opened a public Facebook account, asserting that there is "still friendship in the Myanmar". There are queries about China trying to win hearts in Myanmar whether the new approach will succeed.

We also noted the neighbourly tradition of mutual help and support has been continued and strengthened. Example includes China's support for Myanmar to hold the 27th Southeast Asian Games which Myanmar showed the world that it can do it.

Conclusion

The historical development of Myanmar's China policy is emphasized on goals and strategies and the factors that have shape it. In reality, Myanmar's China policy is to promote the concept of a "Pauk-Phaw" relationship. As long as both sides fulfill the obligation that come under "Pauk-Phaw" friendship, the relationship will remain smooth.

We are confident that Myanmar and China can work closely and address all the challenges and even turn challenges into opportunities in the spirit of Pauk-Phaw friendship.

It is of vital importance that fine traditions of warm friendly close relations, especially the people-to-people contacts with a process of "Public Diplomacy" which

have prevailed between Myanmar and China in the past, right up to the present, be maintained in the future also.

Both Myanmar and China can stand to gain if they understand each others' culture better, learn and find ways of seeking and promoting people-to-people connectivity and demonstrate its good intent through Public Diplomacy will be of mutual benefit.