

PERSPECTIVE

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Myanmar's Foreign Policy in an Election Year

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Foreign policy has not been a key issue for voters in the past three elections in Myanmar.
- However, the 2020 elections present an opportunity for the ruling National League for Democracy to incorporate foreign policy issues into its election campaign.
- This opportunity arises because Myanmar's performance legitimacy has international dimensions that are inextricably linked to its domestic exigencies.
- Myanmar's foreign policy in 2020 and beyond will be scrutinised through the lens of the Rohingya issue and the government's response to COVID-19.
- The challenge for the Myanmar government is to find balances between domestic views and international perceptions of what constitutes a constructive and inclusive response to the Rohingya issue and to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

The performance legitimacy of Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) government will come under scrutiny – domestically and internationally – in elections currently planned for late 2020. This paper considers whether the current global context and Myanmar's domestic conditions present an opportunity for the NLD government to link foreign policy considerations to its election campaign.

Why should foreign policy matter in Myanmar's election year? Most performance legitimacy questions have been and will continue to be about domestic priorities and issues rather than foreign policy performance. Domestic concerns, especially those related to livelihood and income, will no doubt continue to dominate public perceptions and reactions to electoral platforms and campaign promises. While attention will be mainly on the post-pandemic economic recovery plans and the ongoing debate over previous campaign promises such as constitutional amendment and the "21st Century Panglong" peace process with ethnic armed groups, discussion is less likely to dwell on the external implications of these domestic issues. Foreign policy – which has remained a constant element in the changes that Burma in the past and Myanmar today have experienced – rarely features as a significant campaign topic. To be sure, past sanctions under the military government and the more recent appearances of State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi abroad have given the Myanmar public an understanding of the external dimension of internal tensions. Still, the electorate at large has little interest in matters of foreign policy, which seem far removed from the daily concerns of people in a country adjusting to a "triple transition".¹

In 2020, however, the adage that foreign policy is a reflection of domestic priorities should resonate in Myanmar. This is because foreign policy actions or decisions are now refracted through two threats to "national security": the internal and external implications of Rohingya repatriation, and the impact of COVID-19 on the country's political, economic, and social health.

These challenges – one with domestic origins, and the other an "imported" infection – have revealed internal weaknesses, and these have external implications. Cliché though the thought may sound, the crises also offer Myanmar an opportunity to improve its current narrative, if it can rise to the challenge. Some steps are being taken to this end, most visibly in the COVID-19 response. At the same time, the decades-long armed conflict between Myanmar's armed forces and several ethnic armed groups has seen a new entrant in the form of the ethnic Rakhine Arakan Army. This group, which the government declared a terrorist group on March 23, seeks a separate status for Rakhine State.

When the global urgency to tackle the pandemic and mitigate its aftermath is over, attention will once again return to the Rohingya issue. In fact, amidst updates on infection numbers and concerns, news reports have emerged of Rohingya stranded at sea and being refused entry into some Southeast Asian countries.² In the meantime, COVID-19 has now reached the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, sparking concerns about the pandemic's spread among Rohingya in those camps.³ This development would also affect concerns over repatriation.

Considerably more needs to be done to develop a constructive narrative if Myanmar is to counter – with as much grace it can muster – its current credibility deficit.

THE CONTEXT

Domestic sentiments on whether Rohingya are entitled to Myanmar citizenship are uneven at best, while sentiments across the major ethnic groups recognised in Myanmar's constitution seem to be strongly against including Rohingya in the country's ethnic make-up. Complexities of colonial legacies aside, the entrenched notion of "the other" in Myanmar has constrained the already narrow room for manoeuvre for Myanmar's leaders and top diplomats to explain the situation to external interlocutors. The prominence of the proceedings in late 2019 at the International Court of Justice over whether military operations in northern Rakhine State in 2017 constituted genocide will also influence international perceptions of Myanmar and how the wider international community engages with the Myanmar government.

The COVID-19 pandemic that spread in an unprecedented manner across the globe in March 2020 has added to Myanmar's challenges. Caught by the same inertia manifested in several developed economies across the globe, Myanmar's COVID-19 response preparations were only galvanised into full-scale mitigation with the first positive cases confirmed in late March.

The NLD government faces a multi-fold communication and coordination challenges with COVID-19: allaying the concerns of an increasingly alarmed population as it reacts to every report of infections and deaths at home and globally, seeking domestic and external partnerships to secure testing equipment and to meet other needs in its effort to respond, deciding on the extent and duration of border closures, and all the while preparing and enforcing quarantine and lockdown measures amidst a constant feedback loop from netizens on Facebook. This challenge prompted Aung San Suu Kyi to (finally) establish a social media presence, primarily to communicate with citizens over COVID-19 challenges and concerns. Her video-conferences with various experts and stakeholders in Myanmar's administrative regions, live-streamed on her Facebook page, have had the added effect of becoming needs assessment evaluations. At the same time, the NLD government's economic-policy planners worked on a COVID-19 Economic Response Plan (CERP). Issued on April 27, the plan outlines policy measures in six priority areas for "flattening the curve without flattening the economy". CERP priorities include easing the economic burden that workers, individuals, and households face, and strengthening the healthcare system and the country's macroeconomic fundamentals. The CERP's architects have indicated that it is a "living document", to be "revised constantly as circumstances and events demand".⁴ In the meantime, the current version of the plan will become a key reference document in Myanmar's economic diplomacy, a front that seems to provide more room for manoeuvre.

FOREIGN POLICY PAST AND PRESENT

In Myanmar's recent past, the focus of election platforms and promises has been on "change" in different forms. Maintaining an independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy has remained a constant amidst aspirations for change. The NLD government further nuanced this in September 2016 with an emphasis on bringing a people-centred focus to its diplomacy. Long-time analysts of Myanmar's foreign policy have observed that, though this emphasis is not a departure from the independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy

that Myanmar has consistently maintained, the NLD's nuance offers potential for pursuing multi-track diplomacy, focusing on "people-to-people contacts and multilateralism".⁵ In her own words, speaking in her capacity as Myanmar's foreign minister, however, Aung San Suu Kyi qualified this people-centred approach as above all a deliverable by Myanmar's foreign ministry. It was to reach out to Myanmar nationals abroad, without discrimination, to invite their participation in and contributions to the recovery of Myanmar's international image and dignity (and credibility).⁶

This move constituted something of a departure from Myanmar's past diplomatic practice, which had not linked its consular services for, and communications with, Myanmar nationals abroad to the country's public diplomacy initiatives.⁷ It was also a canny move, as votes from overseas Myanmar citizens helped to decide elections in favour of the NLD in 1990 and 2015.

The 1990 elections were the first multi-party elections held in a relatively free manner under military rule. The democracy movement of 1988 – quelled by a military coup – had stoked the desire for change away from a one-party-dominant state. The military junta's promise to hand back power to an elected government was put to the test in 1990, when the NLD, led by the then face of Myanmar's democracy movement Aung San Suu Kyi (under house arrest at the time of the polls), won a landslide victory. The popular euphoria over its victory did not last long, however. A sense of betrayal and mistrust set in after the military insisted on its earlier proviso that the elected representatives – together with ethnic and other stakeholders – participate first in a constitutional convention before a transfer of power could take place.⁸ Paradoxically, the military regime turned to foreign policy to seek a legitimacy it never really gained, by attempts to expand external economic relations and negotiating or countering sanctions imposed by the West through shoring up bilateral relations across Asia. It paid particular attention to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which Myanmar joined in 1997. These foreign policy moves, undertaken in the name of regime security, also and perhaps inevitably pushed Myanmar further into China's expanding geopolitical orbit.

The NLD boycotted the 2010 elections, held under a military-drafted constitution rammed through a referendum in 2008 at a time when the country's rice-bowl delta was reeling from a devastating cyclone. Again, foreign policy came to the fore in the form of disaster diplomacy. ASEAN's coordinating role in Myanmar's disaster and humanitarian response persuaded the generals to open up an operating space for the international humanitarian community, and gave Myanmar government officials an opportunity to learn new ways of building capacity for change.

The foreign policy imperative of being recognised for efforts to "change" also prompted the military regime to adopt its seven-step roadmap to democracy. An unexpected part of that roadmap was the decision to lift Aung San Suu Kyi's on-again, off-again house arrest days after the November 2010 polls. Another unexpected outcome soon followed. The military-backed, quasi-civilian government that took office in early 2011 introduced a process of political and economic transformation that took the world by surprise. It also asserted a new way of dealing with China, by emphasising interdependence rather than dependence.⁹ This laid the groundwork for the 2015 elections, in which the NLD once again won a landslide victory. Aung San Suu Kyi became the face of the ruling party that formed Myanmar's first democratically elected government in more than half a century. Her first pronouncement on

foreign policy in the afterglow of the 2015 elections indicated an intention not to change but rather to continue with a policy that had worked well for the country. The later nuance, framed as a people-centred diplomacy, indicated an interest to engage with neighbours and external partners on human security issues such as labour migration, and to promote more people-to-people contacts and exchanges. This signalled a Myanmar ready to come out of its cocoon and engage the world. The honeymoon period was brief; the disproportionate military operations in response to attacks by an armed group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in 2016, and particularly 2017, brought Myanmar under international scrutiny and ultimately to a position of having to “defend national interest” at the International Court of Justice by the end of 2019.

Considering Myanmar’s foreign policy performance in an election year invites the question of how the NLD government’s people-centred approach will fare in 2020 and beyond, in view of the Rohingya repatriation issue and continuing the COVID-19 response.

PERCEPTIONS, PARTNERS AND PERFORMANCE

Myanmar’s relations with the United States and the European Union members are now centred around human security issues that focus largely on the resolution of the Rohingya issue and to a lesser degree the continuing civilian displacements resulting from ongoing armed clashes between Myanmar’s military and various ethnic armed groups. This interpretation of human security resonates differently with the Myanmar policy elite. Myanmar respondents to the 2020 State of Southeast Asia survey conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, drawn from that elite, ranked domestic political instability including ethnic and religious tensions, the global economic downturn, and terrorism as top security concerns for the region. Their views reflect Myanmar’s internal concerns over the stalled peace talks and the ongoing armed clashes with the Arakan Army in Rakhine and southern Chin States. The clashes with that latter group have added to existing tensions in Rakhine State, and in other armed conflict areas in Kachin and Shan States.¹⁰ Conditions in these conflict areas, especially those that either border China or are sites of current or planned infrastructure investment projects under China’s Belt and Road Initiative, inform and influence how China and Japan will flex their foreign policy muscles in bilateral relations – including economic relations – with Myanmar.

Myanmar’s pragmatic focus on economic and political survival may not extend towards India, even though the Myanmar policy elite view India favourably as a partner.¹¹ Domestic concerns distract both Naypyitaw and New Delhi from translating bilateral dialogue into more concrete projects. At the same time, Naypyitaw is watching how anti-Islamic rhetoric in India may be picked up by ultra-nationalist groups in Myanmar, and how that may affect both election rhetoric and sentiments. No Muslim candidates were put forward by either the NLD or its principal opponent the USDP in the 2015 elections, nor did Muslim political parties gain any significant portion of the votes that year.

On the ASEAN front, the importance of an inclusive and constructive narrative in Myanmar’s reports to ASEAN counterparts has become more evident in discussions on regional priorities and national responsibilities in the context of migration and trafficking. The Rakhine State/Rohingya issue continues to define international perceptions of ASEAN’s credibility vis-à-vis Myanmar, and, in varying degrees, Myanmar’s bilateral

relations with ASEAN member states. Myanmar started engaging ASEAN constructively on the Rohingya issue in 2016, and it has chosen to go with ASEAN and the ASEAN way in coordinating various aspects of the projected repatriation.

Southeast Asian policy elites' view of ASEAN's handling of the Rohingya issue is split almost down the middle between approval and dissatisfaction. The prevailing preference is for ASEAN either to mediate between the government and communities concerned, or step up diplomatic pressure on Myanmar. Other Southeast Asian countries do not appear inclined to accept the resettlement of Rohingya. Tellingly, in their disinclination to support the repatriation of Rohingya, a majority of the Myanmar respondents demonstrate similar feelings.¹²

Still, with ASEAN now focused on getting the better of COVID-19 within national and regional boundaries, Myanmar has gained breathing space for sorting out the process of repatriating Rohingya communities from camps in neighbouring Bangladesh. Quiet diplomacy still counts for much in Myanmar, and it should continue to be used, especially in mending relations with Bangladesh.

Myanmar is also going through a repatriation process for refugees from Thailand. This process started in 2016 but has stalled because of a perceived lack of opportunities for the (re)integration of the returning refugees. In the wake of COVID-19 business slowdown, however, waves of Myanmar migrant workers returning from Thailand may affect existing bilateral dialogue on regularising (and ameliorating) the Myanmar migrant worker situation in Thailand.

The language of the CERP indicates that tackling economic security challenges starts with the people. While the people of Myanmar have been inured to bearing the brunt of various economic transitions from the 1960s onwards, COVID-19 is the first time that Myanmar faces the spectre of a nationwide economic fallout from a global pandemic. Myanmar is not isolated from regional and global supply chains, and it has much to lose from the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Indicators and bargaining chips in Myanmar's discussions with external partners will include the situation of factory workers facing the loss of livelihood should investments dry up or sanctions re-appear, and the need to shore up capacity gaps to meet scheduled commitments for economic integration under ASEAN. Here, too, quiet diplomacy to negotiate substantive responses may prove most effective. Former Myanmar activist networks that supported the democracy movement may yet become informal "ambassadors" engaging in new forms of quiet diplomacy with the West.

Myanmar's main foreign policy challenges for the foreseeable future will thus be making the best of a difficult situation, and regaining credibility. Finding a balance between domestic views and international perceptions of what constitutes a constructive and inclusive response to the country's challenges is both delicate and difficult. It will require considerable investment in a whole-of-government effort to improve Myanmar's narrative internationally and domestically. Communication has been a weak point of the current administration, at both Union and state or regional levels, and both domestically and abroad, with a few exceptions in the cabinet and some ambassadors.

Finding a balance is also necessary to continue engaging purposefully with Myanmar's most prominent interlocutors. Currently, Myanmar's East Asian partners and ASEAN counterparts enjoy a precedence of consideration over the rest of the region and the world.

Myanmar's people-centred diplomacy may find some resonance and leverage in ASEAN's people-centred approach to community-building. ASEAN emphasises that national-level implementation is crucial to accomplishing regional targets. As bilateral channels have taken on more prominence for Myanmar within the overall ASEAN framework, it may be useful to elucidate what "national responsibility" means for and in Myanmar, and to what extent that responsibility is and can be shared by partners within and outside the country.

Ultimately, the measure of how foreign policy can affect the various diverse communities in Myanmar remains largely in the hands of a government whose future will be decided by these same communities in the elections of late 2020.

¹ The political advisor to then President Thein Sein, U Ko Ko Hlaing, observed at the closing panel of the 13th International Burma Studies Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand, on 16-18 August 2018, that Myanmar was simultaneously undergoing political and economic reforms in addition to transitioning to civilian rule.

² Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugees Stranded At Sea", Human Rights Watch, 25 April 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/25/bangladesh-rohingya-refugees-stranded-sea>, accessed 9 May 2020).

³ Michael Sullivan, "COVID-19 Has Arrived in Rohingya Refugee Camps and Aid Workers Fear the Worst", *NPR*, 15 May 2020 (<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/05/15/856584129/covid-19-has-arrived-in-rohingya-refugee-camps-and-aid-workers-fear-the-worst>), accessed 17 May 2020).

⁴ Government of the Union of the Republic of Myanmar, "Overcoming as One: COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan", ([https://eurocham-myanmar.org/uploads/7a892-cerp---final-report-\(1\)5713756333092471786.pdf](https://eurocham-myanmar.org/uploads/7a892-cerp---final-report-(1)5713756333092471786.pdf)), accessed 27 April 2020).

⁵ Professor Maung Aung Myoe has observed that this is not a departure from the "independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy", but is rather multi-track diplomacy with a possible stronger focus on people-to-people contacts and multilateralism; Maung Aung Myoe "The NLD and Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Not New, But Different", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36/1 (2017): 89–121.

⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi, "Pyidaungsu Wungyi ei U-Yaw-Zin" [Foreword by the Union Minister], pp.5-6 in *Thar Kaung Taman* [The Good Diplomat] (Naypyitaw: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

⁷ An illustrative example would be the speaking tour of three Myanmar intellectuals to various international destinations in the 1990s, to "explain" the military regime's motivations and the "reality in Myanmar" to sceptical audiences. They engaged mostly non-Myanmar audiences. Myanmar foreign ministers serving under the military regime also limited their interactions with the Myanmar diaspora.

⁸ Derek Tonkin, "The 1990 Elections in Myanmar: Broken Promises or a Failure of Communication?", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29/1 (April 2007): 33-54.

⁹ Maung Aung Myoe, "Myanmar's China Policy since 2011: Determinants and Directions", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 34, 2 (2015): 21–54.

¹⁰ The International Crisis Group's update for the week of 1 May 2020 noted a conflict trend in Myanmar, observing that the conflict with the Arakan Army conflict had led to the heaviest fighting in the country in several years, with the military conducting almost daily offensive operations, while the Arakan Army sought to hold on to swathes of Rakhine and southern Chin States. There are no prospects of a COVID-19 ceasefire. See International Crisis Group, "Crisis Watch Myanmar – April 2020" (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar> accessed 1 May 2020)

¹¹ Tang Siew Mun et al, *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

¹² Tang Siew Mun, et al, *ibid.*

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