

The Motive Force and Game in Myanmar's Transition

Zhai Kun & Song Qingrun[†]

Myanmar's transition in the international community not only constitutes a unique landscape of post-Cold War international relations but also gives expression to the major trend of development of contemporary world politics. Since the turn of the century in particular, Myanmar has exhibited some positive changes corresponding to global and regional developmental trends while gathering strong momentum for transition. Major hallmark events include: first, after assuming power in 1992, Senior General Than Shwe basically achieved nation-wide peace after over 10 years of conflict; second, Myanmar joined the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 to become part of ASEAN integration process, managing to get rid of international isolationism; third, through launching the "Seven-Step Roadmap to Democracy" in 2003, the military government restarted general election in November 2010 since the 1990 failure to do so; and fourth, since taking office, the newly elected President U Thein Sein has initiated a comprehensive reform program, reaping remarkable achievements that have gained recognition from the international community, and the West in particular. Currently, President U

[†] Zhai Kun is currently the Professor of School of International Studies, Peking University. Before taking this position, he was Director of the Institute of World Politics, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. Song Qingrun is the Unit Chief of Bay of Bengal Unit, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. Gratitude should be extended to Liu Junhong, Director of the Center for Globalization Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, and Zhang Tian, graduate student at University of International Relations, for their contribution to the article.

Thein Sein is preparing to amend the Constitution for the upcoming 2015 general election.

I. MYANMAR LAUNCHED ITS THIRD ROUND OF EXPLORATION FOR DEVELOPMENT PATH

Since its independence, Myanmar has suffered failures in two rounds of exploration in its own developmental path. These failures have exposed contradictions between the superstructure and the economic/social base that have yet to be solved. Despite this, Myanmar's 2010 transition from military to democratic politics has witnessed remarkable progress in less than four years. Such a transition stands in stark contrast to the upheavals of the "Arab Spring" and the periodic political instability of its neighbor Thailand in the meantime, culminating into a unique political landscape in the post-financial crisis era. However, though transition can be solution to old contradictions, it can also be the wellspring of new ones. Within this context, Myanmar's third round of efforts for transition is faced with further complicated structural contradictions of its own development and contains the risk of turning into a new transitional dilemma.

1. The Long Start of the Transition

After independence, Myanmar adopted parliamentary democracy but in an unstable way, which contributed to its demise in 1962 through a coup led by General Ne Win. For 26 years, General Ne Win's military rule further aggravated both Myanmar's internal disturbance and external predicament, which eventually led to his stepping down in 1988. The new military government led by General Saw Maung took his place. Although the political party backed by the military lost the general election in 1990, the military refused to hand power over to the winning National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which resulted in large-scale international sanctions and further jeopardized Myanmar's path to development.

Senior General Than Shwe assumed power in 1992, he managed to stabilize the situation in Myanmar thanks to efforts made over

the years. Yet, General Shwe came to see that, although the military government could hold power for a long time, none of the top leaders of the military junta could have a good ending. Moreover, he also realized that the rule of military regime was running against the trends of world's political democratization, market economy globalization and especially ASEAN integration after the cold war; and stick to the old way would lead the country to poverty and national antagonism, and have itself more isolated in the international community.

Although “giving up privilege is much harder than addicts rehabilitation,”¹ it has to be overcome. Myanmar's practice of transition under the leadership of General Than Shwe can be generalized as: long-term preparation, cautious exploration, balanced advance and retreat, progressed in ups and downs and leaving some leeway. As for advances that has been made, Myanmar joined ASEAN in 1997 as an attempt to ease the increasing international sanction and isolation against it. In 2003, then Prime Minister Khin Nyunt put forward the “Seven-Step Roadmap” for Myanmar's democratization, which consists of: (1) reopening the National Assembly which had been discontinued since 1996; (2) convening the National Assembly to establish a genuine democratic system with full order; (3) drafting a new Constitution in accordance with the basic principles detailed by the National Assembly; (4) ratifying the newly drafted Constitution through national referendum; (5) holding a general election and setting up the parliament in accordance with the new Constitution; (6) opening new sessions of parliament with representatives elected under the new Constitution; and (7) electing national leaders through the Parliament before forming the Cabinet and power institutions that are essential in leading the country towards a new, developed and modernized democratic country.²

In terms of setbacks, Aung San Suu Kyi's political activities after her release from jail in 2002 triggered confrontations between the people and the government troops, eventually leading to her house arrest once again; in 2004, Than Shwe deposed Khin Nyunt, the then internationally popular prime minister, in an attempt to solve contradictions within military junta. In September 2007, the military

government suppressed the nationwide protests, worsening both the internal and external situation. In 2008, Myanmar suffered the rare disaster of Cyclone Nargis. Under this context, Than Shwe accelerated the pace of transition, and held the national referendum to ratify the Constitution in 2008. At the end of 2010, Myanmar held its first general election over 20 years, forming the federal and local parliaments which then elected new central and local governments, with ex-General U Thein Sein being elected the president. In March 2011, Than Shwe dissolved the military government, and U Thein Sein led the newly elected government to take the oath and assume the office. Most cabinet members were liberal-servicemen. Thura Shwe Mann, the Top Third of the former military government, became the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

By then, Myanmar had smoothly completed its transition of state power and progressed from military politics to democratic politics. Since the start of military rule in 1962 to U Thein Sein's election as the president in 2011, for almost 50 years Aung San Suu Kyi represented what might be called the symbolic freedom fighter for democracy, while Than Shwe was the wily mastermind. A veteran Chinese diplomat who once worked in Myanmar perceived after meeting with Than Shwe not only as a head of the military but also a leader who was exploring the path of Myanmar's transition all the time, boasting a noble sense of historical responsibility, ambition, political craft and dedication to Myanmar's transition.

(2) Rapid Transition Process

For a time, Western media doubted the military as just "ruling with changed costumes." However, during the past three-fifths of his term of office, U Thein Sein has launched "irreversible reforms." Centering around political reform, supporting reforms have unfolded in the economy, national reconciliation and foreign affairs at the same time, forging forward in giant strides and boasting remarkable achievements, without encountering any major interference while winning much positive comments from in the international community.

Thura Shwe Mann used to be regarded the chosen presidential candidate by Than Shwe, but finally was replaced by U Thein

Sein. The parliament and government led by the two respectively saw numerous conflicts, and both are competing to be leader and driving force of the reforms, and were therefore desired to reconcile with Aung San Suu Kyi in order to get more public support. Aung San Suu Kyi was by-elected as a member of the House of Representatives in April 2012 and got her public position legally for the first time. Soon afterwards, Myanmar's government, parliament, opposition and populace reached consensus on the issue of reform and quick start was made of overall reform, such as working for political reconciliation, improving human rights and releasing political prisoners, lifting bans over the media, easing racial tensions, implementing market-oriented economic reform and making efforts to improve the international environment. Myanmar has entered the freest period in the recent half a century, with its media coming to enjoy the worst freedom in Southeast Asia. The central government has reached cease-fire agreements with more than 10 locally armed forces of the ethnic minorities. Myanmar's economic growth in 2012~2013 fiscal year was 7.3%; it was expected to reach 7.5% in the 2013~2014 fiscal year.³ Asian Development Bank states that, with its abundant resources and driven by its reform, Myanmar has the potential to become Asia's rising star in economic development.⁴

As the 2015 general election is approaching, the momentum of Myanmar's reform, with amending the Constitution as the focal point, attracts much attention. The 2008 Constitution, issued by the former military government, gave much emphases to protecting the military's interests, restricted Aung San Suu Kyi from participating in the presidential elections and paid little attention to the interests of ethnic minorities and are therefore provoked nationwide disapproval. In February 2014, Myanmar formed a Constitution Amendment Committee based on consensus reached among the various parties to amend the Constitution, which focused on major clauses concerning the presidential qualifications, the political status of the military and the autonomy of the ethnic minorities. In fact, it is decentralizing the power of the military and the ruling party through a public and legitimate power rivalry.

Among the changes, the central piece is amending the clause that restricts Aung San Suu Kyi from participating in presidential

elections. The 2008 Constitution prohibits those whose spouse or children are foreign nationals from participating in the presidential election, and both Aung San Suu Kyi's late husband and two sons are British nationals. Some members of Myanmar's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) have suggested that amending the relevant clause to allow such a presidential candidate to participate in the presidential election if his/her children or spouse of foreign nationalities get Myanmar nationality as a possible solution. If the two sons of Aung San Suu Kyi adopt Myanmar nationality, she could then participate in the presidential election, but Aung San Suu Kyi's family refused to do so.⁵ U Thein Sein stated that the Constitution should not prevent any citizen from becoming the leader of the country.⁶ Derek Mitchell, American Ambassador to Myanmar, also stated that the Constitution should not exclude a particular person from presidential election.⁷ This means it is possible for Aung San Suu Kyi who rode high in public opinion both at home and abroad, to participate the election and then become the next president of Myanmar thus win state power from the military that have ruled the country for over half a century through amendment of the Constitution. However, at present it is still very difficult for the parliament to pass the Constitution amendment. This is because it needs more than 75% of the Union parliament members' support, while the vast majority parliament seats are occupied by ruling party and the military force. Therefore, the chances for Aung San Suu Kyi to become the next President will be slim.

(3) The Dilemma of On-going Transition

The late American scholar S. P. Huntington believed that the excessive fast pace of a country's political modernization would cause tumultuous changes in the interests of all social classes and result in concentrated burst of economic, social, political and national contradictions, thus destabilizing the country.⁸ Transition is both conducive to revolving old contradictions and causing new ones. The fast shift of state power will intertwine with new and old contradictions and make them collide. In the process in which Myanmar's military and ruling party rapidly lose power are hidden

with many uncertainties and risks that almost inevitably further intensify the structural contradictions in the transition. Before the transition, the main structural contradiction is expressed as the tensile force between the increasingly rigid rule of the military regime and the request for open and flexible social and economic development. During the transition, the structural contradictions tend to be more complicated; they include the adjustments and collisions of the new and old systems as well as the adjustments and collisions among various constituent elements of the new system — all of these can lead to a new transition dilemma.

First, the power struggle will turn fiercer. Although Myanmar has been making triumphant advances in political democratization, its Constitution, however, provides that the military plays a leading role in the country's political life and holds a status higher than that of the government, parliament and the elected President.⁹ If Aung San Suu Kyi was elected as president and the inexperienced NLD became the ruling party too soon, they both would find it very hard to control the nationwide situation. Egypt's case during the "Arab Spring" testifies this point sufficiently. If Aung San Suu Kyi loses her chance for the presidential election for failure in amending the Constitution and boycotts the general election, Myanmar would also again fall into political struggle. Once upheavals rise and the national situation goes out of control, the military would, in accordance with the Constitution, temporarily take over the state power at the request of the president.

Second, difficulties for reform are mounting. The political and economic reforms in Myanmar are designed by the Western countries and international organizations, including such elements as Western democratic system, and rebuilding of the banking, exchange rate, finance, accounting and legal systems. The experience of other countries have proved that such brand-new top-level design will not necessarily reap the desired results and it need time to be tested. Most high-ranking officials in Myanmar have military background; they do not have adequate capabilities in governance. The knowledge of functionaries at medium and low levels also falls short of the arduous demands of the reform. Above all, corruption runs rampant, making it almost impossible to press forward the

reform.¹⁰ Statistics released by Transparency International in 2013 showed that Myanmar's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked 157 out of 177 countries (the lower the rank the more serious the corruption).¹¹ Moreover, Myanmar has been isolated for a long time, higher education has long been neglected, and the education level of the general public is rather low. Many people perceive democracy simply as one person one vote, free demonstration and criticism of the government. No doubt, all this increases the government's difficulties in administration. Along with the implantation of the Western system of democracy, Myanmar has been witnessing the rapid rise of a civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which will accelerate its pace of political fragmentation and power loss.

Third, the social conflicts turn prominent. UN statistics show that in 2012 Myanmar's urban population accounted only for 33.2% of the country's total, with the agricultural population remaining the majority; the per-capita GDP in 2011 was US\$1,144,¹² far from reaching the international middle class standards. In recent years, Myanmar's gap between the wealthy and poor has kept expanding. According to available statistics, the wealth of the top 30 richest people in the country amounts to around US\$30 billion, accounting for over half of Myanmar's GDP in 2013. The common people shared much less of the reform's fruits. Mandalay, Naypyidaw and other major cities are rather well developed, but other regions are much backward. The average wage per month for an ordinary worker in Rangoon was around US\$100, much lower in other medium-sized and small towns and villages. Throughout the country, 75% of the population have no access to electricity and 26% are in dire poverty.¹³ The Buddhist societies, in general, can help ease the social tension. Yet, large numbers of monks were the first to take the street in the 2007 economic downturn.

Fourth, ethnic and religious contradictions are hard to ease. The Bamars, who form the majority in Myanmar's total population, have hold control of the central government and the major economic, land and mineral resources, the disputes between the central government and armed forces of the minority ethnic groups over distributing local autonomy rights, developing of science, education, culture

and medical care, allocating of economic and natural resources and reorganizing the military are hard to revolve, the conflicts have existed for a long time. The accumulated rancor between the Buddhists, who make up for the majority of the population, and the ethnic minority Muslims has been lasting for over 100 years, giving rise to a number of sanguinary conflicts in recent years, which once resulted in military control of Rakhine at a time.¹⁴

In general, it is highly possible for the rise of the problem in Myanmar that the development of social and economic infrastructure fails to keep pace with the rapid political reform. If political, economic and social transitions cannot be synchronized, coordinated and matched with one another, the existing structural contradictions are likely to be intensified, thus dragging Myanmar into a transition dilemma with defective democracy, economic stagnation and social unrest.

II. POSITIVE INFLUENCE OF ASEAN INTEGRATION OVER MYANMAR'S TRANSITION

Over a long period of time, the international community has overlooked the positive role played by the ASEAN over Myanmar's transition. The ASEAN has been often criticized by the Western countries for doing nothing on Myanmar and even gone so far as holding that the ASEAN has delayed the resolution of the Myanmar problem. In fact, prior to Myanmar's transition, the ASEAN had encouraged Myanmar, in a way that was acceptable to the latter, to take a path of democracy and ethnic reconciliation, guiding it to get involved in the regional integration process and cushion pressure from the West, and then to establish a "long-lasting and unique all-win model". In Myanmar's transition process, ASEAN and Myanmar will form a symbiotic relationship of interdependence that is conducive to ease Myanmar's transition dilemma.

(1) ASEAN Mainly Playing a Buffer and Guiding Role before Myanmar's Transition

After its establishment in 1967, ASEAN had invited Myanmar to join the organization on a number of occasions. But, Myanmar's

military junta had implemented a neutral nonalignment policy and refused the invitation. Moreover, it remained highly vigilant of the ASEAN's pro-US policy, which distanced Myanmar into further isolation. In the following 30 years, however, Myanmar found that it had been subject to an increasingly difficult internal and external situation. It was then it began to approach the ASEAN and took steps to become a member of it.

In 1997, the ASEAN accepted Myanmar's membership request in disregard of opposition from the United States and other Western countries, thus substantially alleviating Myanmar's isolation, promoting its integration with the ASEAN and playing a buffer and urging role in Myanmar's smooth transition. As the buffer between Myanmar and the West, the ASEAN adopted a tactic of constructive engagement. It not only urged Myanmar to adopt democratic reconciliation, but also criticized it at times. In 2006, it even pressed Myanmar to give up its status as the rotating chair of the ASEAN so as to ease the relations between the ASEAN and Western countries. ASEAN understood well that Myanmar needed time to transit and it was reluctant to see Myanmar to fall into civil strife because of accelerated transition. Besides, the ASEAN countries all had no confidence in Aung San Suu Kyi's capability of governing the country.

The buffer and guiding role played by the ASEAN appeared the most evident in 2007. In September 2007, Myanmar's military junta suppressed countryside demonstrations by force, triggering strong opposition from the United States and the European Union. The US and the EU strengthened their sanctions against Myanmar, in an attempt to overthrow the military rule. They asked the ASEAN to pressure Myanmar as well. At the time, there was also voice of "excluding Myanmar from ASEAN" inside the ASEAN. Yet, the ASEAN took a relatively balanced position. In addition, as Lee Hsien Loong, then prime minister of Singapore and the rotating chair of ASEAN, said, "Trying to isolate Myanmar's government through tough line or more sanctions is likely to be counter-productive." This is because ASEAN was concerned that too much external pressure might cause Myanmar to quit from the ASEAN Summit in November that year, while this summit was about to

authorize the ASEAN Charter, which would be the anchor of ASEAN's integration. Myanmar's absence would pose a major challenge to this Charter and even cause its abortion. Therefore, ASEAN tried its best to prevent the Myanmar issue from disrupting ASEAN's integration process, especially the ASEAN Charter and the establishment of the ASEAN Community. During the ASEAN Summit held in November 8-22, 2007 in Singapore, ASEAN released *ASEAN Chairman Statement on Myanmar* in particular, stating that the ASEAN leaders would respect Myanmar's will and make room for Myanmar to cooperate with the UN and the international community; the leaders would strive to prevent the Myanmar issue from obstructing ASEAN's integration efforts; Myanmar could not go back to its old way or stay where it was; the government must promote the process of national reconciliation, develop meaningful dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, lift restrictions on Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and address the economic difficulties faced by the people of Myanmar; the United Nations had been playing an important role in this process, and all the parties should make full use of the good "opportunity when UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his special envoy Ibrahim Gambari are helping Myanmar to realize nationwide reconciliation".¹⁵ Thereafter, Than Shwe accelerated the implementation of the "Seven-step Roadmap to Democracy", released the 2008 Constitution and actively prepared for the 2010 general election.

(2) ASEAN Primarily Playing a Supporting and Balancing Role During Myanmar's Transition

The outcome of Myanmar's 2010 general election got ASEAN's recognition, which elevated the legitimacy of Myanmar's democratization. U Thein Sein's reform shortly after also won ASEAN's support. Meanwhile, Myanmar has taken proactive steps to improve its status and image in the ASEAN. In 2013, Myanmar hosted the Southeast Asia Games, and in the next year, it formally took the rotating chair of the ASEAN.

Yet, ASEAN's support of Myanmar's transition has its deep geopolitical motivations.

First, promoting the integration of ASEAN. In January 2014, ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Myanmar. The representatives attending it reiterated unanimously that, due to the complicated regional political environment now, ASEAN members should keep united and safeguard ASEAN's central status so as to promote regional peace and stability. Under the goal of building the ASEAN Community, it is Myanmar's responsibility to perform well its duties and fulfill its obligations as the rotating chair to do a good job in organizing the ASEAN Summit to ensure the ASEAN's attainment of the goal of establishing the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015.

Second, balancing the geopolitical situation of ASEAN. Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand are the three major powers on Indo-China Peninsula. Their territories — Myanmar (677,000 square kilometers), Thailand (513,000 square kilometers) and Vietnam (332,000 square kilometers) — are next only to Indonesia, ranking the second, third and fourth among ASEAN countries, respectively. Their populations — Vietnam (almost 87 million), Thailand (almost 66 million) and Myanmar (about 49 million) — are second only to Indonesia and the Philippines, ranking the third, fourth and fifth respectively.¹⁶ Besides, the GDPs of Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar in the years from 2008 to 2012 ranked the second, sixth and seventh in Southeast Asia, respectively, and their ups and downs have been the principal driver of geopolitical changes in the Indo-China Peninsula. Myanmar was a major power in Southeast Asia at the time of its independence, but its status experienced a dramatic decline since the military junta took rule. Meanwhile, however, Thailand, as a longtime regional rival of Myanmar, turned out to be one of the founding nations of ASEAN and boasted a more advanced economy, enjoying a prominent status and playing influential role in the region, which reached the peak in the first five years of the 21st century (the time when Thaksin served as prime minister) before signs of decline surfaced due to domestic political struggles. When Thailand's status is declining, the strength of Vietnam has been growing vigorously thanks to its opening up and reform, making its position in the ASEAN increasingly outstanding. The rise of Vietnam's position have caused

suspensions from the old ASEAN members like Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, who then hoped to constrain Vietnam by roping in and supporting Myanmar. It is undeniable that Myanmar's "impressive turnaround" to a "democratic country" has produced certain impact on the democratization process of Vietnam and the Laos.

Third, upgrading ASEAN's strategy of balance between powers. Southeast Asia, connecting South Asia with Northeast Asia and linking up the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean, enjoys an important geopolitical status. As for Myanmar, it is a pivot that links the two major oceans and the two major powers of India and China. Along with the deepening of its transition, Myanmar will inevitably become an important geo-strategic pivot and a focal point in the competition of the major powers. For quite some time, the ASEAN has implemented a strategy of balance between major powers with aggregate strength of all its members, establishing a regional security and economic cooperation framework with itself at the core and becoming an important strategic force in the Asian-Pacific region. Thus, it is an ideal choice of the ASEAN to appropriately bring Myanmar into the regional integration and enhance the ASEAN's overall strength, so as to better implement the strategy of balance between the powers.

(3) Myanmar Takes Advantage of ASEAN Integration to Ease Its Transition Dilemma

The integration of the ASEAN will be conducive to Myanmar efforts to rid itself of the transition dilemma. Judging by the trend of development it is predicted that Myanmar will adopt more proactive and ambitious ASEAN policies to realize three major goals.

The first goal is to get a backing. Southeast Asian countries are complicated and diversified. Located in the "periphery zone" of the world system, though having gained political sovereignty and political independence, they did not necessarily hold control over their own economies and resources. Meanwhile, the territorial disputes and national and religious contradictions were hard to resolve while their international prestige remained low. It was

impossible for their paths of development to stay clear of the influence of the Cold War between and dominant ideologies of the United States and the Soviet Union, which gave birth to their modernization problems unique to such periphery zone.¹⁷ In view of the changes of world and regional situation, the ASEAN countries have explored a unique model of collective development, namely, the countries' modernization and the region's integration are inseparably connected and with the one providing motivation for the other. By relying on the backing of the ASEAN, Myanmar has managed, on the one hand, to enhance its risk resistance capability, and on the other, step up the development of market economy system, narrowing the gap between itself and other ASEAN member countries and obtain the latter's favorable policies in terms of human resources, capital and institutions by taking the opportunity of the establishment of the economic community in 2015, in addition to taking the advantage of the ASEAN's connectivity plan to attract the various major countries to invest in its infrastructure building, human resources training and institutional development.

The second goal is borrowing experience. Myanmar was intended to learn lessons from the experience of other ASEAN member countries in transition to steer clear of unnecessary risks and build up advantages as a latecomer. For instance, Thailand was a country to establish democracy earlier in Southeast Asia. Yet, after the arrival of the 21st century, contradictions among the various social strata turned increasingly outstanding and the conflicts between the new privileged classes represented by Thaksin and the military, the king and other traditional classes became increasingly fierce, plunging the country into a vicious circle of political struggle. Another example is Indonesia, which, after over three decades of authoritarian rule under Suharto, achieved political democratization in 1998 and became one of the largest democracies in the world. It also solved the secession problem of the Acehnese, the power of the military was held to check to some extent and a market economy also developed quite well. Nevertheless, corruption remains rampant, terrorist extremism is rising, and the risks are increasing for the country as an emerging economy.

The third goal is expanding experience in handling international affairs. Myanmar is rather inexperienced in the handling of regional and international affairs. Thus, the ASEAN-centered regional cooperation framework is, no doubt, an ideal platform for it. For instance, Myanmar can get itself integrated into the regional economic cooperation by taking advantage of the various regional economic cooperation mechanisms, such as the multilateralism of the Chiang Mai Initiative, the rice reserve program, and the negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). It can also draw support from the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) to strengthen strategic dialogue and security cooperation in the region, especially cooperation in non-traditional security areas. There is possibility that Myanmar joins the Mekong River Commission and then the US Mississippi River — Mekong River Cooperation Plan. Therefore, taking the rotating chair of ASEAN in 2014 is of great importance for Myanmar's transition.

III. COMPLICATED IMPACT OF MAJOR POWER GAMES OVER MYANMAR'S TRANSITION

The strategic game among major powers over Myanmar will influence Myanmar's transition process directly in both positive and negative ways. When the military ruled, the Myanmar policies of the major powers conflicted against each other, in which China enjoyed obvious strategic advantages. After the start of the transition, Myanmar has been continuously improving its relations with the West, adopting a strategy of balance between the powers featuring "pro-West and estranging China", and gradually giving rise to a situation in which the West dominates Myanmar's transition. However, such competition among the major powers is of no help for Myanmar to mitigate its transition dilemma. Only by developing positive relations with all the major powers in a balanced way and forging itself into an open and cooperative geopolitical pivot, can Myanmar possibly draw help from the major powers other than being contained by their competing influences.

(1) China Established Certain Strategic Advantages before the Transition

Since the military started to rule Myanmar in 1962, and especially after the military refused to cede power in 1988, the major powers' policies toward Myanmar have become opposed to each other. China has been making continuous efforts to support Myanmar's stability and encourage the military junta to conform with the historical trend of the times and carry out reform and opening up. The US and the EU, however, have been pressuring and coercing the military regime of Myanmar by means of sanctions, trying to force it to cede power to Aung San Suu Kyi. As a democratic country, India has now followed the Western countries to impose sanctions against Myanmar. On the contrary, it maintained a close relationship with Myanmar and adopted rather flexible policies. Japan formerly had had a close relationship with Myanmar, but was forced to suspend its aid and imposed sanctions under the pressure from the US and the EU. After Myanmar's military government suppressing the nationwide protests in 2007, the US initiated a proposal to punish Myanmar in the United Nations. Although the vetoes of China and Russia saved Myanmar from an international crisis, it exacerbated the confrontation between the West and the East.

What deserves attention is that this event has projects major effects in two aspects. The first is that China strengthened its push for Myanmar's transition. After the event, under the mediation of the then Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Myanmar agreed to let the special envoy of the United Nations on Myanmar issue to visit Myanmar. Meanwhile, China clarified its relevant position: "The Chinese side on its part reaffirmed its position on Myanmar: China supports the efforts made by the Myanmar government and people to achieve political reconciliation and improve their people's livelihood. The Chinese side hopes that Myanmar would be able to resolve the pending issues through consultations so as to speed up the democratization process. China will continue to support the mediation efforts of United Nations Secretary-General and his Special Adviser, and hopes that the international community will provide positive and constructive assistance to Myanmar in accordance with the norms of international relations. China

sincerely hopes that political stability, economic development and lasting tranquility would be achieved in Myanmar at an early date.”¹⁸ According to US media report, China helped to bring about a negotiation between the US and Myanmar senior officials on Myanmar’s human rights issues in Beijing in October 2009, and the US expressed its concern on Myanmar’s reactions as well.¹⁹ This event shows that, through its friendly relations with Myanmar, China has directly aided the United Nations’ mediation efforts; that China does not just seek narrow-minded economic and strategic interests in these mutual relations, not to say brutally imposing pressure and forcing others to do what is beyond their capabilities like some major powers of the West; that China prefers to use some delicate tactics to promote conciliation on the one hand, and encourage Myanmar’s political dialogue and democratization on the other.²⁰ This event also shows that, although the major powers’ stands toward the military regime were in conflict with each other, they had the same goal of promoting Myanmar’s transition. Therefore, views criticizing that China was the backer patron of Myanmar’s military government and it intended to delay Myanmar’s transition did not accord with reality. What is more precise is that China has supported political leaders in Myanmar to reform and take the path of transition.

The other is that Myanmar and other major powers have come to realize that they must cope with the further expansion of China’s influence over Myanmar. The prolonged sanction by the West against Myanmar had facilitated the advantageous position of China’s Myanmar policy. The overall investment of China (including Hong Kong and Macao) in Myanmar has exceeded US\$20 billion,²¹ exceeding Myanmar’s GDP. The 2008 international financial crisis has further enhanced the impression of outside world on “China’s excessive influence over Myanmar”. In fact, in the later part of his term of office, G. W. Bush, then president of the United States, took steps to strengthen the Myanmar policy of the United States. Then First Lady Laura Bush was keener on the issue and was involved in person. After taking office, the US new President B. Obama further reinforced the Myanmar’s policy: integrating Myanmar’s democratization into his “pivot to Asia”

strategy, appointing special envoy to Myanmar, putting pressure on the military government, supporting Aung San Suu Kyi and non-governmental organizations, influencing the 2010 general election and promoting the “irreversibility” of U Thein Sein’s reforms.²² In 2009, Myanmar’s government forces conquered the encampment of Kokang group — armed force of ethnic minority with relatively weak strength in northern Myanmar, and directly impacted the security of China-Myanmar border. This reveals to other countries the differences and contradictions in the “relative” relationship between China and Myanmar.

Generally speaking, China’s moderate policy has been conducive to the steady progress of Myanmar’s reform, and the West’s radical policy has forced Myanmar’s military regime to accelerate the transition; their differences gradually produced the effect of “thesis-antithesis-synthesis.” However, in the switch, the positions of China and the West have gradually reversed in terms of strategic advantage.

(2) The West Gains Strategic Advantage in Myanmar’s Transition

In the early days of U Thein Sein’s administration, the West’s Myanmar policy still focused on exerting pressure, trying hard to forge a “democratic model” based on Western standards through a “non-war, no-bloodshed” way. The US adopted the policy of “action-to-action,” which requested Myanmar to release political prisoners, solve ethnic and religious conflicts and improve human rights, before gradually lifting sanctions, increasing aid and developing economic relations in view of Myanmar’s “performance”.²³ Yet, the speed and scope of the reform led by U Thein Sein far exceeded the West’s expectations. As U Thein Sein built up the image of “president of reform”, the West and international organizations began to shower praises on Myanmar’s reform, before gradually abandoning the policies of political isolation, economic sanction and suspending aid. Breakthroughs have been witnessed in the relations between the two sides.

On the part of Myanmar, it has become more willingly to accept the aids and investments of the West and India so as to get rid of its

over-reliance on China. Western aids have been primarily used in projects to enhance Myanmar's democratic ability and improve the living standards and quality of the people. On November 19, 2011, Obama's "historical visit to Myanmar" made him the first American president to visit Myanmar during his tenure of office. He praised the achievements of Myanmar's reform and promised to provide US\$170 million of aid to support it.²⁴ In 2013, the United States increased an additional aid of over US\$100 million to Myanmar. In the 2014 State of the Union Address, President Obama specially mentioned that the democratic reform of Myanmar was a diplomatic achievement of the United States.²⁵ British Prime Minister Cameron, German President Gauck and other European political celebrities visited Myanmar in succession, expressing support for Myanmar's reform. In April 2013, the EU took the lead in lifting economic sanctions against Myanmar and opened its markets to Myanmar's enterprises, in addition to implementing aid plans worth over US\$1 billion in total.²⁶

In early 2014, Germany declared to free Myanmar from 500 million of debt.²⁷ After the Abe cabinet was formed in Japan, the Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Aso and Prime Minister Abe visited Myanmar in 2013 one after the other. From 2012 to early 2014, Japan relived over US\$5.1 billion of debt and provided aid of various kinds for over US\$1 billion to Myanmar, ranking as the largest donor of aid to Myanmar.²⁸ Besides, Japan is also planning to invest several billion dollars to build Myanmar's Thilawa Special Economic Zone.²⁹ In May 2012, during his visit to Myanmar, Indian Prime Minister Singh signed a document, agreeing to provide Myanmar with a loan of US\$500 million.³⁰

The international organizations relieved debts over Myanmar in succession and resumed aid. In January 2013, Myanmar hosted the Conference on International Support, and the "Paris Club" formed by developed countries remitted almost US\$6 billion of debts over Myanmar (of which, Japan had the lion's share), which accounted for 60% of Myanmar's foreign debts.³¹ In the same month, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) provided a low-interest loan of US\$512 million to Myanmar, its first resumption of loaning to Myanmar since 1986.³² The World Bank, which had sanctioned

Myanmar for over 20 years, has planned to implement a multi-year development program in Myanmar in 2014 and invest US\$2 billion in Myanmar's infrastructure and people's livelihood projects.³³ For a moment, there emerged a trend of investigating and investing in Myanmar among the international enterprises.³⁴

Meanwhile, countries like the United States, Japan and India all take Myanmar as a leverage to constrain China's "Bi-oceanic (Pacific and Indian Oceans) Strategy", and push out China's influence in Myanmar and the surrounding region. Japan's game with China on the Indo-China Peninsula has manifested itself in taking over Myanmar's foreign debts, devising Myanmar's economic development strategy and competing with China on major electric power, railway and economic development zones projects. Western media and some nongovernmental organizations have long been emphasizing the negative effects of China's investment to the local society, economy and ecology, and instigating the people of Myanmar to protest Chinese projects. The typical examples include putting on hold the construction of the Myitsone Dam and forcing the Letpadaung Copper Mine to stop operation. This trend has led to a rapid decrease of China's investment in Myanmar over the past three years. The investment, which was over US\$10 billion in 2010, has dropped abruptly to US\$310 million in 2013.³⁵ Many Chinese companies are being forced to back out from Myanmar.

Myanmar's diplomatic strategy has adjusted to "pro-West and estranging China." This is partly because the Myanmar government was eager to win the West's recognition and integrate into the mainstream of the international community, partly because Myanmar's public's negative sentiments toward China. Therefore, with Myanmar's 2010 general election as the watershed, the situation of major power game in Myanmar's transition is reversed. China has failed to maintain its previous upper-hand position to gradually turn to the defensive, while the United States, Japan, the European Union and India have got the head start and become offensive, playing the main role in Myanmar's transition.

(3) Myanmar's Transition Calls for Benignly Interactive Relations among Major Powers

The progress of Myanmar's transition will suffer if it continues its "pro-West and estranging China" policy. On the contrary, it will be able to create a favorable environment for its transition if it improves its relations with China and implement a policy of balance among the major powers while recurring to support of the major Western powers. It cannot keep the initiative of its transition, the sustainability of its economic development, social stability and the formation of geo-advantage not only by relying on West. It also needs the support and understanding from China.

From the perspective of geo-strategy, the best path for Myanmar's development is to rely on its geo-advantages to become a strategic pivot and gateway to connect the two great oceans and the major powers. A Myanmar that blocks China's way to the south can only turn into a bridgehead and geo-trap of the West to confront China, while a Myanmar that only mediates the strategic interests of major powers in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean can reap true benefits from its geo-advantages. For now, China is also reflecting on its Myanmar policy. Some scholars at home generally believe that China has pushed forward Myanmar's transition, but at the cost of weakening its strategic interests. This situation triggered the debate about "whether China has lost Myanmar?" However, China's Myanmar strategy has neither been significantly adjusted, nor has China adopted retaliatory measures against Myanmar; it has not shown any strategic intention to compete with the United States, Japan and India in Myanmar. In 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang put forward the initiative of Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and President Xi Jinping advanced such initiatives as the Maritime Silk Road. All these initiatives are open and cooperative, besides being conducive to bringing into full play Myanmar's geo-advantages and its pivot role in connecting the strategic interests of the major powers in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

From the perspective of political stability, President Obama has removed most of administrative orders on imposing sanctions on Myanmar, the US Congress, however, has not removed the

numerous bills on sanctions, especially which on arms embargo, but kept urging the Myanmar military to pace up power transition. If Aung San Suu Kyi rises to power, the original power structure would collapse more quickly and pressure on the current and future governments of Myanmar would increase, weakening their power in making decisions. However, if the military gradually backs out, the pressure on the armed organizations of ethnic minorities in northern Myanmar which borders China would be reduced and the secession of the nation would continue, strengthening both sides' on China. After Crimea's referendum decided to join Russia in March 2014, the Western media has sensationalized that China might follow Russia's example and instigate United Wa State Party, the largest ethnic minority armed force in northern Myanmar, to secede the Wa state from Myanmar and have it merged with Chinese territory.³⁶ Such action of discord sowing is apparently not in line with China's policy of noninterference; yet it might serve as an inspiration to the ethnic armed forces that share blood relationship with China.

From the perspective of economic development, Myanmar's GDP accounted for only 0.2% of Asia's total, according the 2013 research report by Mckinsey Global Institute. To achieve its modernization goal by 2030, its aggregate GDP has to be doubled, redoubled and even quadrupled and its per-capita GDP has to be increased by significant margins. Although Myanmar boasts great potential, it is a great challenge to turn the potential into real development. In the coming 16 years, it is necessary for Myanmar to create 10 million jobs in the non-agricultural sectors; to drastically increase investment in and promote the development of seven major sectors, i.e., manufacturing, agriculture, infrastructure, energy (mining), tourism, financial service and telecommunication; to attain a leapfrog development by relying on digital economy, restructure both the public and private sectors, vigorously promote urbanization and establish an economic system that is connected with the global network. Myanmar needs investments totaling US\$650 billion, and the infrastructure building alone calls for US\$320 billion.³⁷ The Western countries are generally in financial difficulties, though a large number of Western enterprises are

interested in investigating in Myanmar, real investors are few; the investment environment of Myanmar has not yet up to the requirement for large-scale investment. On the part of China, it has rich experience and grave lessons in making investment in Myanmar. China should be one of the most important FDI providers for Myanmar with continuous efforts being made in regularizing, adjusting and optimizing ways of investment.

The year 2014 is crucial in the continuous adjustment and formation of Myanmar's diplomatic strategy. Leaders of the major powers will meet in Myanmar for the East Asia Summit. Myanmar will also hold activities to mark the 60th anniversary of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence." All these are the best opportunities for Myanmar, with an open and inclusive mentality, to coordinate the positive interactions among the major powers, facilitate its orderly transition and advocate for the new-type international politics in the 21st century.

After long yearly of discussion, experiencing twists and turns and balancing backward and forward moves, Myanmar started its transition from military rule to democracy. This is a historical progress. Myanmar's own pursuit for democracy development is the main motive power driving its transition, while joining the ASEAN integration movement and acting force from the major powers' influence over its transition are the two supplementary forces at the regional and institutional levels. These three forces have intertwined with one another, playing different roles at different stages before eventually turning into a historic synergy pushing forward Myanmar's transition. The key for Myanmar's smooth transition lies in the Myanmar government's ability to control and coordinate the three forces to rid of the country's transition dilemma, i.e., solving the structural contradiction between the political superstructure on the one hand and the economic and social base on the other. This contradiction was manifested as economic and social contradictions that were made ever the worse by the strengthening of military rule prior to the transition, and during the transition it turns into an issue whether the economic and social development can keep pace with the rapid democratization.

The year 2014 is essential in Myanmar's transition. It is in this year that Myanmar has strived to steadily promote the amendment of its Constitution to make preparation for general election; it is also in this year for Myanmar to take advantage of its turn to take the ASEAN rotating chair to promote the regional integration strategy that favors its transition, and it is also in this year to see whether Myanmar can help turn the increasingly intensifying strategic contest among the major powers in Myanmar into benign competition which is conducive to its own transition. All this will ultimately determine the success or failure of Myanmar's transition.

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