

New Myanmar and Two Koreas

The two Koreas, Republic of Korea, an ally of US on the one hand and North Korea, axis of evil regarded by President George Bush on the other, have diplomatic ties with Myanmar. The close relationship with North Korea under previous military government became a great concern of international community that posed challenges to regional security. Today, new Myanmar is on her path way to democracy and extending her diplomatic relations throughout the world especially with the West. Due to North Korea current active policy in the Asia Pacific, observers cannot imagine how U Thein Sein administration will handle its relations with North Korea in the last year of his first five-year term. Attentions are drawn on Myanmar's relations with North Korea that would become strategic implications for the Asia-Pacific region. Against this backdrop, I'd like to share my view on Myanmar's relations with two Koreas and try to point out Myanmar's current situation relations with two Koreas will not be major agenda for the key players in the Asia-Pacific.

Two Koreas and Myanmar have in common-geography, history and people. Geopolitically, they are located among big powers and share a common interest to maintain friendly relations among them. Moreover, Myanmar is located at the western most of SEA and Korea at the east of the East Asia so that they can contribute to the region-wide peace and stability by playing the bridging role within the region and beyond. They also share historical experiences of colonization, military government and economic backwardness.

Myanmar's interactions with two Koreas can be explained by military contact with DPRK and economic cooperation with ROK. It can also be traced back since 1948. Under U Nu's administration, his government was keen to play a positive role in favour of the US motion to recognize Seoul government. His government fully endorsed the Security Council's action in declaring DPRK as an aggressor in the war of 1950. Although Myanmar's cautious attitude towards the Korean question was a reflection of its strategic concerns, she did not desire to be caught up in the great power competition. However, U Ne Win's strict neutralism paved way for establishing formal relationship with two Koreas in 1975, just one year after formation of BSPP. In U Ne Win era, Myanmar's relationship with the two Koreas changed dramatically due to North Korea attempt of assassinating Chun Doo-hwan during his official visit to Myanmar. On this occasion, seventeen South Koreans, including four Cabinet ministers and the ambassador,

were assassinated at the martyr's monument in Yangon. In this context, Myanmar's diplomatic relations with North Korea was suspended in 1983.

After 1988 student uprising, military government of Myanmar faced with economic sanctions of the West due to the lack of democratic manner and human right abuse. These situation became the push factor for Myanmar to establish the closer ties with North Korea.

After two decades long hiatus, military government launched unofficial relations with Pyongyang in 1996 by exporting rice, timber and rubber in order to exchange of North Korea weapons, military and technical assistance. At this point, both states were international pariah, under heavy international sanctions and ruled by military government and deeply concern about US intervention. Bilateral diplomatic relations was reestablished in 2007 and their burgeoning relationship became worldwide attention in 2009 when there was a high level visit by Thura U Shwe Mann to North Korea. Concerning this case, unauthorized reports were issued by Australian watchers and they pointed out about the suspicious nuclear plant in Myanmar during 2008 to 2010. With regard to Myanmar's stand on North Korea under new government, then Vice-President Thiha Thura U Tin Aung Myint Oo made his explanation to Senator John McCain on 1 June 2011 that Myanmar is abiding the UNSC Resolution 1718 and 1874 dealing with North Korea case. Oftentimes, Myanmar's stand on North Korea was reaffirmed by the monthly radio talk of the President U Thein Sein between 2013 and 2015.

President U Thein Sein has fundamentally renovated Myanmar's foreign relations by reengaging with the west. A series of diplomatic moves and domestic developments underline Myanmar's intention to foster better relations with any major powers. In order to verify the argument, "Myanmar's current interactions with two Koreas will not be critical concern (major agenda) for the key players in Asia-Pacific", I'd like to point out the following six influencing factors.

1. Myanmar's willingness to engage with West by reintegrating into international community

New Myanmar under President U Thein Sein has attempted to enhance Myanmar's role in regional and international settings. Additional basis of foreign policy has been announced that is, Myanmar will actively take part in international organizations in line with domestic political development. This political basis is the platform for national economic and political development in long term, especially in the age of market economy. The approach of foreign policy under

President U Thein Sein highlight a reorientation of foreign policy by opening revitalized relations with the West to boost up economic modernization and to narrow down the development gap to the other countries in the region.

After making transition to new political culture, Myanmar has strong willingness of Myanmar to cement the relations with US and the west. Relationship between Myanmar and the West has changed considerably since the US had applied smart sanctions which have been lifted due to series of reforms carried out by U Thein Sein government. This fulfills the national development strategy of Myanmar government which aimed at developing aspect of all walks of life. New Myanmar wants to catch up economically as well as politically with the rest of SEA. Myanmar has gained fruitful assistance from donors like Japan and Paris Club Consortium by debt cancellation on Myanmar. The sanctions lifted by EU in June 2013 paved way for Myanmar to achieve GSP status. Moreover, EU assistance in anti landmine, relocation of internally displace person and primary health care and education has contributed to the basic needs for Myanmar people. As poverty alleviation is a top priority for Myanmar, she appreciated development partners in assisting to remove from the list of LDC and to reduce the poverty rate from 26 %to 16% in 2015. Successful holding of World Economic Forum and ASEAN Summit were remarkable events and being reflecting upon the tremendous interest of international community in the development of Myanmar. In this context, Myanmar acquired international recognition and forged warm relations with international community in line with its reform agenda. That is why it is no doubt that Myanmar will not desire to lose this promising ties. Military-to-military contact with the US, has also been improving during the first five years of new administration. There have been meetings in the context of ADMM-Plus, US-ASEAN informal defence ministers' meeting, participation as observers of Cobra Gold, the hosting of 19th ASEAN- Regional Forum Heads of Defence Universities, Colleges and Institutions Meeting in Nay Pyi Taw. Considering to restore IMET, EMET program to Myanmar, all these events are positive steps for Myanmar-US military-to-military contact.

As part of the government's attempt to strengthen ties with the Washington Administration and to dispel any lingering concerns over Myanmar's nuclear ambition, Myanmar had already clarified its position on North Korea to international community and also expressed her confidence that the latest move would not injure relations between Myanmar and its new foreign partners such as like US and EU.

2. Closer to South rather than North

Myanmar's relation with ROK is in nature of economic cooperation. Since 1989, Korean companies invested in Myanmar including the garment industry that boomed around 2000. Myanmar has captured the world's attention with its transition away from authoritarian military rule towards democracy. In his monthly radio speech of President U Thein Sein highlighted " the economic development as the priority of foreign economic policy". So, New Myanmar takes into account for the economic development model of South Korea and strengthening its economic ties with South Korea, welcome Korea investment in Myanmar in order to fulfill its foreign economic policy.

Official statistics show that South Korean investment in Myanmar amounted to \$3307.159 billion in 105 projects as of July 2015, accounting for merely 7.10 percent of the total foreign investment and ranking the fifth position in the country's foreign investment line-up. The biggest share is in the energy sector. South Korea's foreign direct investment started in the electronic products sector in 1990. Since then, South Korea's direct investment has expanded in various sectors and as of March 2009, total investment was about US Dollar 97 million. The investments are focused on the Mining & Energy sectors (37.45 percent) and the Processing & Manufacturing sector (47.06 percent). In terms of investment attractiveness, the Mining & Energy sectors, especially the natural gas exploration sector, are relatively immature industries in Myanmar, thus investments have been more focused in Mining & Energy than other sectors.

In May 2015, Myanmar and ROK celebrated the 40th anniversary of establishing bilateral diplomatic relations in Yangon. During transition period, the visit of the President of South Korea to Myanmar in 2012 signified a renewed commitment to extending economic and development cooperation with Myanmar. The ROK's resumed its development loans when Myanmar transformed into new government. Daily direct flights between Seoul and Yangon were established and floods of visitors ensued including heads of government, Speakers of parliaments and other high level officials. In December 2014, KOICA launched two symbolic development projects- Myanmar Development Institute (MDI) and Saemaeul (New Community) Movement. Under this program, KOICA-sponsored project of faculty is being trained at YU. The highest point in this renewed friendship was reached in 2014 when a memorial monument in commemoration of the victims from the 1983 bombing was erected. The new Myanmar government paid attention on public voice in making decision to permit the construction of such

monument because of the impact of national identity and character deeply accepted by local community among Myanmar people. It caught to reach the agreement after 30 years, that is in 2013. This agreement for establishing memorial monument indicates that how Myanmar is closed to South Korea and showed her attempt to fulfill the desire of individual Korean family who were severely suffered for the loss of life in 1983 bombing.

3. Giving Priority for Handling Domestic issues

The year 2015 is critical and important year for Myanmar. Holding 2015 general election to be free and fair, signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement, resolving communal violence, attempting in rehabilitation for flood victims, launching colourful ribbon campaign by civilian officials are the typical and tough issues for President U Thein Sein's government especially in the last moment of his term. Within his five-year term, there is no high level visit to North Korea. It indicates that Myanmar is trying to keep status quo with North Korea rather than focusing on domestic issues.

New Myanmar under President U Thein Sein gave special attention on national economic development by carrying out reform measures on infrastructure development, agricultural mechanization and development of SMEs in special economic zones in Myanmar economy to be competitive with neighbours. Such kind of multi-purpose economic development needs the support and credibility from the WB, ADB and other development partner in love term. Myanmar totally accepts the international credibility as a peddle to force democratic reform process, especially in fragile transition period. That is why, it is obvious that heartily incusted non-productive sector, building nuclear plant is an unsustainable for national economy. Moreover, Myanmar, in current transition, is trying to stabilize financial market to rehabilitate in mandated areas and to conclude NCA before 2015 election which are more significant domestic concern than nuclear plant establishment.

Besides, government is trying to protect both manmade and natural disaster in current situation. However, it is necessary to maintain trust of foreign investors amid the protest of local community an FDI in Kachin and Mandalay area. As government pays more attention on public opinion on investment, environmental conversation, culture and religious heritages, it is unlikely to invest in uncertain and suspicious unclear plant for the moment.

4. Diversifying Approach of Myanmar Defense Force

It is difficult to deny that MDF, the only strong institutions in Myanmar comparing with Executive, legislature and other CSOs in Myanmar today. However, MDF is becoming more open minded than ever before. During the year 2015 , C-in-C who has the significant power in line with 2008 constitution, hold regional seminar on defense and several military friendship tours to Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India, Israel, Russia and China respectively and frequently. It indicates that C-in-C is trying to establish military professionalization of MDF with the support of partners within and outside of the region.

One significant project in diversifying approach of MDF is that dispatching the mid-age military officials to Hawaii, Japan and Russia for advanced military-civilian cooperation purposes. MDF maintains long term friendship with Israel and Russia where most of young military officers were sent to study civilian purpose nuclear technology which is officially permitted under IAEA guidelines. Besides, acquiring nano-nuclear technology is one of the top priorities that Myanmar is trying to fulfill for the energy substitution and health purposes for many years.

5. Public voice

It is to be noted that Myanmar is not an old Myanmar and it is moving towards with democratic transformation. President U Thein Sein cares of people's will can be seen by looking at the suspending the Myitsone dam. The face book , one of the popular social media and also one of the significant tools for commenting and criticizing the government implementations is widely used among the youth in Myanmar. The Myanmar expatriate news media organizations such as Irrawaddy magazine, Mizzima News and DVB were quick to embrace modern technology especially internet. For New Myanmar, it is interesting to learn how military and youth today view on North and South Korea. The military views South Korea as a model of economic development. With regard to North Korea, there are different views among the military. Some would like to keep North Korea as a source of weapon supplier but some view that Myanmar under President U Thein Sein would focus on economic development with SK rather than military contact with North. The students from IR and PS view North Korea with Kim Jung Eun and South Korea as a trade partner.

Based on these, the government take serious on public voice and opinion.....

6. Signatory to International Conventions NPT

In an attempt to address this problem and facilitate Myanmar's adoption and implementation of nonproliferation rules and norms, the Pacific Forum CSIS, in partnership with the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS), and with support from the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (DOE/NNSA) and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Strategic Programme Fund (FCO/SPF), held the 1st Myanmar-US/UK Nonproliferation Dialogue in Yangon, Myanmar on Feb. 7-8, 2014. The Asia Pacific is plagued with many WMD threats: the region has several nuclear-armed states (China, India, North Korea, and the United States) and many dual-use capabilities are on the market. Myanmar clearly expresses that plans, including cooperation with Russia on development of a research reactor, were abandoned primarily due to high cost and also in light of "international concerns" surrounding Myanmar's intentions. The participants from both US and UK learnt from the conference that prospects of nuclear power development in Myanmar remain remote.