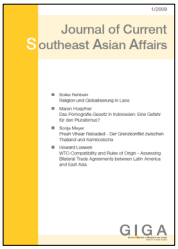

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Myanmar's Foreign Policy under the USDP Government: Continuities and Changes

Maung Aung Myoe

Abstract: Myanmar's foreign policy under the USDP government is historically consistent in terms of fundamental principles of being independent, active, and non-aligned, as promulgated in the Constitution. However, the USDP government has pronounced a new foreign policy objective of reintegrating Myanmar into the international community. This objective is not in conflict with the existing ones nor does it seek to replace them, but rather endeavours to supplement them to make Myanmar's foreign relations more active, dynamic, and international. This is by no means a major change in foreign policy orientation. It is merely an adjustment within the context of the fundamental principles of Myanmar's foreign policy to cultivate friendly and balanced relations with all major powers active in the Indo-Pacific region. The change is mostly in terms of how the foreign policy is implemented and diplomacy is conducted. Since it came to power in 2011, the USDP government has pursued a foreign policy strategy that delicately balances the strategic interests of major powers in the country, that primarily maintains friendly relations with countries both near and far, and that applies multilateralism with an emphasis on regional cooperation or regional institutions. The foreign policy adjustment under the USDP government is leadership-driven, and it appears that the president is a prime mover and the Tatmadaw is a lead institution.

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Keywords: Myanmar, foreign policy, foreign relations, Tatmadaw, Hluttaw

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1 Introduction

After the 15-year-long National Convention (1993–2008) convened to draft a constitution and the subsequent constitutional referendum in May 2008, the military government, known at different times as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) or the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), held nationwide general elections at various levels on 7 November 2010. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by U Thein Sein, managed to win a majority of seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly), constituting a government. The USDP government came to power on 30 March 2011 and started its administration on 1 April, following Myanmar's fiscal calendar. The USDP government rule comes to an end in March 2016, when a new government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), chaired by Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in general elections held on 8 November 2015. This article is an assessment of the overall foreign policy of the USDP government.

There are several publications on Myanmar's foreign relations in the last few years. Many of them are articles and books dealing with Myanmar's bilateral relations (for instance, to mention but a few, the list will include Clymer 2015; Myoe 2011; Steinberg and Fan 2012; Chachavalpongpun 2005; Seekins 2007; Tin Maung Maung Than 2010; Li 2012 and Nehginpao Kipgen 2013). However, there are four books or special issues/reports that address more directly with Myanmar's foreign policy. Published in 2006, Jürgen Haacke's book (Haacke 2006) examines "the objectives, means, and effectiveness of Myanmar's foreign policy under the military regime" and identifies the primary drivers and basic principles of Myanmar's foreign policy and the main goals of the SPDC in their external relations. His monograph has five core arguments. First, Jürgen argued that "the regime's perceived domestic political-security imperative," the most obvious aspects of which are national unity and sovereignty, shapes Myanmar foreign policy. Second, he stated that the military regime is willing to pay a price in defence of the domestic political security imperative. Third, although the difficult relations with the West had limited the scope of Myanmar foreign policy manoeuvre, in his view, it has nonetheless eventually "managed to achieve a balance of sorts in its relations with its neighbours" and "integrated into regional international society". Fourth, rather than being a pariah state, Jürgen asserted that Myanmar has markedly improved its relations with the wider international community. Fifth, he cautioned that the regime's unwillingness or incapacity to understand the price of continued defiance, a failing of Myanmar's foreign policy, not only could prolong and deepen

cycles of suspicion and hostility with the regime critics in the West but also potentially undermine the regime's sympathiser in Southeast Asia (Haacke 2006). The monograph, unfortunately, covers only up to the mid-2000s.

Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan's *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma*, published in 2013, is a major contribution to the literature on Myanmar foreign relations. The focus of Egreteau and Jagan's book is the ways in which the "praetorian" ethos of the Myanmar military influenced the conduct of the Myanmar state's external relations. The period under study extends all the way from the day of Myanmar independence to the early days of the USDP government, with special attention paid to the period after the military coup in 1962. The book reviews and scrutinises Myanmar's foreign relations through 1990s to the end of 2000s. Yet, it says very little about the USDP government's foreign policy goals and strategies, as it is still too early to come up with an assessment at the time of the publication (Egreteau and Jagan 2013).

Special report No. 45 of the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), published in March 2014, is dedicated to Myanmar's "growing regional role" and six contributors have examined Myanmar's foreign relations in the context of regional politics. Chapters written separately by Priscilla Clapp (2014) and Morten B. Pedersen (2014) deal with the "influence of domestic issues on Myanmar's foreign policy" and "Myanmar's foreign policy in a time of transition." Morten Pedersen's work discusses the basic attitude and the core principles and objectives of Myanmar foreign policy and concludes that the new quasi-civilian government has pursued an independent, non-aligned, and active foreign policy, like its predecessors, while

> leav[ing] behind the essentially defensive, inward-looking policies of past security-oriented administration and greatly increase interaction with the outside world in pursuit of national development (Caballero-Anthony et al. 2014).

However, the paper does not address the USDP government's new foreign policy objective and its strategy to implement it, nor does the paper identify who and which institutions are driving Myanmar's foreign policy under the USDP government.

The special issue of the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, issue no. 2 of volume 34,[1] published in August 2015, is all about Myanmar's international relations. The introduction by Marco Bünte and Jörn

1 See: <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jsaa/issue/view/124> (24 March 2016).

Dosch explains Myanmar's political reform under the USDP government and its implications for the country's external relations, along with summarising the articles that followed. Each of those six articles is about Myanmar's respective bilateral relations with the United States, European Union, China, Japan, Russia, and India, and it is in the present writer's own article that a new foreign policy goal or objective under the USDP government is briefly addressed. That article does not go into detail about whether the new foreign policy goal under the USDP government is consistent with fundamental principles of Myanmar's foreign policy. In all of these works, there is little or no discussion on the foreign policy establishment in Myanmar and how to understand Myanmar's foreign policy evolution, particularly in the USDP period.

Since this article is about foreign policy behaviour, it is useful to discuss foreign policy changes in the literature, though straightforward application of these concepts to the specific case of Myanmar may be difficult. Charles Hermann has presented a conceptual framework for foreign policy change. His focus is on the "foreign policy change" carried out by the existing government rather than on the "foreign policy redirection" resulting from regime change or state transformation. Foreign policy change will be carried out either to address some problems or to pursue some goals in a country's foreign relations. Based on the degree of "change," Hermann classified four types – namely, (1) adjustment change, (2) programme change, (3) problem/goal change, and (4) international orientation change. According to his explanation, adjustment change is a change in the level of effort (what is done, how it is done, and the purpose for which it is done all remain unchanged); programme change is a change in the methods or means by which the goal or problem is addressed (what is done and how it is done are changed, but the purpose for which it is done remain unchanged); problem/goal change is a change in the objective (therefore what is done, how it is done as well as the purpose for which it is done are all changed); and international orientation change is a change in the fundamental principles of foreign relations. He also examined key players in, or driving forces behind, the "foreign policy change" in terms of whether the change was triggered by (1) a leader, (2) bureaucratic advocacy, (3) domestic restructuring, or (4) external shock (Hermann 1990: 3–21).

When it comes to the "international orientation change," for analytical purposes it is useful to discuss K. J. Holsti's four types of change. In his book titled *Why Nations Realign*, Holsti defined foreign policy restructuring as "a type of foreign policy behaviour where governments seek to change, usually simultaneously, the total pattern of their external rela-

tions." The foreign policy restructuring is non-incremental, abrupt, and "usually involves the conscious linking of different sectors," in contrast with normal foreign policy change. According to his theoretical framework, there are four ideal types of foreign policy behaviours: (1) isolation, (2) self-reliance, (3) dependence, and (4) non-alignment and diversification, and the classification is based on (a) level of external involvement, (b) external penetration, (c) pattern of external involvement, and (d) military and diplomatic commitments (Holsti 1982: 1–20).

One of the first activities of the USDP government was the official public announcement of its various policies, including a statement on Myanmar foreign policy. This article examines continuities and changes in the general trend of Myanmar's foreign policy under the USDP government from a broader historical perspective, but it will not cover the details of its foreign relations. It raises the following questions: How can we explain and understand Myanmar's foreign policy under the USDP government? Has there been a continuity or change in Myanmar foreign policy and, if so, what are the factors that contribute to it? Who and which institutions are key driving forces behind Myanmar foreign policy at present? This paper argues that the USDP government has adjusted its foreign policy without undermining the fundamental principles long practised by successive governments in Myanmar. However, as it sets a foreign policy objective of reintegrating Myanmar into the international community, the USDP government has pursued a foreign policy strategy based on multilateralism, with special attention to regional institutions and cooperative security, and realignment of Myanmar's foreign relations in the context of strategic competitions among major powers active in the region. While the foreign policy adjustment was driven by leadership, with the president as a prime mover, the military plays an influential and indispensable role in shaping and making it a reality and a success.

2 Fundamental Principles of Myanmar's Foreign Policy

The fundamental principles of Myanmar foreign policy, stipulated in article 41 of the 2008 Constitution, are that

> the Union practises *independent, active, and non-aligned* foreign policy aimed at world peace and friendly relations with nations and upholds the principles of peaceful coexistence among nations.

In his inaugural speech as the president of newly constituted government on 30 March 2011, U Thein Sein clearly stated that his government will

follow a foreign policy based on the above-mentioned principles. The same principles have been confirmed by the USDP government on various occasions. In fact, they are basically a logical extension of both article 26 of the 1974 Constitution, which very similarly stated that

> the State consistently practises an independent foreign policy, aimed at international peace and friendly relations among nations, and upholds the principles of peaceful co-existence of nations,

and the endorsement of the 1981 Fourth Party Congress of the only legal party at the time, the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), which stated that "the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma practises an independent and active foreign policy." What is interesting here is the reinstatement of the "non-aligned" aspect of Myanmar's foreign policy. U Thein Sein's pronouncement specified three interrelated fundamental principles of Myanmar's foreign policy: (1) independence, (2) activism, and (3) non-alignment. They are time-tested and have secured firm support throughout the postcolonial period regardless of the political orientation of the government: whether a democratic regime or an authoritarian one. Widely seen as principles that had withstood the stormy superpower rivalry in the Cold War and safeguarded the country's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, they are considered as cardinal principles in Myanmar's foreign policy. For a better appreciation of these principles, it is essential to place them into a historical perspective.

The Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) claimed, "since achieving independence, and for quite some time thereafter, Myanmar had adopted and practised an 'independent' and 'non-aligned' foreign policy."[2] As for this justification, MOFA states:

> At the time of Myanmar's independence, the international system has an Eastern and Western bloc, between which a "Cold War" was raging. It was also the time when colonial nations were regaining their independence. These newly independent states were in favour of adopting "independent" foreign folicies, *"independent" in the sense of being totally free of outside influence*. (emphasis added) For Myanmar, which wrested independence with great difficulty, only an "independent" foreign policy was congruent with independence. Concurrently with independence, Myanmar faced an internal insurgency and therefore wished to avoid a disastrous contention on its soil between the Eastern and Western blocs. Hence it wished to be non-aligned between the two great blocs. At the time

2 See <www.mofa.gov.mm/?page_id=32> (8 October 2015).

> of independence, it was essential to prioritize economic and social reconstruction. It was declared at that time that foreign assistance, without any strings attached from both sides, would be accepted. As Myanmar is geographically situated between two highly populous nations, India and China, it desired to be independent and non-aligned.[3]

The claim to have practised a "non-aligned" foreign policy since the day of the country's independence is somewhat overstated. Until the issue of Kuomintang (KMT) aggression came up in early 1950, the Myanmar government headed by Prime Minister U Nu was seriously interested in entering into an alliance with Western powers. The 1947 Constitution did not give any statement on the fundamental principles of Myanmar foreign policy; yet it stated that Myanmar "renounces war as an instrument of national policy, and accepts the generally recognised principle of international law as its rules of conduct in its relation with foreign states" and affirms its devotion to the ideal of peace and friendly cooperation amongst nations founded on international justice and morality (Articles 211 and 212). For the first couple of years, the Myanmar government was in search of appropriate foreign policy principles to guide its external relations. For slightly longer than two years after independence, Myanmar tried to rely its foreign and security policy on twin pillars of collective security and collective defence. As a result, Myanmar applied for membership in the United Nations (UN) not only to be recognised as a member of the international society of states but also to seek a security guarantee under the UN's collective security. It was also in this context that the Myanmar government under the leadership of Prime Minister U Nu sought an external security guarantee. In his speech on 14 June 1949, Prime Minister U Nu stated his government's desire to "enter into mutually beneficial treaties or arrangements, defence and economic, with countries of common interest" and "to cooperate as closely as possible with countries of common interest, in economic, political, and defence matters, with a view to the achievement of common ends" so that Myanmar "can fall back [on something] in [a] time of need" (U Nu's speech on 14 June 1949: 209). When General Ne Win, at the time deputy prime minister and commander-in-chief, visited the United Kingdom and the United States in August 1949 alongside Dr. E Maung, the foreign minister, the delegation expressed Myanmar's willingness to be a part of Pacific area security pact (Trager 1966: 218–219; Cady 1958: 598). Even in February 1950, Ne Win, through his close colleague, Bo Set Kyar, in-

3 See <www.mofa.gov.mm/?page_id=32> (8 October 2015).

formed the US embassy in Yangon that Myanmar was fully prepared to align with the West if the United States were willing to extend long-term assistance, including military supplies and technicians (Clymer 2012: 260; Taylor 2015: 137).

Insurgency, both leftist and rightist, and the Cold War were possibly the most important internal and external determinants in Myanmar's pursuance of "positive neutralism." Being disappointed by the lack of interest on the part of United States and the United Kingdom to provide a security guarantee and by the failure of the UN to address the KMT aggression, Myanmar embarked on a policy of neutralism. The superpower competition and Cold War ideological rivalry undoubtedly necessitated that the Myanmar government adopt a neutralist foreign policy not only to avoid entanglement in the international or regional conflicts but also to prevent external interference in its domestic affairs. Perhaps the Cold War great power rivalry provided Myanmar's foreign policy of positive neutralism with both substance and credibility.

The security calculus changed once Myanmar found out that neither the collective security nor the collective defence were available to protect it. Myanmar's foreign policy from early 1950s until late 1960s was basically regarded as neutralism and non-alignment. In his address to the Chamber of Deputies on 5 April 1960, Prime Minister U Nu stated:

> We are pledged to the policy, followed ever since independence, of positive neutrality, non-alignment with any bloc, doing our utmost to promote peace in the world, giving our full support to the aims and objectives of the United Nations and our full support and active cooperation to its working and taking all measures in our power to promote the closet relations of friendship and amity with our neighbouring countries. (U Nu 1960)

Likewise, General Ne Win, 18 months after the military takeover of the state in March 1962, briefed Myanmar ambassadors on 2 September 1963 that what is well defined and clear-cut in Myanmar's foreign relations is the policy of "strict neutrality of non-alignment." Approximately another 18 months later, Ne Win, for the first time, mentioned "independent foreign policy" during his trip to India on 5 March 1965. The use of the term "non-alignment" had become less and less pronounced in official statements in the later 1960s, yet it remained official.

Only in 1971 did the BSPP government officially announce the "independent foreign policy," dropping any reference to the non-alignment aspect. At that time, there was no official explanation as to what made the government drop the "non-aligned" aspect of Myanmar's foreign policy. It did not necessarily mean that Myanmar no longer practised

"non-aligned" foreign policy; to the contrary it was so non-aligned that it even withdrew its membership from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1979. In order to justify its "adjustment" in foreign policy, the BSPP produced two small booklets, one for "restricted" internal circulation in April 1974 and the other for public consumption in December 1978. Both documents claimed that the use of the term "independent foreign policy" was by no means representative of a change in foreign policy or a sign that the positive neutralism practised successively in the past was being abandoned; instead, its purpose was to make it abundantly clear that Myanmar would take an independent position to stand firm on what it considered as the truth or the righteous in international issues (Central Committee of the BSPP 1974: 17, 1978: 33–34). Ten years later, at the Fourth Party Congress of the BSPP in August 1981, the party modified the country's foreign policy description to include "independent and active" foreign policy, probably in response to the criticism of its nearly 20 years of inward-looking and isolationist behaviour. This independent and active foreign policy is further endorsed by SLORC declaration no. 3/88, which it made when it came to power through a military coup on 18 September 1988. The Myanmar government had "officially" practised an "independent and active foreign policy" since about 1981, until a new constitutionally elected government was formed in March 2011. The MOFA explains that

> in practising its independent and active foreign policy, Myanmar will not align itself with any bloc on international issues except to consistently stand on the side that is right. Myanmar also actively participates in activities for world peace; opposes war, imperialism, and colonialism; and maintains friendly relations with all countries.

The ministry also explained that

> Myanmar practises an independent and active foreign policy in accordance with the principles of (a) respect of and adherence to the principle of equality among peoples and among nations and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence;[4] (b) taking a non-aligned, independent, and just stand in international issues; (c) maintaining friendly relations with all nations, and good-neighbourly relations with neighbouring countries; (d) continued support of, and active participation in, the United Nations and its affiliated organisations; (e) pursuit of mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral cooperation programmes; (f) regional consultation and beneficial cooperation in regional economic and social affairs; (g) active participation

4 This will be explained in a later section.

> in the maintenance of international peace and security and the creation of an equitable economic order, and in opposition to imperialism, colonialism, intervention, aggression and hegemonism; and (h) acceptance of foreign assistance beneficial to national development, provided there are no strings attached.[5]

However, the ministry does not provide any explanation for the reinstatement of the "non-aligned" principle in Myanmar's foreign policy. In fact, the non-aligned aspect of the country's foreign policy was reinstated when the National Convention was held in 1993. When Attorney General U Aung Toe, chairman of the National Convention Convening Work Committee, presented 104 basic principles for the new Constitution on 16 September 1993, he explained that there are three principles related to foreign affairs and they were (a) that the State practise independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy, aim to achieve world peace and friendly relations with nations, and uphold the principles of peaceful co-existence among nations; (b) that the State never start aggression against any nation; and (c) that no foreign troops be permitted to be deployed within the borders of the Union. It should be noted that Myanmar rejoined the NAM in September 1992 at the 10th NAM summit in Jakarta, 13 years after withdrawing from the movement. The reason Myanmar gave for withdrawing its participation from NAM in 1979 at the 6th summit in Havana is that it was disappointed with some NAM members for deviating from the non-aligned stand. While the rationale for the reinstatement of "non-aligned" principle in 1993 is beyond the scope of this study, one reason for it could have been that the SLORC/SPDC government was in search for all possible avenues to protect its national interests in the post-Cold War security environment. Myanmar's interest in the reinstatement of the non-aligned principle in its foreign policy could be to make both the domestic and the international community understand that Myanmar is not allied with any particular country – in this case, China in particular – and to announce that the country no longer relies on "isolationist" or "self-reliant" foreign policy and will once again embark on a policy of "diversification" with more options in its conduct of diplomacy.[6] In sum, all three fundamental principles of Myanmar foreign policy are formally enshrined in the 2008 Constitution.

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5 See <www.mofa.gov.mm/?page_id=32> (8 October 2015).

6 For this analysis, please see Myoe 1993. In this thesis, borrowing conceptual framework from K. J. Holsti, the author argues that Myanmar's foreign policy in the period between 1974 and 1988 could be classified as "self-reliance" rather than "isolation" as most people tend to believe.

3 A New Foreign Policy Objective under the USDP Government

Historically, since independence, like many other countries, Myanmar foreign policy objectives have been a combination of protecting and promoting national interests on the one hand and supporting broader global agendas of international security, peace, and development, which include disarmament, anti-colonialism, and international cooperation for friendship and economic development, on the other.[7] In sum, Myanmar's core foreign policy objectives could be safely summarised as (1) to enhance national security, (2) to bolster economic prosperity, and (3) to promote a peaceful and equitable world order. However, these objectives are occasionally prioritised depending on the internal and external political/security environment. At the same time, it is important to note that national security, state security, and regime security are always conflated in Myanmar. These objectives are designed to prevent external interference in Myanmar's internal affairs and to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity. They are further supplemented by the endorsement of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – namely, (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) non-interference in each other's internal affairs, (4) respect for mutual equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence. These foreign policy objectives remain persistent throughout the postcolonial history of Myanmar's foreign relations.

Ever since U Thein Sein came to power in March 2011, his government has pronounced a new foreign policy objective of reintegrating Myanmar into the international community. In his inaugural speech at the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly) on 30 March 2011, he outlined his government's foreign policy as follows:

> From the post-independence period to date, successive governments have practised different political and economic policies and concepts. But, regarding the foreign affairs policy, they all exercised a non-aligned, independent, and active foreign affairs policy and dealt with other countries in line with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In addition, they never permitted any foreign troops to deploy within the borders of the Union. They never

7 For instance, at the United Nations General Assembly on 27 August 2012, President Thein Sein stated that one of the basic tenets of Myanmar's foreign policy is to actively contribute towards the maintenance of international peace and security (Thein Sein 2012a).

> launched aggression against or interfered in the internal affairs of any other country. And they never posted threats to international and regional peace and security. These points are the pride of Myanmar's foreign affairs policy.
>
> Our government will also adhere to this honourable foreign policy and continue relations with all the countries. Moreover, *our country will stand firm as a respected member of the global community* while actively participating in international organisations, including the UN, ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and other regional organisations. This is why I invite and urge some nations wishing to see democracy flourish and the people's socio-economic lives grow in Myanmar to cooperate with our new government that emerged in line with the Constitution by accepting and recognising Myanmar's objective conditions and ending their various forms of pressure, assistance, and encouragement to the anti-government groups and economic manipulations […]. We need to convince some nations with negative attitudes towards our democratisation process that Myanmar has been committed to shaping a democratic system correctly and effectively. (Thein Sein 2011a; emphasis added)

In addition, the USDP government declared,

> Our vision for Myanmar is to become a modern developed nation that meets the aspirations of its people for a better life and to achieve greater integration into the international community by 2020.

In his address to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on 22 August 2011, Thein Sein said,

> Our government has inherited a traditional foreign policy which has never been harmful to international and regional stability and security and it is maintaining friendly relations with global nations. What's more, *we are trying to stand tall as a dutiful member of the global family in international and regional organisations*. (Thein Sein 2011b; emphasis added)

Similarly, a year later, at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 27 September 2012, President Thein Sein told the international community,

> Myanmar is now ushering in a new era. As a member of the family of nations, Myanmar will be participating more actively in the activities of the United Nations in various fields. *Standing as a responsible and respectable nation on the world stage, we will take on the challenges*

> *of the twenty-first century in a bold and resolute manner.* (Thein Sein 2012b; emphasis added)

In his State of the Union address on 1 January 2015, President Thein Sein proudly stated,

> Over the past year [2014], we have continued carrying out our objective of [Myanmar] becoming a respectable, dutiful, and responsible country of the family of nations by breaking out from international sanctions and isolation. We have managed to start casting an international network essential for our country. We are walking on our own path of possessing a foreign policy of active and friendly-with-all in the world communities. By building the strongest possible relations with all countries in the world, and [particularly] with all great powers, we can bring best benefit for our fellow country people. (Thein Sein 2015)

It was obvious that the reintegration of Myanmar into the international community is a key policy message and a primary objective or goal of the new USDP government.

Why did the USDP government pursue a foreign policy objective of reintegration into the international community? There are at least three reasons that could have led the USDP leadership pursue this new foreign policy objective. First, it is about the legitimacy of the government. As a constitutionally elected government, the USDP leadership appears to understand the importance of political legitimacy and, to a certain extent, it enjoys domestic legitimacy. For the sake of wider legitimacy, there is evidence that the USDP has co-opted ethnic parties into the electoral and parliamentary processes. Therefore, the USDP government is more confident in its conduct of external relations and it is also eager to seek international legitimacy to complement the domestic one. Second, it is about a sense of responsibility. Members of the USDP leadership, most of whom worked in the previous military regime, seem to understand that their country was viewed by the international community as a pariah state and that they should do their best to put their country back on the international stage when opportunities arise. The country's badly damaged international image might have impacted the psyche of the USDP leadership. Third, it is about image. The USDP government projects itself as a reformist government and is sending signals that it is different from the past regime and that its policies, especially in the area of foreign relations, will be different from those of the previous regime. In other words, the USDP government's message is that it is ready to change the country's international image of a client state.

4 Foreign Policy Circle in Myanmar

The foreign policy circle within the USDP government in Myanmar is remarkably similar to its predecessor, in both composition and outlook, and is heavily influenced by security-oriented personnel. Decision making in both foreign policy and closely related security policy remains firmly at the level of the executive branch and there is no meaningful parliamentary oversight. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) appears to be the most influential institution in the foreign policy circle.

Historically, leadership style, worldview, and personal experience of Myanmar's leaders, like Prime Minister U Nu, General Ne Win, or Senior General Than Shwe, have shaped Myanmar foreign policy behaviour and the patterns of its foreign relations. For instance, the activism and multilateralism in Myanmar's foreign policy under U Nu leadership was less and less pronounced during the Revolutionary Council government led by General Ne Win, despite the fact that they had similar worldviews based partly on their Buddhist backgrounds and their participation in the anticolonial struggle for national liberation. The avoidance of summit diplomacy by Senior General Than Shwe, chairman of SLORC/SPDC, is another example of how important personality is in Myanmar's foreign relations.

Most of the USDP leadership and key personnel in government are from the Tatmadaw and served in the previous military government. However, they realised that Myanmar had become a pariah state, as Myanmar had suffered international isolation imposed by the West, most notably by the United States. They were also becoming increasingly concerned about and uncomfortable with falling under China's shadow and the presumed growing Chinese influence in the country. They understood that foreign policy change in the form of adjustment was necessary for Myanmar to get back into the international community and to become politically and economically more developed. The president and his confidants, including those from the military, have actively engaged with the international community and participated in various international forums. It was this leadership that decided to take and hold ASEAN chairmanship.

4.1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) in Myanmar is organised into eight departments: (1) Minister's Office, (2) Political Department, (3) ASEAN Affairs Department, (4) Strategic Studies and Training Department, (5) Protocol Department, (6) International Organisations and

Economic Department, (7) Consular and Legal Affairs Department, and (8) Planning and Administrative Department. It has a total manpower of 2,161 people, including 629 officers. The role of MOFA is more to do with implementing foreign policy objectives. The USDP government opened two new embassies – Vienna and Oslo – and two new consulate-generals in Chiang Mai and Los Angeles, for a total of 35 embassies, three permanent missions and six consulate generals worldwide. The minister of foreign affairs, U Wunna Maung Lwin, is an ex-colonel from the Tatmadaw who served as the ambassador in Tel Aviv (1999–2001), Paris (2001–2004), and Geneva (2005–2011) before becoming the head of MOFA on 30 March 2011. Among his deputy ministers for foreign affairs, Maung Myint (30 March 2011 to 7 September 2012), Zin Yaw (29 August 2012 to 7 August 2013), and Tin Oo Lwin (13 August 2013–30 March 2016) were/are also from the military, while Dr. Myo Myint (30 March 2011 to 9 July 2012) and Thant Kyaw (29 August 2012–30 March 2016) were/are from civilian backgrounds. Thant Kyaw is the only career diplomat. While more and more career diplomats are being appointed as ambassadors under the UDSP government, military personnel still comprise the majority of ambassadorial position at Myanmar's embassies around the world.

As of 30 March 2016, out of 38 ambassadors, only ten are civilian career diplomats and the rest are from the military. Out of 23 newly appointed ambassadors during the USDP government, only nine are civilian career diplomats. While one might think that ambassadors are primarily there to implement the foreign policy objectives or maintain regular administrative duties concerning "representation, negotiation, and communication" with foreign governments, their views and assessments in the forms of reports and special notes are important feedback that can have a significant impact on the overall direction of Myanmar foreign policy. The fact that ambassadors with military backgrounds have gone through a long process of training at various military institutes, particularly at the Command and General Staff College and National Defence College, is noteworthy as their worldviews are more or less shaped by those security-related perspectives.

4.2 Foreign Affairs Policy Committee

The Foreign Affairs Policy Committee (FAPC) is a sub-cabinet level body to coordinate some issues related to Myanmar's foreign relations. The FAPC, founded on 30 October 1992, was to "constantly, extensively, and effectively implement Myanmar's independent and active foreign policy," but its role in shaping the foreign policy appeared to be rather

limited. In the past, it was chaired by "Secretary-1" of the SLORC/SPDC, the third-highest-ranking member of the government hierarchy or protocol. However, during the USDP government, the status of the FAPC has been considerably downgraded and is now chaired by the minister for foreign affairs. The FAPC, it is stated, discusses and coordinates policy matters related to foreign affairs, border affairs, aid and assistance from UN agencies, suppression of narcotics, policies on environmental affairs, human rights and disarmament, and editing speeches by ministers and other top-level leaders at the UN General Assembly and other international forums. The FAPC is also assigned to "analyse and submit reports on bilateral and multilateral treaties, agreements, and joint declarations to higher authorities." Issues tabled to discuss at the FAPC meetings include matters related to the establishment and closure of Myanmar's diplomatic missions. Under the FAPC, there is a subcommittee chaired by a deputy minister for foreign affairs.

However, the subcommittee plays a very limited role as it deals primarily with (1) the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations, (2) the appointment of Myanmar ambassadors, (3) the transfer of Myanmar ambassadors, (4) the joint accreditation of Myanmar ambassadors, (5) the payments of annual fees, membership fees, and reserve funds in foreign currency to a foreign country or any organisation, (6) visits of foreign VIPs and delegations, (7) foreign visits of the members of Union-level organisations – from the president down to the ministers, deputy ministers, chief ministers, and ministers of regions and states, (8) sending delegations overseas, and (9) other issues designated by the committee. In other words, the FAPC at present is more involved in administrative tasks than policymaking.

4.3 Hluttaw

The conventional wisdom in foreign policy analysis has assumed that the legislature or parliament of any given country has rarely influenced or challenged the government on foreign policy issues as it deals primarily with domestic issues, lacks expertise or competence in foreign affairs compared to the executive, and wants the country to project a unified front when facing external threats. However, recent studies, such as ones on Turkey and Denmark, have highlighted that, based on the composition and structure, parliament can certainly influence and shape the foreign policy of a state (Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010; Doeser 2011). Of course, parliament can form committees on various issues, including foreign affairs, to scrutinise the government's activities. The 2008 Constitution allows both houses of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly) –

Pyithu Hluttaw (People Assembly) and Amyothar Hluttaw (National Assembly) – with almost equal rights and power, the formation of Union-level committees, commissions, and bodies.[8] Four committees are specifically prescribed by the Constitution: (1) the Bill Committee, (2) the Public Accounts Committee, (3) the Hluttaw Rights Committee, and (4) the Government's Guarantees, Pledges, and Undertakings Vetting Committee. These four committees are known as "permanent committees." The Pyithu Hluttaw has 19 other committees and one commission. In the case of the Amyothar Hluttaw, in addition to four permanent committees, there are 12 "affairs" committees, two commissions, and one board. However, the Constitution, in articles 115(b) and 147(b), stipulates that

> when the occasion arises to have studies made and submitted on defence and security matters or military affairs, the [Pyithu/Amyotha] Hluttaw shall form the Defence and Security Committee with the [Pyithu/Amyotha] Hluttaw representatives who are the Defence Services Personnel, for a limited time, and if it is necessary suitable Hluttaw representatives who are not the personnel of Defence Services could be included.

8 In accordance with the 2008 Constitution, for the first time in 20 years, nationwide general elections were held on 7 November 2010 to constitute assemblies at both at the central and regional levels in Myanmar. At the central level, elections were held for both houses of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly): the Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Assembly) and the Amyothar Hluttaw (Nationalities Assembly). Since 25% of representation in both houses is reserved for the members of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces), elections were contested for 330 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw and 168 seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw, out of 440 and 224, respectively. Due to security reasons, only 325 constituencies for the Pyithu Hluttaw were contested. The USDP won 259 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw and 129 seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw, controlling 78.48% of contested seats or 58.86% of all the seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw and 76.79% of contested seats or 57.59% of all the seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw. When some representatives had to resign from their assembly seats to take up executive positions and Union-level bodies, such as chairman of the Union Election Commission, several vacancies opened up for the by-elections of April 2012. On 1 April 2012, 40 seats for the Pyithu Hluttaw and 6 seats for the Amyotha Hluttaw were contested, and the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won 37 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw and 4 seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw. Therefore, since the 2012 by-elections, the USDP has maintained 212 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw, controlling 64.24% of contested seats or 48.18% of the total seats in the house. In the Amyotha Hluttaw, with 124 seats, the USDP maintains 73.81% of contested seats or 55.36% of the total seats.

In the Pyithu Hluttaw, out of 19 non-permanent committees, the International Relations Committee is one of them. This 15-member committee is chaired by former ambassador U Hla Myint Oo, representative of the Pyimana constituency. The committee is supposed to help develop activities in regard to international relations, to follow independent and active foreign policy, to strive towards world peace and friendly relations among nations, to maintain peaceful coexistence among countries, and to help oversee the observance of the above-mentioned matters, along with submitting findings to the Hluttaw on the abolishment, amendment, and legislation of laws practised by various departments related to foreign relations.

In the Amyotha Hluttaw, there is an International Relations and Friendship and Cooperation among Legislatures affairs committee and a Strategic Studies and Research committee. The former is chaired by former ambassador U Nyunt Tin, a representative from No. 2 constituency of Yangon Region, and the latter by Brigadier General Kyaw Oo Lwin, representative from the Tatmadaw. However, no detail is available for the functions of these bodies. As in many other countries, the legislative assembly has a limited role in foreign policymaking and implementation. It is mostly to do with ratification of treaties and agreements. There has never been a formal hearing or debate on any foreign policy issue or issue related to Myanmar's international relations. The committees are mostly ceremonial.

4.4 National Defence and Security Council

The National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) is comprised of 11 members. The president chairs the council and the members are two vice presidents, the commander-in-chief, the deputy commander-in-chief, two speakers – one each of the both houses of the Union Assembly, the minister for defence, minister for foreign affairs, minister for home affairs, and minister for border affairs. In a sense, the commander-in-chief commands the majority of six in the committee, as he brings his deputy and nominates three ministers (defence, home affairs, and border affairs) and a vice president. In the event of any major political and security issue and in any state of emergency, the president needs to consult with and seek approval from the NDSC. Under the declaration of a state of emergency, if not all the members of the NDSC are able to attend the meeting, the president needs to consult with the commander-in-chief, the deputy commander-in-chief, and ministers for defence and home affairs before any announcement can be made. In a sense, the NDSC functions like a politburo. In the early days of the USDP government, the NDSC

met twice a week on a regular basis. However, these regular meetings were suspended when the conflict between the Hluttaw and the government developed. At one stage in 2014, the speaker of Pyithu Hluttaw called for an NDSC meeting to discuss some political issues. While no detail about the functions of the NDSC is publicly available, it is generally assumed by some observers that the council is the highest state body to discuss matters related to national security and foreign policy.

4.5 Tatmadaw

The Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) does not have any formal role in foreign policymaking. Yet, it is a lead institution in shaping Myanmar's foreign policy under the USDP government. Constitutionally, its responsibilities are mostly in the area of the nation's security and defence.[9] However, for both ideological and practical reasons, the Tatmadaw is an active player in foreign affairs. The praetorian ethos as the guardian of the state and internal security challenges in the form of various insurgencies encourage, if not dictate, the Tatmadaw to engage in various foreign policy issues. In addition, for instance, as it enjoys autonomy in the defence budget and there being no parliamentary oversight on the use of budget, arms procurement policy is solely controlled by the Tatmadaw leadership and it is perhaps an important factor in shaping Myanmar's foreign policy.

Since the Tatmadaw does not have any formal role in the foreign policy decision making, the NDSC is where it can exercise its influence. Of course the Tatmadaw also has its own multiple channels of information and intelligence gathering and its own research departments on various foreign policy issues. Defence attaché offices are sources of intelligence that feed the Tatmadaw leadership with information so it can take appropriate decisions and actions. The Tatmadaw has conducted both bilateral and multilateral defence diplomacies. Through arms procurement, naval port calls, exchange of high-level commander visits and

9 Article 20 of the 2008 Constitution stated: "(a) The Defence Services is the sole patriotic defence force which is strong, competent, and modern; (b) the Defence Services has the right to independently administer and adjudicate all affairs of the armed forces; (c) the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services is the Supreme Commander of all armed forces; (d) the Defence Services has the right to administer for participation of the entire people in Union security and defence; (e) the Defence Services is mainly responsible for safeguarding the non-disintegration of the Union, the non-disintegration of national solidarity and the perpetuation of sovereignty; and (f) the Defence Services is mainly responsible for safeguarding the Constitution."

so on, the Tatmadaw is active in Myanmar's international relations. It is safe to argue that Myanmar's policy towards neighbouring countries is primarily handled by the Tatmadaw. It was the Tatmadaw that organised and participated in various defence- or security-related seminars, forums, and conferences held under the auspices of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

5 Foreign Policy Strategy

How has the USDP government pursued its foreign policy principles, objectives, or goals? In term of foreign policy strategy, the USDP government has applied multilateralism, with a particular emphasis on regionalism, in the forms of regional cooperation and cooperative security arrangements, and on a reorientation of Myanmar's foreign relations in the context of strategic competitions among major powers.

For nearly 50 years, Myanmar has relied quite heavily on bilateralism and paid little attention to conference diplomacy or multilateral institutions in its foreign relations. However, since 2011 the USDP government has pursued its foreign policy principles and objectives through multilateralism in tandem with bilateralism. It is not that multilateralism has supplanted bilateralism as a dominant form of foreign relations, but that the USDP government has drawn more attention and interest in it. One of the first things that the USDP government under U Thein Sein decided to do was to chair ASEAN and hold the ASEAN Summit in 2014 and its related conferences as well as to organise a Southeast Asian Games in 2013. The USDP government appears to view ASEAN and its related institutions as appropriate venues though which Myanmar can reintegrate into the international community and also as cooperative security institutions to deal with great powers competition, if not to regulate great powers relations in the region.[10] In early May 2011, just one month after his administration started, Thein Sein requested that ASEAN allow Myanmar to host the summit. During its ASEAN chairmanship in 2014, Myanmar hosted 12 meetings of heads of state/government, including

10 During the ASEAN chairmanship, the Ministry of Defence organised a seminar on the South China Sea dispute in preparation for the upcoming summit and ARF meeting. The minister of defence, senior officers from the Office of the Commander-in-Chief, and senior officials from Ministry of Foreign Affairs participated. The present author was also invited, along with a presidential political adviser. The discussion centred on how to deal with great power competition in the South China Sea through a cooperative security framework under the auspices of the ARF.

two summits, 34 minister-level meetings, and 89 senior-official-level meetings: a total of 135 meetings (Po Sone Kyu 2015: 13). In the same period, Myanmar, together with other ASEAN countries, managed to issue 34 declarations, including the Nay Pyi Taw Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2015 Vision. The Tatmadaw also actively participated in this multilateral diplomacy by holding a number of conferences and seminars related to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The release of the *Myanmar Defence White Paper* (2015) in February 2016, after nearly 20 years of the country's participation in the ARF, is another indication of Myanmar's commitment to multilateralism and regional cooperative security as it encourages the publication of such document as part of confidence-building measures. While the document sets its tone on realist interpretations of international affairs, it nevertheless highlights the importance of ASEAN and the ARF in regional security (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015: 6).

Yet, to what extent the Myanmar government is convinced by either the constructivist notion of norms influencing or shaping the state's behaviour or the neoliberal assumption that institutions can mitigate raw struggles for power is difficult to know. It is also not so clear whether the Myanmar government holds the view that a regional institution can facilitate a regional balance of power, as in a realist interpretation. Nevertheless, the government took huge pride in the successful completion of its run as ASEAN chair. In addition to ASEAN, the government of Myanmar has actively participated in other regional institutions, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), and so on. Myanmar's participation in region-wide, multilateral military exercises, such as the International Fleet Review or Cobra Gold, was a marked departure from its past stance of strict non-participation in any regional military activities.

The other strategy is the reorientation of its foreign relations in the context of strategic competition among great powers. For approximately 20 years, the Myanmar government has relied on the diplomatic and economic support of China for its regime security. The USDP government is fully aware that there is a growing anti-China sentiment in Myanmar and it is also concerned about China's possible interference in Myanmar affairs. As it intends to reintegrate Myanmar into the international community, the USDP government understands that the success of this foreign policy objective depends on Myanmar's rapprochement with the United States, which requires both domestic political reforms and a foreign policy realignment – a need to reduce Myanmar's depend-

ence on China, particularly in the context of US–China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. The Myanmar government, therefore, has repositioned its foreign policy within a complex of relations among major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. Myanmar maintains delicately balanced relations with China, the United States, Russia, India, and Japan.

The USDP government is desperate to break free of prolonged international isolation and over-dependence on China, and to reduce China's presumed influence over and interference in Myanmar affairs. Myanmar's China policy shift, in terms of direction, is by no means to seek to be independent of China, but rather for there to be a mutual interdependence between the two countries. At the same time it is in the interest of the Myanmar government not to jeopardise its relations with its northern neighbour. The government is trying to ensure that the reintegration of Myanmar within the international community not necessarily be to China's disadvantage. It is in this context that the USDP government adjusted its policy toward China. While maintaining a stable relationship with China on the one hand, the Myanmar government has taken stands that do not necessarily please the Chinese government, such as suspending the construction of the Myitsone Dam, rejecting China's proposal to establish Confucius Institute in Yangon, and renegotiating the contract for the Latpadaung copper mine.

The Myanmar government has tried to find a way to have a rapprochement with the United States. As the United States is also interested in mending its relations with Myanmar, it has also made overtures regarding conditions for the rapprochement. As it has become increasingly concerned with the rise of China and its growing assertiveness in the region, the United States needs to cultivate good relations with other countries in the region. At the same time, the US government needed to reassess its sanctions policy towards Myanmar. The sanctions-based foreign policy of the US government towards Myanmar, which has been in place since the early 1990s, did considerable damage to ASEAN–US relations and the United States eventually realised that the policy failed to achieve its objectives. However, even to admit the failure of sanctions and to normalise diplomatic and economic relations with the Myanmar military regime could draw criticism from anti-regime activists and supporters of Myanmar's democracy movement, particularly in the US Congress. Unless there were to be significant changes in terms of governance, and subsequent endorsement by the icon of democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the US government could not go very far in its re-engagement with Myanmar. The USDP government appeared to understand the limitations of American re-engagement with Myanmar, and it was by

then more or less prepared to find an acceptable compromise. Both sides have keenly worked on the restoration of bilateral diplomatic relations. As a result, finally, the US government appointed an ambassador for the first time in 20 years. President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made historic visits to Myanmar to show their support for the Myanmar government's effort in the country's move towards democracy.

In the context of US–China strategic competition, it is important for the USDP government to cultivate cordial and close relations with Russia, India, and Japan. Myanmar's relations with Russia have been growing in recent years as Myanmar has procured Russian military hardware and sent a large number of students to study in Russian academic institutes. Likewise, the Myanmar government has maintained very friendly relations with India. Especially the military-to-military relations between the two countries have been going strong with reciprocal visits by senior commanders and port calls. Japan is another regional power that plays an important role in Myanmar. Myanmar's relations with Japan have tremendously improved under the USDP government. Besides debt relief totalling several billion US dollars, the Japanese government has financially supported the Myanmar government's peace process and efforts towards democratisation. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso of Japan visited Myanmar to promote bilateral relations and Japanese investment. President Thein Sein also paid state visits to Japan. One interesting aspect of Japan–Myanmar relations is the warming ties between the two defence forces. Several Myanmar military delegations led by senior commanders, including the commander-in-chief and the deputy commander-in-chief, visited Japan and established closer cooperation between the two militaries, which included sending military cadets to, or receiving cadets from, the Japanese Military Academy. Moreover, Japan Self Defence Forces (JSDF) provided training for underwater medicine and aviation meteorology for Myanmar military officers.

6 Conclusion

Myanmar foreign policy under the USDP government is historically consistent and there is certainly continuity with the past in terms of fundamental principles. Yet, what is significant is the constitutional reinstatement of the "non-aligned" aspect of foreign policy and setting a foreign policy objective of reintegrating Myanmar into international community. The central pillars of Myanmar's independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy under the USDP government are the avoid-

ance of both dependence on collective defence and reliance on collective security; the embrace of multilateralism on the basis of regional cooperation and cooperative security; and the maintenance of delicate balanced relations among major powers. Myanmar's conception of being "independent" is not simply a matter of preserving its status of sovereign independent state, which theoretically could be accomplished by different other means, but a manifestation of freedom of action based firmly on its own perception of what is right or wrong. The "activism" appears to connote its embrace of multilateralism with a particular emphasis on regional cooperation and cooperative security. This activism is not merely rhetoric but a reality as the USDP government has enthusiastically assumed a leadership role in chairing ASEAN and organizing important region-wide activities. The non-alignment is to ensure that Myanmar is nobody's ally but everyone's friend. The USDP government pays careful attention to this aspect as it wants to demonstrate that Myanmar is not a client state of China, as some countries view it. Without undermining its fundamental principles, the USDP government has adjusted its foreign policy orientation.

A new foreign policy objective does not conflict with nor replace the existing ones, but supplements them to make Myanmar foreign relations more active, dynamic, and international. The new foreign policy objective, in a sense, is not entirely new since the SLORC/SPDC government had tried to break the country's self-imposed isolation in the post-BSPP period but faced the externally imposed isolation. The government has attempted to change its foreign policy orientation from isolation/self-reliance to one non-aligned and diversification. However, it failed to fully realise this ambition. Throughout the SLORC/SPDC period, Myanmar has tried its best to maintain balanced relations with major powers within the constraints of West's imposed isolation. What signifies the new foreign policy objective of the USDP government is that it is official and, more importantly, that the government is making serious efforts to reintegrate Myanmar into the international community; therefore, in the context of the literature on foreign policy change, it is an adjustment. It is more to do with change in effort to make Myanmar foreign policy truly independent, active, and non-aligned. It is merely an adjustment within the context of fundamental principles of Myanmar foreign policy to cultivate friendly and balanced relations with all major powers active in the Indo-Pacific region. The change is mostly in terms of how the foreign policy is implemented and diplomacy is conducted.

The most important factor for the foreign policy adjustment is the Myanmar government's desire to reintegrate Myanmar into international

community. The USDP government had realised that Myanmar had become a pariah state, and was increasingly concerned about falling under China's shadow and the perceived growing Chinese influence in the country. With a declared objective of "greater integration with the international community by 2020," since its inception in 2011, the Myanmar government under President Thein Sein has pursued a foreign policy strategy that delicately balances the strategic interests of major powers in the country and primarily maintains friendly relations with countries both near and far. For the past five years, while maintaining a stable relationship with China, the Myanmar government has cultivated closer ties with the United States, Russia, India, and Japan, demonstrating an adjustment in its foreign relations from one of dependence on China to a more diversified and dynamic relationship with major powers. Another aspect of the foreign policy strategy is the reliance on multilateralism with an emphasis on regional cooperation or regional institutions. In this context, ASEAN has become a pillar in realising Myanmar's foreign-policy-related objectives.

The foreign policy adjustment under the USDP government is leadership-driven, and it appears that the president is a prime mover and the Tatmadaw is a lead institution. Coming to power through constitutional means and a formal electoral process, the USDP government and its leadership, now less concerned about its legitimacy deficit, appears to be far more confident in making foreign policy adjustments. Despite the change in political structure, from authoritarian exercise of executive, legislative, and judicial power singlehandedly by the military to a civilian government with checks and balances and a separation of powers among different institutions of the state, there is little impact on the foreign policy decision-making process, where the Tatmadaw is still a lead institution with significant influence. Both houses of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw have little influence on Myanmar foreign policy and their role in foreign relations is minimal, confined mostly to ratification of treaties, agreements, and appointments. The Tatmadaw was a very active player in shaping Myanmar foreign policy under the USDP government. Myanmar's relations with neighbouring countries, to a large extent, are managed by the Tatmadaw as they are closely related to national security. The Tatmadaw is also instrumental in maintaining delicately balanced relations among major powers as its procurement policy and military-to-military ties are key to the foreign policy adjustment.

As mentioned earlier, there are both ideological and practical reasons for this. Another possible explanation is that members of the Tatmadaw leadership, particularly the commander-in-chief and the depu-

ty commander-in-chief, enjoy a higher status than ministers in state protocol. While the commander-in-chief is equivalent to vice-presidential status, the deputy commander-in-chief is between vice-presidential and ministerial levels. Although the Tatmadaw is a lead institution, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also takes substantial responsibility in meaningful pursuance of foreign policy objectives through multilateralism and regional cooperation. It is the MOFA that has made Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship a success and provided more impetus for the USDP government to further embrace regional institutions and multilateralism in its conduct of foreign policy.

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