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# Balance of relationship: the essence of Myanmar's China policy

*Chiung-Chiu Huang*

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**Abstract** Although many observers in the field of Southeast Asian international relations (IRs) predict that Myanmar's relations with China have faced a grand challenge since the 2010 presidential election, this article provides a different perspective and proposes that Myanmar's China policy remain consistent. In addition, theorists in IRs tend to apply the concepts of balance of power (BoP) and bandwagoning as the analytical base and fail to explain the Southeast Asian states' responses to the rising China. This article argues that Myanmar's China policy is better understood and depicted by the theory of balance of relationship (BoR). This article further provides an analysis from the angles of historical factor, domestic political tradition, and external environment to investigate Myanmar's manipulation of BoR. The conclusion of this article aims at predicting the future development of the Sino-Burmese relations.

**Keywords** Myanmar; balance of relationship; balance of power; hedging; China.

## Introduction

When investigating small and medium-sized states' responses to a rising great power, some theorists in international relations (IRs) tend to apply the concepts of balance of power (BoP) and bandwagoning as the analytical base. There are other research works claiming that hedging is the major strategy and further providing details of the range of policy choices for the small and medium-sized states; yet the scope has never transcended the logic constructed on material and immediate national interests (Ross 2006). In the case of Southeast Asia, facing the rising China and its increasing economic and political influence, states in the region have obviously not followed the pattern suggested by the theories of BoP and bandwagoning. Aside from the reports made by mass media, which remain stuck on the neo-realist style of analysis – adopting BoP as the structure

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determining Southeast Asian international politics – there have been scholarly works suggesting that the concept of hedging is better for examining Southeast Asian states' policy toward the expanding Chinese influence (Chen and Yang 2013).

If merely focusing on the policy orientation that the Southeast Asian states have adopted in response to the rise of China, this article agrees with the assertion that hedging is a more proper description of Southeast Asian states' China policies than are BoP and bandwagoning. However, hedging as a type of policy orientation is not capable of providing an explanation of the long-term logic for policy making. Especially in Southeast Asia, the multiple policy choices states have made are not merely a reflection of the contemporary political conditions; more importantly, their relations with China and the corresponding policy are the product of historical entanglement and deeply embedded in each of these states' evaluation of its own position and interactions with other actors in the region. Moreover, the approaches provided by BoP, bandwagoning and hedging have shared one important characteristic in common: these approaches only provide static analysis, meaning that they are better at describing phenomena and depicting short-term motivation of policy makers. They are not capable of explaining 'change', including changes of states' policy orientation, patterns of states' interaction with each other, and even the shift of paradigms in any international system.

In the study of Southeast Asian IRs, the theoretical approach provided by hedging does help to present the formation of the specific phenomena: states in this region tend to shift position and adopt different strategies according to the policy makers' evaluation of the situation. Yet hedging provides no solid explanation of how these changes occurred and why they happened. To make up the deficiency of the existing theoretical approaches, this article introduces a new theory, balance of relationship (BoR), which focuses on long-term and dynamic development of states' behaviors and is thus capable of providing profound analytical viewpoint; hence, BoR is useful for explaining changes in the Southeast Asian international politics and states' China policy.

Myanmar's policy toward China, the case study used in this article, was selected because Myanmar/Burma used to be labeled as the client state of China; and its China policy represented the typical case of bandwagoning, especially during the time when Myanmar was under severe sanctions imposed by Western powers from the late 1980s to 2010 (Roy 2005). The political reform in Myanmar, starting in late 2010, has caused great attention among scholars and policy makers who are concerned about East Asian IRs. Many Western countries have lifted sanctions against Nay Pyi Taw as a reward for the reformation and democratization that was just initiated (Martin 2011; Tamen 2011; Pawlak and Moffett 2012). Responding to this good will, Myanmar has started a series of limited policy reforms with special focus on loosening restrictions on foreign visitors and changing regulations to facilitate foreign investments (Turnell 2012: 161). Myanmar's present

restoration of relations with the Western world has caused skepticism about Nay Pyi Taw's relationship with Beijing. Whether Myanmar is changing its position from bandwagoning toward balancing the Chinese power has been a hot issue in the research agenda of many IR scholars.

Joining the timely concern on Myanmar's relationship with China, this article first questions the oversimplified dichotomy of BoP versus bandwagoning as the analytical approach to Myanmar's foreign policy. Second, this article contends that the analysis based on the approach of hedging is not enough for understanding Myanmar's relationship with China. To further depict the rationale behind the Burmese government's decision making and explain the rise and fall of the bilateral relationship, this article applies the analytical perspective provided by the theory of BoR and runs the feature on Myanmar's China policy. The empirical investigation made in this article to support this analysis is presented from three aspects: domestic factors in Myanmar's foreign policy, structural factors concerning Southeast Asian international politics, and historical factors that have developed in the long-term interactions between Myanmar and China.

### **Concepts of balance of power, bandwagoning, and hedging**

Theorists of IRs tend to defend strategies that advance one's power relative to that of others. Classic realists prioritize apparent national interests of a nation in order to determine the costs and benefits of states' endeavors in pursuit of power. The premise supporting the theory of *balance of power* assumes that units in an anarchical international system have the most crucial and apparent interests in terms of the maximization of national power and defense of national security. It assumes that states will check dangerous concentrations of power, such as hegemony or a rising great power, by building up capabilities of individual states and/or aggregating with other states and establish alliances. As Gulick argued, preservation of independence and survival of the state is always the key aim for applying the strategy of BoP. In addition, BoP is never aimed at peace; sometimes for preserving the survival of states and the international system, war is the necessary instrument that states must employ (Gulick 1982).

Theories of BoP have been suggested by realists, such as Waltz, as unconditional and could be applied to any and all state systems. A systemic BoP theory assumes that balancing occurs when states take action aiming at checking a potential systemic hegemon. BoP could also refer to strategy adopted by states to check the increasing influence imposed by the rising great power.<sup>1</sup> Such balancing behavior could be done in three ways: external balancing, internal balancing, or the combination of both. Internal balancing means the enhancement of a state's material power in order to compete with the potential hegemon (Kaufman et al. 2007: 9). In this article, the focus of discussion is mainly on external balancing, which means alliance making or interstate military cooperation for checking the power of a potential hegemon.

Aside from BoP, the other type of small to medium-sized states' response to a rising hegemony is *bandwagoning*. The realist definition of bandwagoning refers to a state's aligning with the threatening rising power to avoid being attacked by it (Roy 2005: 306–7). In other words, the incentives for a weaker state to adopt the strategy of bandwagoning do not derive from the discrepancy of capabilities or national power per se, but from the anticipation of future behaviors of the winner in the contention. In addition, Kuik pointed out that bandwagoning is different from diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation with the rising power, for bandwagoning reflects clearly the smaller states' acceptance of the power ascendancy of the potential hegemon, and such acceptance is often shown by the form of political and military alignment between the weaker states and the rising great power (Kuik 2008: 160).

*Hedging*, in comparison to BoP and bandwagoning, is not a strategy representing either full rejection or complete acceptance of the power ascendancy of the potential hegemon. Hedging is understood as 'a set of strategies' adopted by states when facing an uncertain situation and not wishing to make decisions that might bring risks. When states hedge, they are cultivating a middle position to avoid the potential damage caused by straightforward and extreme policies. Thus, hedging is a kind of strategy similar to an insurance policy adopted by states to deal with uncertainty in the international arena (Goh 2006). Hedging includes various types of policies that contain different proportions of power rejection and power acceptance. These policies are a mixture of engagement, limited bandwagoning, and indirect balancing (Kuik 2008: 165–71). While both the approaches of BoP and bandwagoning demonstrate an oversimplified strategic thinking, the strategy of hedging is more sophisticated and reflects much of the reality of the Southeast Asian international politics by indicating the fact that states rarely confine their policy choices to any sole strategic orientation. However, addressing uncertainty in the international arena and states' corresponding policies, which are neither consistent nor unanimous, the approaches provided by BoP, bandwagoning, and hedging all fail to explain *why* states change their positions and policies from time to time, and under what conditions these changes occurred. In the case of Southeast Asian states' responses to the rise of China, changes of strategy do occur frequently, yet there remains consistency in terms of the logic of policy making. To complement the explanatory deficiency of the abovementioned approaches, in the following section, a new theoretical perspective will be introduced: BoR.

### **Balance of relationship: theory and practice**

The approaches provided by BoP, bandwagoning, and hedging all face the limitation in terms of the ability to interpret and analyze changes occurring in states' foreign policy orientation. Thus, an alternative theory with a focus on the sources of the dynamics of international politics is required to

complement the deficiency. This article proposes that the theory of *BoR*, which reflects a systemic force shaping all countries' behaviors under uncertainty and anarchy, fits the requirement. This force drives states to seek long-term reciprocal relationship regardless of differences in values, regime type, and power status. *BoR* presents a clear contrast by emphasizing self-restraint in states' foreign policy, while the former three approaches highlight self-help in states' behavior facing uncertainty in the international system. In reality, self-restraint has been frequently adopted by states. One example is the United States (US) showed exceptional concession to North Korea by giving the promise not to attack it with either nuclear or traditional weapons in 2005, regardless of the fact that regime was previously defined as a terrorist state (Cha 2009: 119). Another example is China's tolerance toward the US arms sale to Taiwan, which has threatened Beijing's claim of core national interests. In both cases, self-restraint has characterized these states' management of crises.

The ultimate goal of states' self-restraint is to acquire stable relationships or to rectify a wrong relationship. Nevertheless, the pursuance of a stable relationship is a consideration of national interests in the long run. Such a relational constitution of state transcends anarchy and uncertainty in international politics. A considerable amount of IRs literature has paid strong attention to this 'relational turn' of international politics. For example, Qin Yaqing argues that the element of 'relations' has been frequently cast aside by most IRs theories; to build a more comprehensive understanding of global politics nowadays, he suggests that bringing 'relations' back to the study of international politics is crucial. Hence, Qin proposes new theoretical approaches based on relational constitution, including relational governance (in contrast with rule-based governance) and a process approach (for analyzing the meaning of China rise in the international society) (Qin 2010, 2011). Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery also suggest applying a relational-based approach, network analysis, to identify and measure structural properties, especially the element of power in IRs (Hafner-Burton et al. 2009). In 1999, Jackson and Nexon pointed out that the major IR theories (which they called 'substantialism') have encountered the difficulty of explaining certain phenomena in world politics, especially the occurrence of change. They further introduce the concept of 'relationalism', which emphasizes the 'configurations of ties' among actors and defines them as the building block of social analysis (Jackson and Nexon 1999: 291–2). The aforementioned arguments and approaches have echoed with the theory of *BoR*. *BoR* also focuses on the logic which drives states to evaluate and arrange the sequence of national interests, while at the same time interprets the dynamics of inter-state interactions.

In terms of national interests, *BoR* agrees with *BoP*, bandwagoning, and hedging that the preservation of independence and security has always been the core national interests of states. Yet *BoR* assumes that the means to reach the goal of guarding national security is not limited to self-help

oriented strategies and that self-restraint is more often the case adopted by states. Self-restraint places emphasis on the wisdom of not taking extreme measures and always saving leeway. Hence, for the sake of long-term relationship, abandoning apparent and immediate national interests under certain circumstances is necessary. BoR argues that states' evaluation and interpretation of a mutual relationship and the actions taken on the basis of this understanding form the systemic force that shapes their managing IRs.

On the other hand, the strategies of BoP, bandwagoning, and hedging are often triggered by 'fear'; these approaches claim that it is the fear small to medium-sized states have regarding their survival being deprived by external great powers within the context of eternal uncertainty in the international system. Yet typical realist rationale cannot fully explain the behavior of a state that possesses different motivation, holds alternative considerations, and opts to apply strategies aimed at maintaining a positive relationship, even in times when bilateral relations are degenerating. In other words, if uncertainty as such does not drive states' behaviors in the international arena, but the motivation of transcending uncertainty does, then fear loses its power of explanation. The logic of BoR is the product of the motivation to transcend uncertainty. Furthermore, the strategies of BoP, bandwagoning and hedging are always targeting the specific other(s). It either attempts to weaken this specific other's capability or influence, or it wishes to release the pressure of being threatened by the stronger external power. However, such assumption excludes the circumstance where the state's need of survival is not at stake and targeting others is no longer the priority of goals.

In theory, BoR could be a strategic logic universally adopted by states. Empirically, BoR becomes the main theme of foreign policy especially in states whose domestic culture (political as well as social) provides strong support for the relation-oriented strategic thinking. BoR emphasizes the importance of reciprocal interaction and harmony in one's network. Here the goal of 'harmony' does not signify the ethical and virtuous aspects of states' acts. On the contrary, to achieve harmony is a realistic consideration with the hope of better future gain by preserving positive relations with all parties in question. Therefore, the practice of BoR is a strategy with truly pragmatic logic that takes national interests seriously into account; it is just that such logic treats the sequence of interests differently.

In East Asian IRs, survival has not been a need at stake for most states since the end of World War II. China and Burma used to be suzerain and vassal in the East Asian tribute system. After both countries entered the modern state system, their close ties have remained and harmony between the two nations has lasted until the 2010 Burmese presidential election, when doubt was casted by external watchers of their bilateral relations. Despite their differences in ideology, value system, and regime type, Burma was the first non-communist state to build a formal relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC); and China has treated this



historical fact as a valuable and critical landmark in the history of its foreign relations with Myanmar. In the following sections, this article will follow the clues provided by the theory of BoR to depict the development of Myanmar's China policy; moreover, by applying the logic of BoR, the theme of Myanmar's China policy will be explained and the future evolution of the bilateral relationship will be discussed.

### **Myanmar's balance of relationship with China**

The theory of BoR suggests that states' interactions with each other are always in process; IRs are not a static phenomenon like what BoP or bandwagoning suggest, and changes do happen from time to time. Hence, context matters a lot, and policy makers in each state adjust and readjust foreign policy according to varying conditions in time and space. At the operational level, states evaluate and redesign their strategies based on the response from the other side. According to the theory of BoR, feedback from the others has a crucial impact on states' 'balancing' behaviors. If the feedback led to the perception that mutual relationship is encountering a breach, states tend to cool down the dissatisfaction and adopt self-restraint. Under such circumstance, if one side decides to initiate the readjustment of their relations, it might give up some apparent and immediate national interests for the exchange of a better and reconnected bilateral relationship. Hence, in the long run, the relationship between the two sides remains stable, while temporary turbulence appears from time to time. On the other hand, if the condition of mutual relationship is perceived as seriously damaged and the cause was from the other party, then states tend to adopt actions with the purpose of punishment. The degree of punishment and the corresponding means is decided based on policy makers' judgment, and such judgment remains within the frame of context at the time.

This article suggests that it is far from appropriate to apply the perspective of BoP or bandwagoning to predict future Sino-Burmese relations after Myanmar's 2010 presidential election. Evidence can be easily found in the history of the bilateral relations between the two countries. Myanmar has never initiated or participated in any military activities designed for checking China or crippling its power; thus, both internal and external balancing fail to provide proper explanation of Myanmar's China policy. If BoP were ever a priority of Myanmar's policy toward China, it has had several chances provided by the US since the 1950s. Even when Washington applied a containment policy against China in the 1950s, Yangon opened a new international air route for communist China to connect with the Third World countries (Kunming was the departure location on the Chinese side). Yangon even exported rubber, which was one of the UN embargo items, to China, regardless of the opposition from the Western community (Fan 2008b: 138–9). Siding with China at that time was in fact against

Burma's national interests, for Burma was in desperate need of aid from the Western camp, and its regime demanded support from Washington at that time (Fan 2008b). Counter argument could suggest that the size of the PRC has forced Yangon not to implement strategies which might exasperate China. This consideration also conforms to the logic of BoR, for the pursuit of long-term stable relationship is to ensure the continuing gain of national interests, including survival and security. When the pro-democratic regime was taken over by the military junta, the newly established government treasured the relationship with China even more, to the degree that the serious disagreement on communism between the two sides could not destroy the mutual ties.

On the other hand, this article holds the view that although Myanmar and China have shared close ties, bandwagoning has never been a strategy adopted by the Burmese leaders. Since its independence in 1947, Myanmar's policy toward China could hardly be described as bandwagoning. Neighboring with a vast and strong communist state like China, Myanmar has never adopted the political ideology of the PRC, nor has Myanmar submitted in any form to China. This was notably so when controversy occurred between Myanmar and China. For example, the unsolved border disputes had once made Burma anxious about the intention of China,<sup>2</sup> and the Burmese leaders always had doubts about the intention and behavior of their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, if Burma had opted for bandwagoning, military cooperation or even alliance between Myanmar and China would most likely have occurred. Yet this has never happened. The strategy of hedging could not provide a proper explanation either. Hedging strategies are evident in Southeast Asian states' China policy orientation, which focuses on engagement and economic cooperation while adopting limited balancing at the same time (Roy 2005; Goh 2006; Kuit 2008). The use of hedging strategies targets the pursuit of apparent and immediate national interests; such interests include economic benefits, security, and political independence. Hedging strategy is a risk-avoidance policy in essence. However, when a crisis occurs, the priority of national interests is blurred, and states adopt different strategies in response to their changing relationships with the countries involved. For example, when the South China Sea territorial disputes recently erupted, hedging theory became incapable of explaining Southeast Asian states' adjustments of their China policy.

### ***Historical factors and Myanmar's relationship with China***

The relationship between Myanmar and China has never been as close and smooth as expected. Both Myanmar and China are aware of the turbulence in the development of their bilateral relationship. As Maung Aung Myoe has stated, Myanmar has managed its relationship with China within the

framework of 'pauk-phaw' (or kinship) while at the same time being alert to the power asymmetry. Dealing with the 'ideologically hostile and traditionally chauvinistic China' has always been a crucial task for the Burmese leaders (Maung Aung Myoe 2011: 179; Wilson 2012; Steinberg and Fan 2012: 28). Under this condition, the approach of BoR provides a better perspective to interpret how Myanmar managed turbulence and preserved the balanced relationship with China. Burma was the first non-communist state to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1949. However, the Burmese leaders suspected that China might utilize the Chinese diaspora to get involved and intervene in the domestic politics of Burma. In addition, since the early 1950s, KMT (Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party) troops were still in place in Burma. These troops provoked armed conflicts along the border shared by Burma and China, causing a rift between the two states. Burma was concerned that China might use these KMT troops as an excuse for invasion (Fan 2007: 60). Nevertheless, these controversies did not make Burma turn away from the 'pauk-phaw' relationship with China.

The icebreaker of the cold relations between China and Burma was the visit of Zhou Enlai to Yangon in 1956 (ibid. 62). Since then, frequent exchange visits have occurred between the two regimes. The frequent exchange visits contributed to a more profound mutual understanding and improvement of the confidence-building relationship between China and Burma. The zealotry in Sino-Burmese relations was reflected in Burma's opposition to not only the UN proposal that defined China as an 'aggressor' after the Korean War broke out but also the UN's decision to sanction China in the 1950s. Burma even abstained from the voting process for imposing sanctions on China (Fan 2008a: 139), despite the fact that Burma was still in the process of making imperious demands for aid from the US.

In 1960, the unsolved border disputes were well managed via China's ceding more than 80% of the disputed lands to Burma (Fan 2010: 43). Yet in the mid-1960s, due to China's increasing support of the Burmese Communist Party, which was the main rival to both the democratic and military regimes, the Sino-Burmese relationship began to sour. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution contributed to the rapid degeneration of the Sino-Burmese relationship in late 1960s. The Burmese military junta was irritated by the spreading Maoist propaganda and China's supporting the Burmese communists (Van Ness 1970: 225–6; Liu 2001: 326). The crucial event that hastened the degeneration of the Sino-Burmese relationship was the 15th National Day celebration of the PRC in 1964. China published the felicitation sent by the Burmese Communists to the *People's Daily*, translated the content into English and Burmese, and made it known to the public. Such conduct infuriated Yangon. Immediately Burma shut down China's consulates in Mandalay and Lashio (it was noteworthy that the Burmese leaders'

decision did not include shutting down the Chinese official institutes in Yangon). On the other side, China was frustrated by Burma regarding its Vietnam policy. China tried gaining support from Burma on the Chinese position in the Vietnam War but failed. The Burmese response upset China and worsened their already shaky relations. However, Burma did not side with the US either. In these cases, self-restraint was clearly shown in the Burmese sides.

On the other hand, the Burmese leaders were quite aware that to control the Burmese communists' influence, they have to gain support from China, thus maintaining positive relationship with China was crucial (Maung Aung Myoe 2011: 83). By the mid-1970s, Sino-Burmese relations had gradually improved; yet such improvement did not mean that Myanmar's suspicions had dissolved. EgretEAU pointed out that xenophobia and its nationalization policy kept the Burmese society alert to external influence (EgretEAU 2008a: 63–8), and the relationship with China was no exception. Accordingly, the turning of Myanmar into a closer relationship with China was mainly for a strategic purpose, and China clearly recognized this intention. The Burmese military junta's bloody suppression of civilians and violation of human rights resulted in severe international condemnation. The 1988 turmoil even caused the US and European Union to sanction Myanmar. The Western states had been trying to target the Myanmar military junta in the UN Security Council agenda. Facing a more hostile international environment, China became the most crucial source from which the Burmese military regime could gain both political and economic support.

Since the 1980s, China has been a close ally of Myanmar. Chinese support of the Burmese military junta has brought Beijing severe criticism in the international arena. Some have argued that Myanmar's reconciliation with the Western world after the 2010 election implies a breaking with China, and the Burmese military regime's resolution to go through democratization was due to their long-term fear of China (Voice of America 2012). However, the historical record proves the weakness of this argument. Burma's taking of a neutral position during the Vietnam War and the self-restraint in late 1960s has, to a great extent, revealed the logic of BoR in its foreign policy. Myanmar's responses in these two events represented a balancing behavior aimed at punishing China for Chinese support of the Burmese communists; nevertheless, the possibility of future restoration of their bilateral relationship was carefully preserved.

### ***Domestic factors and balance of relationship in Myanmar's China policy***

To understand how BoR becomes the main theme in Myanmar's foreign policy, one has to have a comprehensive understanding of the domestic politics, as well as the social and economic conditions of Myanmar. In

2012, Myanmar was ranked 21st in the Failed States Index. This record indicated that Myanmar is a state with very bad economic and political conditions. According to the index, Myanmar has been one of the most impoverished states in East Asia since 2008 (Foreign Policy staff 2012). The retardation of economic development in Myanmar is partly attributed to sanctions imposed by the Western countries.<sup>3</sup> In addition, on one hand, the former totalitarian regime adopted an extreme nationalization policy that has proved to be a great failure and led to the dire poverty of the Burmese people (Holliday 2007: 374–92). On the other hand, Myanmar is also notorious for the endless internal conflicts between armed ethnic minority groups and the Burmese central government. Due to the damages and atrocities caused by these internal battles, Myanmar has suffered a bad human rights record and is always on the edge of being listed as a target of international intervention.

The overall condition of Myanmar has remained desperate, even after the 2010 election. As Haacke has described, the challenges of the armed minority forces and the opposition parties, plus the unfriendly international environment, had driven the Myanmar military junta to make political security the imperative for their foreign policy. This imperative has not changed much in the current pro-democratic regime dominated by President Thein Sein. That is to say, the essential goal of Myanmar's foreign policy is to prevent national unity and domestic stability from being threatened by any external or internal force (Haacke 2006: 17–21). Thus, sovereignty and the independence of the state remain the highest priority of Myanmar's foreign policy. To reach this goal, maintaining a neutral position on the international stage becomes the most rational choice for the Burmese leaders, and such logic conforms to the rationale of adopting a BoR strategy.

Once becoming an independent state, the Burmese leaders tried to adopt a neutralist stance to balance the diverse interests of major powers in the region (McCarthy 2008: 912). This strategy was chosen based on the rational thinking that Myanmar, being a weak state surrounded by two big nations, China and India, while at the same time facing Washington's vigorous attempts to impose political influence, has to cautiously evaluate all possible outcomes before responding to the diverse external powers. Hence, self-restraint weighs more than self-help in the decision making process, while a strategy based on self-restraint places more emphasis on the preservation of relationship, which is the core pursuit of a state's taking the neutral position. Taking the neutralist stance does not mean the actor has to be passive and postpone its response until the uncertain factors dissolve. On the contrary, Myanmar's foreign policy is more proactive and directional than expected by many foreign observers (*ibid.*). Instead of shunning uncertainty, the Burmese leaders opt for searching ways to manage uncertainty; adopting self-restraint, preserving positive relationship with major powers as best as they can, and balancing diverse external

influences have been the consistent strategies in Myanmar's foreign policy. Especially in making policy related to China, Myanmar has rarely been passive. The strategic logic of BoR drives Myanmar to drag other external factors into the bilateral relationship with China; looking for alternatives to counter China's growing influence remains a continuing task, while at the same time positive relations must be preserved.

### ***Myanmar's balance of relationship in East Asia***

The Burmese leaders, especially the military regime, perceived the unfriendliness of the Western world, and in certain periods, also sensed enmity from other Southeast Asian nations.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Myanmar's comradeship with China has not excluded its relationship with other states in the region; it did not cut off connections with other Southeast Asian countries, nor did it reject the approach of other Asian states, including India and Japan.<sup>5</sup> Myanmar has been quite pragmatic in terms of developing the direction of foreign policy. The Burmese leaders keep adjusting and readjusting their foreign policy according to different conditions in time and space. The attempt to balance relationships with all parties has been distinct in Myanmar's foreign policy.

Myanmar's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other member states provide a good example of how BoR has formed the main theme in Myanmar's foreign policy. Right after ASEAN's establishment in 1967, Burma was invited to join the membership. However, Burma turned down the invitation. Yangon's rejection of the membership of ASEAN was made for two reasons, the first of which deeply related to China: ASEAN had not recognized the People's Republic of China in 1967 (McCarthy 2008: 914–5). Noteworthy, 1967 was the year Sino-Burmese relations began to turn sour, and Yangon dreaded the expansion of communist power along its borders. Burma decided to follow the theme of self-restraint. By so doing, it avoided displeasing Beijing. Maintaining neutrality and not allying with any political camp was the second reason leading to Myanmar's rejecting ASEAN in 1967. If evaluating Burma's turning down the ASEAN membership from the angle of self-help and immediate national interests, this was an irrational choice. At that time, ASEAN had the US sponsor behind the curtain. The strategy of BoP (allying with ASEAN member states) and seeking support from the US would have been the first option if Burma pursued immediate interests regarding the need of eliminating the threat of spreading communist propaganda. Yet this was not the case in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

Burma formally became one of the ASEAN member states in 1997. Before that, Burma's relationship with ASEAN had steadily improved. Even when the Western countries boycotted aid to Burma due to the military junta's violation of human rights and an annulling of the 1990 democratic election, ASEAN did not abandoned its Burma policy, which is

known as 'constructive engagement'. The constructive engagement policy of ASEAN, initiated by Thailand (Katanyuu 2006: 825–45), represented the self-interested aim of acquiring raw materials and markets pursued by ASEAN countries to fulfill their economic and strategic interests, while at the same time, encouraging moderate regime change in Burma. The constructive engagement policy, as observed by Jones, was to replace the Cold War security framework and expand regional trading networks (Jones 2008: 273). No matter how self-interest-oriented the constructive engagement policy was, this policy and its practice by ASEAN member states did help improve their relationship with Burma. Since the 1990s, the official visits paid by leaders of ASEAN member states to Myanmar have been frequent. In 1994, Burma started pursuing inclusion in the ASEAN and was granted full membership eventually.

The key reason contributing to Burma's shift of position regarding membership in ASEAN in the 1990s, except for the termination of the Cold War, was the equally important factor: the normalization of the relationship between ASEAN and China. Most of the ASEAN states did not build a formal relationship with China until the mid-1970s. Even Indonesia, the very rare case along with Burma that recognized the PRC right after its establishment in 1949, did not restore relations with China until the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> What had concerned the ASEAN countries before the mid-1970s and led to their hostile attitude toward China included Beijing's public support of regional communist insurgents and potential connections between China and the large number of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The suspicion was also related to the obvious asymmetry in terms of size and material power between Southeast Asian states and China. Such suspicion has been the foundation of the 'China threat' discourse. The icebreaking point of the long-term negative relationship was instigated by two events: the rapprochement between China and the US in the early 1970s and the Sino-ASEAN cooperation on certain issues, especially Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia (Yuan 2012: 3–4). It can be said that the normalization of the Sino-ASEAN and Sino-US relations encouraged Myanmar to continue the strategy of BoR. In fact, Myanmar's strategy of BoR in its China policy did pay; especially after 1988 when the US and other Western countries cut off donations to Myanmar's economic development and imposed sanctions on the military regime, China and the ASEAN states kept their engagement with Myanmar.

Except for concern about the thread of Sino-ASEAN relations, a great portion of Myanmar's foreign policy also focuses on other regional great powers and their capacity to influence Nay Pyi Taw. How to balance the interests and influences among these great powers has not only dominated Burmese foreign policy, but such rationale has to a great extent shaped Myanmar's China policy. Among all of Myanmar's foreign policy activities, relations with India and Japan have been especially illustrative in terms of depicting the strategy of BoR. For instance, many Western observers have

proposed that Myanmar has become the battlefield for China and India to compete regarding their respective political and economic influence in the region. The bilateral relations between Myanmar and India are expected by some observers to be restored, based on the hostile atmosphere of the Sino-Indian competition since the 1990s (Egreteau 2008a). This type of argument mostly emphasizes the strategic thinking on both the Chinese and Indian sides and stresses that Myanmar's responses to these two big powers are relatively more passive and rarely the initiator of interactions. The fact regarding how Nay Pyi Taw has been an active player and carefully calculated the gains and losses in interactions with the regional powers is not given enough attention.

Myanmar is indeed cautiously designing a specific way of distributing fields where it can afford foreign engagements. In the case of Burmese-Indian relations, with concern of the Chinese influence, Myanmar has balanced its relationship with both countries by adopting their requests for cooperation. While accepting China's proposals of cooperation in the exploration of energy resources and the building of a pipeline for transporting oil, Myanmar did not immediately respond positively to a similar request made by India. However, Myanmar responded to New Delhi's invitation of military cooperation and allowed the Indian Navy flotilla to berth in the Burmese port, Thilawa, in 2002 and the following years. Moreover, whereas China has not yet achieved the goal of conducting joint operations with Myanmar, India has successfully conducted Indo-Burmese joint naval exercises, held in 2003, 2005, and 2006 (ibid. 44–5). The other important fact regarding Indo-Burmese military cooperation is related to arms supplies. It is said that for balancing dependency on China, Myanmar has renewed its sources of arms suppliers to include India, in addition to its original suppliers – Russia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Ukraine (Egreteau 2008b: 952–3).

On the other hand, although China has been viewed as the main ally and political supporter of the former Burmese military junta, few have noticed that the major source from which the military regime gained financial aid was the other great power in East Asia: Japan. Japan had been the main donor of bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Burma.<sup>8</sup> Before 1988, Japanese ODA reached 78% of the total amount of the annual ODA (about 333 million dollars) Burma had received (Saito 1992: 23). Japan's close tie as the main donor of ODA to Burma had its origin in the colonial era when Japan provided active and significant support to the Burmese independence movement. However, Japan's foreign policy has been shaped by the US since the Cold War. Thus, when the US began to sanction Burma, Japan had to suspend its ODA plan. The response from the Myanmar side was illustrated by Nay Pyi Taw's changing attitude toward Japan's role as a war criminal in the World War II. When Japan began the ODA project in Southeast Asia, Burma had been the very first



country to accept Japan's plan and did not argue about the amount of reparations, even though other Southeast Asian states did (Saito 1992; Streford 2010). At that time, Burma's friendliness toward Japan was demonstrated by the fact that it rarely expressed public condemnation concerning the atrocities carried out by Japan during World War II. Moreover, when Burma was the major receiver of Japanese ODA, the Ne Win regime even refused to join China and South Korea in condemning Japan's intention of erasing the historical facts regarding Japan's conduct in World War II. Yet after Japan suspended ODA to Burma in 1988, Japanese-Burmese relations drastically degenerated, and this change led to Myanmar's publicly criticizing Japan in 2006 (Zhao 2013).

Myanmar is capable of symbolic punishment, which is the major characteristic of the BoR logic. Japan's unilateral suspense of the ODA plan to Myanmar was the major cause of Nay Pyi Taw's public criticism of the war crimes Japanese troops committed during World War II. Being the most important source of foreign aid to Burma, Japan was viewed as an intimate partner by the Burmese leaders. This was the major reason why Burma restrained from joining its East Asian counterparts in condemning Japan. The counter argument might suggest that Myanmar's human rights record has incurred so much room for scrutiny that it does not have the credibility to criticize others. Indeed, Myanmar's criticism of Japan in 2006 did not cause too much international attention probably due to its bad credibility. The Burmese leaders must have sensed it. However, making public criticism was not a wasted effort; it was a symbolic action aiming at punishing Japan for its abandoning Myanmar and supporting the Western states' proposal of listing Myanmar into the agenda of UN Security Council (due to the human rights crisis in Myanmar) (Zhao 2013). Such logic corresponds to the theme of BoR that when a state perceives that a mutual relationship is damaged and that the cause was from the other party, it would take actions with the purpose of punishment; yet more severe means could hardly be on the Burmese leaders' table, because the possibility of future restoration of relationship remains and needs to be carefully preserved.

Since Myanmar's 2010 presidential election, there has been positive improvement in the relationship between Myanmar and the Western world. The current trend of Burmese foreign relations has also led to the rapid restoration of Japanese and Burmese relations. In December 2012, Myanmar signed a contract with Japan that allowed Japanese banks and companies to enter the Burmese financial market. In addition, a contract regarding Japan's financial assistance and share in the joint development of Myanmar's Thilawa Port has been initiated. Japan has gained the privilege of helping Myanmar build a special economic zone in Thilawa (Seth 2012). The Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso visited Myanmar in January 2013 and pledged to support the democratization of Myanmar (Slodkowski 2013). The Aso administration's active pursuit of

strengthening Japanese-Burmese relations has unsurprisingly caused China's concern. Yet according to Myanmar's long-term logic of BoR, such development should hardly have serious impact on Burmese-Sino relations.

### ***Myanmar's balance of relationship after 2010 presidential election***

Since the 2010 presidential election held in Myanmar, there has been constant suspicion about the future of Sino-Burmese relations. It has been said that the change of regime style might have led to the redirection of Nay Pyi Taw's foreign policy, especially its relations with Beijing (Kudo 2012). This suspicion was strengthened by three episodes that occurred in 2011: Myanmar's unexpected halt of the hydroelectric project in the Irrawaddy River (also known as the Myitsonne Dam Project) (Turnell 2012: 160, 163), former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit in late 2011, and U.S. President Barack Obama's official visit in November 2012.

In September 2011, Myanmar President Thein Sein announced the halting of the hydroelectric project in the Irrawaddy River, financed and led by a state-owned company, China Power Investment Corporation (Fuller 2011; Zhang 2013). The suspension of the dam project caused a huge loss to Chinese investors; anger and criticism ruled among the Chinese businesses involved in the project (Watts 2011). Some have argued that the sudden termination of the dam project shows the negative impact of the inactive attitude of China in its long-term policy toward Myanmar (Yuan 2012). On the other hand, the official visit paid by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama seemed to materialize Washington's pivot to the Asia Pacific. China's responses to the event have been controversial: whereas the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC publicly expressed China's positive attitude toward the strengthening relationship between Myanmar and the Western countries, the official media, *Global Times*, attacked Clinton's visit as inciting antipathy among China and its allies who have been relying on the financial support provided by Beijing (Global Times Public Opinion 2011).

It is an over simplified argument that Myanmar is now inviting economic and political influence from the Western world (particularly the US) to check China's political influence. In fact, Myanmar is still cautiously managing its foreign relations via the logic of BoR. An example of Myanmar's practicing BoR is the pattern of Burmese President Thein Sein's official visits to neighboring countries and his plans of deepening ties with diverse political powers. Since his taking office in early 2011, Thein Sein has paid multiple visits to ASEAN states and attended the ASEAN-US leaders' meetings. In addition, Thein Sein visited India and issued a joint statement that Myanmar and India would expand cooperation in oil and gas exploration and border trade (BBC NEWS 2012). More importantly, Thein Sein

visited China before paying the first official visit to Washington (Linn 2012). Such behavior has the symbolic meaning that Myanmar still prioritize its relationship with China.

Another example showing the continuing logic of BoR in Myanmar's foreign policy is Thein Sein's public statement about the South China Sea issue. In his first state visit to China, 'in return for China's consistent support, Thein Sein pledged to President Hu that his new government maintained support for the "One China Policy" and backed its northern neighbor regarding South China Sea issues' (Hete Aung 2011). Thein Sein's statement violated the *Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC)* signed by ASEAN and China.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he transgressed the long-term political stance of Myanmar of being a neutralist nation in the region and weakened Myanmar's relations with other ASEAN member states. In other words, Myanmar's public statement regarding its stance on the South China Sea issue has apparently negated its national interests. This event has closely paralleled Myanmar's response to the US containment policy against China in the 1950s. The logics of BoP, bandwagoning and hedging could hardly explain such irrational choices of Myanmar; their calculation of national interests does not allow for a long-term perspective. The 2011 statement concerning the support for China's position in the South China Sea dispute was a means to compensate for the potential negative impact on Burmese-Sino relations caused by Thein Sein's following visit to the US. It was a decision made on the basis of long-term interests, albeit harming short-term ones. However, preserving their relationship with China and ensuring Beijing's role as Myanmar's strong supporter weigh more than temporarily hurting an already shaky unity. Following Myanmar's pursuit of the 2014 chairmanship of the ASEAN, the Burmese government did not repeat this claim; instead, Myanmar emphasized its readiness to deal with the disputes and asserted its confidence of China's having a positive response to the DOC (Ririhena 2013). Yet, it is noticeable that Myanmar has not changed its position, neither has it publicly opposed China's claim on the South China Sea dispute.

The abovementioned events have, to a great extent, revealed the essence of Sino-Burmese relations since 1949. The bilateral relations between Myanmar and China are relatively more stable than most Western experts have suggested and predicted. There is no such sign that Myanmar is making an effort to build a military alliance with the Western states to target China. Bandwagoning remains incapable of providing an explanation for Myanmar's China policy. Myanmar was even more actively looking for recognition from its ASEAN counterparts for the purpose of gaining the 2014 chairmanship. Disturbances in the Burmese-Sino relationship will possibly keep occurring. Consequently, maintenance of the stability of this relationship will still be a primary concern in Myanmar's China policy.

## Conclusion

BoR is a strategy frequently adopted by, but never limited to, small states that are greatly concerned about the geopolitics and independence of their sovereign power. Geopolitical and historical conditions have made Myanmar a typical state whose style of foreign policy is shaped by such logic. Myanmar's BoR in managing relationship with the rising China also gains a similar type of response from China. Being such a big state with strong material power, China also follows the theme of BoR in foreign policy making. Self-restraint and the emphasis on long-term relationship have been frequently shown in China's interactions with its neighboring countries. The pursuit of relational security is also the crucial factor impacting China's nonintervention policy, and that nonintervention policy has, to a great extent, sculpted the evolution of Sino-Burmese relations.<sup>10</sup>

Both China and Myanmar have demonstrated a strong consensus concerning the priority of maintaining the stability of their bilateral relationship; and through the logic of BoR, such consensus between these two nations is easy to understand. The complexity of BoR makes it not only a strategy, but a value, an attitude, a skill, and a system. The unique perspective and significance of BoR can often be more clearly identified in an era when a bilateral relationship turns sour. During periods like this, symbolic punishment must be made, while at the same time self-restraint should remain the guiding principle of action. The eventual goal of the symbolic action is always aiming at the flexibility and possibility for future restoration of relationship.

In sum, BoR is the main theme in Myanmar's China policy to ensure the stability of their bilateral relationship. Myanmar is unlikely to be the sole case of a state's adopting and applying similar logic and strategy. In the foreseeable future, the theme and orientation of Burmese foreign relations and its China policy could hardly expect any dramatic change. Restoration of relations with the Western countries, to whatever extent, only means that Myanmar is granted more space and bargaining power in its participation in international politics in the region of the Asia-Pacific. Understanding this fact, the policy makers all over the world should be more cautious and not assume that a more democratized Myanmar will definitely side with the camp of liberal democracy.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

1. When BoP is defined as a strategy, it shares certain characteristics in common with the strategy of balance of threat. The key to differentiating BoP and

balance of threat lies in the ‘cause’ that led to the balancing behavior. In addition, BoP is a systemic theory, while balance of threat lacks such theoretical potential (see Kaufman et al. 2007).

2. The border disputes between China and Myanmar were resolved in 1960. The PRC gave up a great portion of the disputed lands to Myanmar (Fan 2010: 43).
3. The European Union (EU) has decided to suspend the sanctions against Myanmar for one year to show agreement with the democratic reform starting with the 2010 general election (see Pawlak and Moffett 2012).
4. During the 1997 East Asian Financial Crisis, many Southeast Asian states had changed position and criticized Myanmar’s conduct of violating human rights. It was said the change of trend in Southeast Asian states’ Myanmar policy was due to their need of Western financial support and economic aid (see Voice of America 2012).
5. In 2008, the vice chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, the regime of the military junta) was sent to New Delhi to persuade India to oppose the proposal of imposing international sanctions on Myanmar. Myanmar also has a good relationship with Japan. Japan has been one of the crucial aid providers that has helped Myanmar improve its domestic infrastructure (see Lee et al. 2009: 108–109). In addition, China is not the only provider of weapons to Myanmar. Myanmar also purchases weapons from India, Pakistan, and North Korea (see Li and Lye 2009: 267).
6. As McCarthy also suggested the similar viewpoint that facing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, it was almost impossible that Burma may have held to forge alliances with the West. McCarthy’s argument, ‘Burma quickly adopted a neutralist stance whereby it would pursue good relations with all countries and steer clear from aligning itself with power blocs’, supports the statement made in the previous section of this article (see McCarthy 2008: 913).
7. Indonesia used to share close ties with China. In the 1950s, Indonesia and China had worked together for promoting Asian-African emergence and solidarity. The famous Bandung Conference was the achievement of their cooperation. However, the 1965 coup in Indonesia and the following prosecution of the Indonesian Communist Party, as well as the Chinese diaspora, led to the stagnation of the bilateral relationship. The restoration of a formal relationship did not begin until 1990. For more details, see Yuan (2012: 40–41).
8. Since the 1950s, Japan has been the major aid provider to Myanmar; the project of aiding Burma was originated from Japan’s idea of paying reparations to the Southeast Asian states while benefiting and restoring the Japanese economy. Japan’s plan was first accepted by Burma and carried out with the name, Official Development Assistance (ODA) (see Strefford 2010: 35–45).
9. The DOC required the ASEAN members to take a neutral stance on the South China Sea issue.
10. China’s pursuit of relational security has also resulted in its taking part in certain cases of international intervention, such as Sudan, East Timor, and abstaining from the voting process of the Libya case.

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