

**MYANMAR AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY: A COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN ITS
FOREIGN POLICY**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to study and understand how the democratization process in Myanmar impact its foreign policy. It is apparent that the foreign policy of a country defines how it approach other states while protecting its sovereignty and balancing to maintain both its strategic interests and that of other international actors. Foreign policies are used as a strategy by governments to guide their action in the international arena, thus, a newly democratic country like Myanmar required a robust foreign policy and build its foreign relations with other countries. By attempting to explain and understand the changes made in Myanmar's foreign policy after its transition to democracy, it is apparent that the country's foreign policy pre-democracy and after-democracy are looked into and discussed.

This thesis used a comparative temporal research design as it will allow us to capture the essence of consequences and changes by taking time into account in the new democratization process and contribute to explaining the changes or continuities of Myanmar foreign policies in the country as they are exposed to other external liberal and non-liberal actors over time.

Through this thesis, it is understood that no large changes were made in Myanmar foreign policy, however, the new government is committed to pursuing an active foreign policy in re-integrating itself to the international community after self-isolating from the world for over some decades.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recent democratic transition in Myanmar¹ raises some critical questions as to how its foreign policy is implemented to adjust to recent world of international diplomacy from a long-established authoritarian system. Due to its geostrategic position, Myanmar is faced with security challenges as it is sandwiched between two emerging powers, namely China and India (Egreteau 2017, 301). With the increasing opportunities for growth and development in the country, it also creates increasing concerns in how international institutions may seek to gain and profited from the underexploited natural resources of the country (Egreteau 2017, 301). Thus, a robust foreign policy is required for a newly democratic country like Myanmar and build its foreign relations with other countries. This is so to ensure that certain principles and rules are established for the newly democratized country so that the flux of the political systems in the country is effective in relation to its counterparts in the international politics. By building foreign relations through following the principles of one's own foreign policy and in maintaining the strategic interests of other external actors no misunderstanding arises and create conflicts between nations. Moreover, a robust foreign policy will strengthen the economy of the country by promoting the interests of the country.

The foreign policy of a country defines how nation-states approached other states by protecting its territorial integrity and the interests of both its citizens and country. Foreign policies are used as a strategical tool by governments to guide their action while persuading other international countries. The formulation of foreign policies is formulated in accordance with the value and strategic interests of the state (Sein 2016, 27). In 2003 a “*roadmap to democracy*” which was a seven-step process in restoring democracy in the country was introduced by the ruling government of Myanmar which also reflect the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) confidence in controlling the insurgencies in the country to a more “*disciplined democracy*” (Jones 2014, 794).

As the purpose of this thesis is to study the democratization process in Myanmar and discuss the impact it has on its foreign policy. With the purpose in mind, this thesis will analyze Myanmar's relations with one of the most important and powerful actors in the industrialized

¹ Officially the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and also known as Burma.

and developed countries today, the United States of America (U.S.) vis-a-vis the emerging powerful actors in developing countries, China and India. As such it is an attempt to assess if the democratization process in Myanmar has any affects with its relations to the aforementioned countries.

2. BACKGROUND

Myanmar, previously known as Burma, was under the oppressive rule of the military junta (Tatmadaw) from 1962 and considered to be a pariah state until 2011. Before the coup, the country managed to enjoy a brief democracy, however, the constitution was suspended, and opposition political parties were banned. Further, as the abused of human rights intensified, the dissent for the *tatmadaw* grew as a result of demonetization which leads to economic fall and leading to a mass demonstration in 1988. Many students and young political leaders were jailed, killed and forced to flee the country. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) imposed martial law and implemented new economic reforms drafted by the previous government. In 1990, the country held its first elections where opposition parties were allowed to participate where the National Unity Party (NUP), the predecessor to the BSPP² and an opposition coalition called the National League for Democracy (NLD) were the two most prominent parties. Though the NLD won with a landslide victory, the SLORC remain in power (Aung, Aung-Thwin, and Steinberg 2019, BBC 2018). Many of the opposition leaders were put under house arrest and forced to remained in exile. Subsequently, the country faced a lot of condemned and sanctioned by the international community.

After years of self-isolation, sanctions, and condemnation from the international community, the country has managed to assume great strategic and economic importance in the Asian region (Aung, Aung-Thwin, and Steinberg 2019). This is because of the support of the Chinese government for the SLORC in the form of military assistance and infrastructure development due to the mass migration of Chinese population into Myanmar. According to Malik (1998), Myanmar under the SLORC and SPDC rule was a “*puppet of China*” where the Chinese government used the country as based for their military operations which “*upsets the regional balance of power*” (Malik 1998, in, Haacke 2011, 113). Moreover, as the support from the

² Abbreviation for Burma Socialist Programme Party which advocated for the ‘*Burmese Way to Socialism*’ under the guidance of General Ne Win and later reformed again to the National Unity Party (NUP) in 1988.

Chinese government increased, neighboring countries like India grew concerned with the open trade between China and Myanmar as it also affected the Indian economy. Similarly, the U.S. also became concerned with the increasing influence of China in the Southeast-Asia region during the late 1990s. As a result, both the Indian and U.S. government has to shift its policy from opposing pro-SLORC and lift imposed sanctions to lessen the Chinese influence in the region, as well to build better bridges between the countries (Aung, Aung-Thwin, and Steinberg 2019).

In 1997, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) admitted Myanmar in its regional intergovernmental organization where participating countries positioned themselves vis-à-vis the rising China (Haacke 2011, 105) and the SLORC morphed into SPDC. According to Haacke (2011), the ASEAN countries were engaging themselves with China which provides economic exchange and diplomacy while at the same time, they were also pursuing security and defense relations with the United States (Haacke 2011, 106). In 2010, a legislative election was held where the ruling party, Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) accumulated over 75 percent of contested seats which resulted in the NLD and other international community boycotting as they elections was seen to be flawed (CIA 2019). Nonetheless, a national legislature was assembled again in 2011 under President Thein Sein, former Prime Minister. Under the new President, vast political and economic reforms were undertaken leading to a start of opening of the isolated country. In 2015, a new legislative election was held where the NLD won a landslide victory and sworn in the Htin Kyaw to be newly elected President as the first elected civilian government after five decades of militia rule (CIA 2019).

3. LITERATURE

Democracy in its most basic level is a term that encompasses that a legitimate regime satisfies its citizens by presenting the nation-state with “*universal, adult suffrage; recurring, free, competitive and fair elections; more than one political party; and more than one source of information*” (Morlino 2004, 10,12). As a process that liberalizes the political system of a nation, democratization entails the transitioning from an authoritarian system, as in the case of Myanmar where changes in the political system are initiated by the elites to share and maintain its power via creating institutions (Jones 2014, 782, Nicolaus 2015, 4). Democratization is influenced by several factors ranging from the country’s economic and social development to

the demand for political change to uphold the interests of the citizens. In the last decades, there is a gradual declination of military regimes in the world and has become virulent especially in Asian countries like Bangladesh, South Korea, Thailand, and Pakistan where many of the populations were under military rule. However, this phenomenon was replaced by democracy. Nevertheless, the democratization process from military regimes is not as linear as anticipated as violent political strife can occur between the old and new rulers. Moreover, there is a need for more robust political frameworks in a democratic country that allow and upholds the interests of the people and politicians to participate in elections (Bünthe 2014, 743).

Similarly, the process of democratization in Myanmar also presents various contradicting arguments on why Myanmar's long-ruling military government choose to embark on the road to democracy and constitute new reforms. It is reasonable to suggest that there are some internal and external factors that influenced the change in Myanmar political systems. For instance, it can internal factors like reforms that safeguard the interests of the military or an attempt to centralized military power (Bünthe 2014, 743, Nicolaus 2015, 5). Moreover, there are also some contested questions that are asked by many outsiders on why one of the longest ruling military regimes decides to withdraw from power and if the new democratic rule is an indirect military rule or behind the scenes (Bünthe 2014, 743). On the other hand, some external factors that might have contributed to the democratization process can be due to the various sanctions that the Western world has placed on Myanmar during the late 80s has affected the development of the country and presumably cause doubt as a deciding factor to democratize as a survival strategy of the military regime (Croissant and Kamerling 2013, 105, 108). This liberalization of the political system in Myanmar has been a great asset to the development of the country by increasing space for civilian institutions and reducing the authority of the military regime (Bünthe 2014, 743).

Haacke (2006b) in Myoe (2016) examines and describe the essential drivers and principles of Myanmar's foreign policy under the military regime SPDC or SLORC (Myoe 2016, 124). He highlighted five core arguments to identify the effectiveness of Myanmar's foreign policy as it became imperative for the regime to have a strong domestic political-security. His first argument stressed on how the country's foreign policy was shaped by its national unity and sovereignty, followed by how the regime is willing to defend the political-security of the country by paying a price. His third argument rests on the notion that though relations with the West had limited scope, the country was able to manage to achieve a balance of relations with

its neighboring countries, thus integrating the country into a regional intergovernmental organization. Fourth, he opined that Myanmar as a country under the military regime was able to boost its relations with the international community and lastly, he urged that the regime's incapacity to perceive the price of provoking other countries could deepen the hostility with the regime critics in the West (Myoe 2016, 124-125).

After decades of sanctions and isolations from the international community due to the country under a military regime, however, the international community has supported the democratization process. Thus, it is crucial for the country to establish political relations and pursue an active foreign policy as an international relation is important to the stability of the country. Despite the continuous efforts for reform in the democratic transition, Myanmar is still considered to be a weak country with political instabilities, unsettled conflicts and low economic performance which is a result of the country under a series of military regimes (Wah 2016). During the last three decades the country has undergone three distinct transitions from colonial rule to its independence in 1948, from a parliamentary democracy to military coup d'état in 1962, and the transition from dictatorship in 1988 to democracy which is still in progress and incomplete (Global New Light of Myanmar 2018). Following a landslide victory in 2015 elections in Myanmar, the NLD ushered its way into its first democratically elected government since 1962 under Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto leader of NLD (Hoque 2017, 551, Myoe 2017, 90).

As Jones (2009) opined in his article '*Democratization and foreign policy in Southeast Asia: the case of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus*', that little attention has been paid to the democratization effects on the country's foreign policy (Jones 2009, 388). Though the country has suffered political challenges under the military regimes for over two decades and had strained foreign relations with Western nations, Myanmar's foreign policy is based theoretically on the principles of liberal tradition as it determines to stand on its own and follow the international principle of peaceful settlement of disputes (Sein 2016, 28). Moreover, with the changing international and domestic politics, its foreign policy towards other countries serves as a bridge in analyzing the impact of internal and external politics on Myanmar's relation to other states. Thus, the implementation of foreign policy in the new government is likely to try group together with other neighboring states to balance the powers in the international community. As more states and countries are experiencing challenges and transformations internally and externally, a study on foreign policy is important as it connects

how the study of states relate to each other in international politics (study of international relations) with the functioning of governments and the relationships among individuals, groups, and governments (study of domestic politics) (Beasley et al. 2012, 1-2).

Withal, the overall aim of this thesis is to study and discuss the democratization process in Myanmar and its impact on foreign policy, hence, it is crucial to discuss and highlight the most relevant aspects of democratization. The research question of this thesis is thus as followed:

“How has the democratization transition in Myanmar impact its foreign policy?”

The thesis layout is structured into an introduction with a presentation of the topic, followed by background and literature. Thereafter, the methodology and methodological approach that I choose to apply with a source of criticism will be explain and describe briefly. Subsequently, the theoretical framework will be discussed in the next chapter, followed by the main chapter of the thesis where relevant theories and factors of the democratization process in Myanmar and its impact on its foreign relations with other countries will be discussed. Lastly, the last section will present a conclusion where I try to justify my discussion and findings by writing a short summary of it.

4. METHODOLOGY

This section will justify my choice of methodological approach which is a temporal comparative case study where the context of Myanmar and its foreign policy will be examined in detail (Campbell 2010). This qualitative design will able to capture the essence of consequences and changes by taking time into account in the new democratization process and contribute to explaining the changes or continuities of Myanmar foreign policies in the country as they are exposed to other external liberal and non-liberal actors over time (Caren and Panofsky 2005, 147-150). Hence, some variables can be collected and must be accounted for the changes in foreign policies of Myanmar, its actors and their political motivations and strategic interests of the involving actors that might have affected its relations (Burnham et al. 2008, 65-66). Burnham et al. (2008) further opined that other forms of research design would be less appropriate than a comparative design in order to assessed and interpreted the

democratization process and changes in its foreign policy, in comparing the events before and after democracy (Burnham et al. 2008, 66,69).

According to Bennett (2004), a case study is a conceptual aspect of a historical happening that inquire to understand and explain the meaning of the social phenomenon (Bennett 2004, 29). Thus, a case study will be used as the thesis aim to explain how the democratization process in Myanmar has affected its foreign policy. Moreover, a case study will also enable to focus on an in-depth study of Myanmar's history from the transition from a military regime to the democratization process, and how it changes its foreign relations over time (Burnham et al. 2008, 63-64).

This thesis also aims to draw a causal-process tracing between the social mechanisms which is Myanmar's democratization and to a specific outcome which is the growth or declination of its foreign relations through its foreign policy (Blatter, Haverland, and Hulst 2017, 6). And in order to compare the impact of democratization on its foreign policy in Myanmar, it is important that the study is divided into two periods from the era of the military regimes into the introduction of "*roadmap to democracy*" in 2003 as the first period to the democratization process in 2003 to present-day as the second period.

Further, Burnham et al. (2008) opined that a longitudinal study design will enable to explain the change that occurs in Myanmar foreign policy and its relations with Western and neighboring nations over time (Burnham et al. 2008, 61). The purpose of qualitative methodology is to explain the systematic approach to understanding the changes in Myanmar's foreign policy and in a qualitative approach, the samples size are small in comparison to a quantitative approach (Patton and Cochran 2002, 2). Thus, data obtained from a qualitative approach from common methods such as interviews, observations, written documents, audio, and video material can be complex, and must often be interpreted by the researcher (Johannessen, Tufte, and Christoffersen 2011, 117). As such, a literature review will also be used in this thesis to analyze the social phenomenon and its specific outcomes. It is also essential that existing literature on the topic from researchers is used as it will highly contribute to a better understanding and explaining of theoretical framework used.

4.1 USE OF DOCUMENTARY AND ARCHIVAL AS SECONDARY SOURCE

The advantages of using documentary and archival sources in this thesis are that they can be found in libraries and has already been assessed and controlled. Moreover, the use of secondary sources is a useful point of reference as they already have contextualized the research problem and provide scholarly and comprehensive discussion of the topic. And the internet sources that I have chosen to use are of reputable academic publishers and can be regarded as solid sources. Further, Burnham et al. (2008) assert that documentary and archival sources provide an opportunity to develop interpretations of significant events (Burnham et al. 2008, 208). Additionally, Myanmar official policies statements, speeches of renowned leaders, conferences and meetings will also be utilized for this thesis. While using a secondary source of data, it is advantages to be critical as the obtained data can be biased, outdated or improperly obtained which can discredit the overall thesis.

4.2 LIMITATIONS AND CRITICISM

Burnham et al. (2008) assert that the use of comparative case study as a method has numerous advantages, as well as its limitations as it can often turn out to be meaningless. One of the limitations in using a comparative design is that there is a difficulty in finding similar cases or events to compare as no political system can never be the same, for instance, the military government under General Ne Win or General Saw Maung, and lastly, the government under President Than Shwe or Henry Van Thio. According to Ragin (1987) in Burnham et al. (2008) opined that as the political world is ever-changing, there are rich and varied available variables which make it impossible to isolate and control the primary interests (Burnham et al. 2008, 83).

The limitation in this thesis is that there were no actual interactions between the researcher and the research object which can reduce the reliability of the data. Since a secondary collection of documentary and archival data were used for this case study, it is critical for the researcher to inquire whether the obtained data were copyrighted or freely accessible and quote per se to the right citation. According to Aaltia and Heilmann (2010), the research problem and the research questions are to determine the methodology and methods used, and as such a case study with use of secondary data is inevitable. However, my personal background and experience as a Myanmar-Norwegian can influence my understanding of the obtained data, and thus, be biased on how I analyze and describe the research problem.

The extensive use of secondary sources of data in the form of news articles, blogs, academic journals, and prior research on the topic is crucial as there is limited research done on the research problem and as it is almost impossible to conduct primary research on the actual events that occurred during the first period. Moreover, there is scarce information or research done on the choice of topic which can increase the limitations of data obtained for this thesis. It is also critical to clarify that the researchers or authors from the secondary data are biased on their understanding of the social phenomenon, and thus, the data obtained need to be more scrutinized.

4.3 CREDIBILITY AND GENERALIZATION

The credibility in research refers to the methodological soundness of the methods used in research or thesis and is crucial in assessing the extent to which the method of case study is trustworthy (Burnham et al. 2008, 209). It indicates how data is collected and analyzed appropriately to capture the studied social phenomenon. Scott (1990) in Burnham et al. (2008) asserts that the researcher should consider the availability of other relevant secondary data that may have been gathered, retained, or archived on an ad hoc basis which can result in the continuity of under-representative selection of documents (Burnham et al. 2008, 211). The aim of this thesis is not to generalize but to be able to provide a contextual understanding of the impacts of democratization process in the foreign policy in Myanmar. Moreover, it is crucial that the researcher determine as much as possible about the conditions under which the data are obtained and produced to uphold its credibility (Scott 1990, Burnham et al. 2008, 212).

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will lay out the theoretical framework that will be used for understanding and discussing the concept of democracy as the context of democracy differ from one to another. In this section, it is also important to discuss the process of democratization and the stages it involves. Further, the concept of foreign policy will discuss and will be linked to democratization as a political context to foreign policy as a process.

5.1 DEMOCRACY

The notion of democracy is a complex and contested concept as the definitions of democracy can be understood and perceived differently by different political actors. The notion of democracy derived from the Greek words ‘*demos*’ which means the people and ‘*kratos*’ which means to rule, thus, meaning to rule by the people. The idea denotes the political systems that exist in Athens during classical antiquity where common people were allowed to participate in the assembly. Joseph Schumpeter (1942, 260) cited in Sorenson (1993) developed the notion of democracy as, “*the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote*” (Sorenson 1993, 10). In other words, Schumpeter regard democracy as a political method and mechanism for choosing political leadership by citizens who are given a choice among rival political leaders to compete for their votes during elections (Sorenson 1993, 10). Sorenson also opined on David Held’s notion of democracy where the basic principles of autonomy are supported where individuals are seen as equal and free to determine their own lives, thus, should enjoy equal rights. Thus, democracy is a dynamic entity with different definitions as it can be framed as one’s own understanding of the concept (Sorenson 1993, 10-11).

Though the concept of democracy also incorporates the idea of stability in the political system which according to Huntington (1993) is the degree to which the political system is expected to remain in existence. He further asserts that a political system may not always be more or less democratic or more or less stable (Huntington 1993, 11). Although political democracy is associated closely with the freedom of the individual, democracy can also be unruly and abused individual rights and liberties as well an authoritarian regime can provide a high degree of security and order for its citizens (Huntington 1993, 28). Thus, it is important that the political system in a country is not classified based on how long the country will endure the new democratic system as they can also differ greatly in their political stability.

Robert A. Dahl (cited in Sorenson 1993) also defined democracy as a political system where the citizens of a certain nation are considered as political equals by its government which is also a key characteristic of democracy. Thus, can be defined as, “*a political system characterized by the freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, the right of political leaders to compete for support or votes and the right for free and fair elections*” (Sorenson 1993, 12). According to Sorenson (1993), Dahl’s definition of political democracy

is a liberal democracy as it emphasized the protection of individual rights, and property rights (Sorenson 1993, 12-13). Sorenson further developed his notion of democracy as:

“a political system of government that meets the following conditions namely: “Competition”- among the individuals and organized groups for positions of government power. “Participation”- an inclusive political participation in selection of leaders and policies. “Civil and political liberties”- the freedom to express, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations to ensure that the integrity of the political competition and participation” (Sorenson 1993, 12-13).

Although the thesis is limited to how the democratization process has impacted changes in Myanmar’s foreign policy. It is still crucial to understand the political democracy as it opens up the political space for active participation, and for civil and political liberties of the citizens. Morlino (2004) asserts on the importance of how the quality in democracy can have immense impact on ensuring that an ideal democracy is met by presenting, *“a stable institutional structure that realizes the liberty and equality of citizens through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms”* (Morlino 2004, 10, 12). He opined on the importance of a legitimate regime that satisfies its citizens and pursues the values of democratic institutions. Moreover, as democracy is defined in terms of political democracy, the process of democratization, the change of a political system from non-democratic toward more democratic can take place in different ways (Sorenson 1993, 14).

5.1.1 DEMOCRATIZATION

The transition to democracy from a non-democratic rule is still a complex process as it involves several phases from the breaking down of the non-democratic regime (Sorenson 1993, 40). Rustow (cited in Sorenson 1993) asserts that the democratization process is attainable if national unity is in place (Sorenson 1993, 41). The transition to democracy has been experienced by many countries with autocratic regimes where changes in political, economic, and social institutions are inevitable. For instance, during the democratization process in China, the government had to deal with the issue of autonomy which the Tibetans claims. Sorenson contends that uniting the national through a democratic manner is a precondition for the success of democratization as it can result in the breakdown of democracy combined with the repression of the minority groups or a civil war (Sorenson 1993, 41). Thus, democratization can be defined

as the process of change towards a more democratic rule. The transition of a political system with democratic characteristics is not limited to modern times but have been an ongoing process that many of the worlds has experienced.

Pridham (2000) contend that democratization is used as an umbrella term for the process of change from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy. With the transition to democracy, new procedures are open in the institutions that allowed citizens to determine their rights. For instance, the democratization process also involves the introduction of universal rights and political competition to elect others that will take power for the common good through fair elections. Kozhemiakin (1997) opined that democratization in developing countries promotes peace and stability within the country through the country's interaction with other democratizing nations (Kozhemiakin 1997, 49). In light of the constant interactions with other neighboring nations, conflicts in international security can arise, however, this does not mean that advocacy of democracy is unfavorable to the impact it has on foreign relations. With the transition to democracy from an authoritarian regime, fundamental changes in foreign policy are necessary to establish so that the international community will be able to reopen their doors to pariah nation states.

Though the transition to democracy can contribute to sustainable growth, it is not an easy process. It is the process of shaping the country's mindset, the principles and development as Yves Leterme, International IDEA secretary-general asserts during the Annual Democracy Forum in Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia in 2016 (Santos 2016). As such it also has implications for international relations as democracy means an increase of a zone of peace in the world (Huntington 1993, 29). Kozhemiakin (1997) also recognized that the transition to democracy can last for a period of time and the success of it is not assured as many third wave democratizing nations are still struggling to concretized the democratic procedures (Kozhemiakin 1997, 51). Hence, the outcome to revert to an authoritarian regime is most possible in newly democratic nations (*ibid*,51).

Upon the success of the transitional process, democratization can present solutions as well as create problems. For instance, democratization can result in international conflict because of the changes in the political, socio-economic, and cultural attributes. Moreover, Kozhemiakin (1997) presumed that the changes in these attributes on the basis of domestic preferences are prominent in the foreign policy decision-making process (Kozhemiakin 1997, 58). Thus, it is

in order to point out that the impact of democratization on international society in form of foreign policy towards other neighboring nations is reliant on the aspect and strength of the domestic foreign policy preferences (Kozhemiakin 1997, 59). Accordingly, the democratization involves both internal and external forces which is often perceived as secondary to the domestic (internal) actors (Brown 2011, 10). External actors such as international institution, supranational institutions can influence democratization through incentives, international trade, diffusions of neighbor through resource-based approaches (Teorell 2010). Hence, the transition to democracy needs the involvement of both internal and external actors to achieved legitimized democratic nations.

5.2 WHAT IS FOREIGN POLICY

Foreign policy can be defined as a strategy used to approach other nations outside its states territorial border by its government (Sein 2016, 27). In his book, Fermann (2013) stated that *“foreign policy is an outward and purposeful business in which strategies are chosen and instruments are sought to be dosed in light of foreign policy objectives and the specific challenge facing the state”* (Fermann 2013, 47). It is established as a systematic way to deal with issues that can arise with other states and is not limited to the military and security policy, but also includes foreign economic policy, international environmental policy, and human rights policy (Beasley et al. 2012, 4). Hence, it is defined as the interest of the state towards other states within the scope of limited action through a creative political act which can be either pro-active towards interest policy internally or reactive towards adaption policy externally. According to Rosenau (1966), foreign policy behavior can be explained with five explanatory variables from *“idiosyncratic, role, government, societal and systemic”* (Wah 2016, 6). Based on Rosenau’s variables, scholars and veteran analysts who like Jeanne A.K. Hey and Maung Aung Myoe have categorized these five variables of the foreign policy of weak states into three levels from the individual, state, and system (Wah 2016, 6).

Since this paper focuses on the impacts in the international factors in Myanmar’s foreign policy, a systemic level of analysis which accounts for an external influence for defining its behavior toward other states in the international sphere will be used. As this thesis will try to understand the changes made in Myanmar’s foreign policy after its transition to democracy, it is apparent that the country’s foreign policy pre-democracy and after-democracy be discussed. Myanmar’s foreign policy has always been influenced by the domestic issues, however, Morten B. Pedersen

(2014) discussed that the core principles of Myanmar foreign policy is to pursue on three interrelated fundamental principles namely “*independent, non-aligned, and active foreign policy*” which was also stipulated in article 41 of the 2008 Constitution and in article 26 of the 197 Constitution (Myoe 2016, 125, 126). Though the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed to have adopted and practiced an independent, non-aligned foreign policy since its independence, the country was interested in entering an alliance with Western powers during the Kuomintang (KMT) aggression consisting of Chinese Nationalist troops in Myanmar (Sein 2016, 129).

6. DISCUSSION

The transition to democracy in Myanmar has been rocky and is scrutinized by the international community. The democratization process has enabled the country to set down the sanctions that have been established by the international community while the country was under the military regime. In this discussion, I would like to discuss how democratization process in Myanmar impact its foreign policy and take into account Myanmar foreign policy during the regime. It is important that I divide the discussion into two periods from the military era and the transition era. I would also like to discuss the variables that can contribute to changes in how foreign policy occurs like competition, participation, and civil and political liberties which are the principle tenets of Sorenson’s notion of democracy. And under the foreign policy section, I would also like to look into the system level of foreign policy as it is important that I take into account of Myanmar foreign policy towards the U.S., China and India into these two periods.

6.1 MYANMAR UNDER AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

As discussed earlier, the political system under the military regime was not a legitimate regime. Citizens were deprived of their rights to have a free, competitive, and fair elections which Morlino (2004) stressed is the most basic level of democracy. Under the regime for nearly fifty years, the country was still considered to be a weak country with instabilities in the political arena with unsettled regional conflicts and low economic performance (Wah 2016). During their military rule, Turnell (2011) asserts that circumstances and methods were exploited in order for them to continue their rule while failing to execute the basic principles of democracy (Turnell 2011, 79). Dean (2017) and Turnell (2011) stresses that many civil organizations and

dissent towards the government were suppressed, and as a result, many political opponents for fair elections were imprisoned. In order to understand if the transition to democracy impact on its country foreign policy has, it is essential to discuss the basic principles of democracy in Myanmar as these principles paved way for the possibilities of Myanmar to interact and open its door to the international community.

6.1.1 COMPETITION

According to Sorenson (1993), democracy entails that the freedom that allows individuals and organized groups for positions of government power (Sorenson 1993, 12-13). However, the Constitution in Myanmar under the military rule during the early 2000s were believed to be drafted by the military in Article 436 in Chapter 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar that provisioned 25 percent of the seats in each of the two houses of parliament. Though the 2008 Constitution took away its power from the military, it also offered them compensations by giving control to the military over the important ministries of home affairs, border affairs and defense with prior approval of more than 75 percent of representatives of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Yi 2018, Republic of Union of Myanmar 2008).

Myanmar has held two historic elections in the year 1990 and 2010. In 1990, an election was held between two multi-party national elections, the USDP and the NLD where power was not transferred to civilian government and the military regime was uphold. However, in 2010 a new election was held as a result of “*roadmaps to democracy*”. In this election, power was transferred to a nominally civilian government, the USDP and won a majority in both the chambers of the parliament. This new government was composed of former military generals and was established to keep key ministries were under the control of the military. Dahl and Sorenson opined that a democratic system gives free and fair elections and ensured that active participation for citizens to participate in elections is open.

As Sorenson (1993) opined, competition in a democracy is a concern with the extent to which rights are liberties are available to members of the political system (Sorenson 1993, 14). In other words, the present process of democratization in Myanmar allows an extent of political competition amongst opposition parties with the Third Constitution of 2008 giving 25 percent of seats in both houses of parliament to the military party or the USDP. During the early military rule, the military elites in Myanmar were impatient with the inability and weakness of the civilian politicians to stabilize the country (Wells 2018, 6). Thus, did not allow for a fair

competition and undermined the possibility of obtaining democracy. As such, there was no opposition parties that contributed to the construction of Myanmar's foreign policy under the *tatmadaw*. However, with the democratization process, opposition parties can exercise their rights to compete with the ruling party and contribute to strategizing new foreign policy that still preserves its strategic interests in other international countries.

6.1.2 PARTICIPATION

According to the findings of Larkin and Nyoï (2014), the participation of the citizen in a free and fair election where the basic principles of democracy are supposedly to rest is extremely low. Their findings further show that the political participation of the citizens was almost non-existent as they are faced with barriers such as poor access to information, perceptions of the political processes and reforms, restrictive social and cultural norms and hierarchies, low expectations of government responsibility and responsiveness (Larkin and Nyoï 2014, 6, 24). In the context of Myanmar during the military rule until 2011, citizens were suppressed or imprisoned if dissents for the ruling party was noticed. This kind of action towards dissents ensured that the rule of dictatorships.

Sorenson (1993) and Yi (2018) asserts that an inclusive participation for individuals to exercise their civil and political rights is an essential element in the process of democratization (Sorenson 1993, 43, Yi 2018). However, the findings of Larkin and Nyoï (2014) shows that democratic participation for women and young people in elections are low as the voting system is still based on heads of households rather than all adults residing in each household, thus excluding equal participation. With the process of transitioning to democracy, women and young adults can participate in foreign policies decision-making circles and provide other insights on the strategic interests of the state.

6.1.3 CIVIL AND POLITICAL LIBERTIES

Since 2012, the media of freedom in Myanmar have improved without the need for approval from the government. However, the military still has surveillance of the journalists and many are still at risk for harassment, physical violence, and imprisonment. Though the third Constitution of the country provides freedom, these liberties are limited. Many of the civil liberties which includes the freedom of right to free speech, privacy, fair court trial, and vote are restricted and constrained by state surveillance (Freedom House 2018). The study of Larkin

and Nyoï (2014) further found out that women civil and political liberties were limited, which also limit individuals or minorities to extend their liberties at its fullest (Larkin and Nyoï 2014, 33-34).

6.2 MAPPING MYANMAR'S FOREIGN POLICIES PRIOR TO THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION

As the previous section indicates, there are certain factors that play roles in the shaping of Myanmar foreign policy. These factors can be internal and external. The aim of this section is to explain and understand if there are changes in the foreign policies towards the U.S., China and India. Myoe (2016) asserts that the objectives of Myanmar foreign policy have always been practicing in the combination of protecting and promoting national interests and in upholding extensive global agendas of international security, peace, and development (Myoe 2016, 133).

Albeit that Myanmar has always relied on dealing with the international community and domestic unrest by repressing the populations and imprisoning people who opposed the regime while appeasing the international community with promises in freeing their political prisoners and giving more rights to its population. Since under military rule, the country has always been in isolation until 2011 and has recently begun to open up its door. With its geostrategic position, it has become a vital strategic value for foreign nations for its vast resources (Hays 2008). Hence, the core principles of Myanmar foreign policy is to pursue on three interrelated fundamental principles namely "*independent, non-aligned, and active foreign policy*" which was also stipulated in article 41 of the 2008 Constitution and in article 26 of the 197 Constitution (Morten B. Pedersen (2014) cited in Myoe 2016, 125, 126).

6.2.1 U.S.

Myanmar's relation with the US has been turbulent until 2008 when the Myanmar government was trying to improve its troubled relations with the U.S. (Qingrun 2010, 6). The U.S. as the world superpower has been promoting democracy and human rights as its central component in its foreign policy where it can help create a secure, stable, and prosperous global arena to advance its national interests (US Department of State 2019). Since its independence, Myanmar has received economic assistance from the U.S. through the Economic Cooperation Agreement in 1950 where incentives were provided in the form of grants, loans, and sales of

agricultural commodities (USAID 2019). When the SLORC, later SPDC took over in 1988, the U.S. and the European Union (EU) imposed strict sanctions on Myanmar where it criticized and pressured its military government and has a great influence in the political and democratic process. In 1990, the NLD won with a majority of the vote, however, the military did not abdicate from its rule and continued to control power until 2008 (Qingrun 2010, 9).

Since its independence in 1948, the bilateral relations between the U.S. and Myanmar have developed whereby recognizing the independence of Myanmar as a way to prevent the expansion of communism in the South Asian region. After the military coup by General Ne Win in 1962, Myanmar's followed a '*neutral foreign policy*' and made most external foreign investment in the country to cut off except for the assistance of U.S. where Myanmar officers graduated from the U.S. between the year 1950-1988 (Qingrun 2010, 12). With its neutral foreign policy, Myanmar believed that big powers like the U.S. and Russia cease to intervene in its domestic affairs. However, the bilateral relations between Myanmar and the U.S. reached its lowest point after the coup in 1988 and worsened it until 2008 (Qingrun 2010, 13). Under the Bush administration, Myanmar was continuously put under sanctions such as tightening economic sanctions on the military and its financial backers, imposing visa bans for individuals responsible for disregarding human rights, freezing assets of Myanmar officials, restrictions on import goods of Myanmar origin as it posed a threat to the national security and foreign policy of the U.S. (Siddique 2007, Qingrun 2010, 13-14).

6.2.2 CHINA

The Sino-Myanmar political relation has been a long and complicated relationship since the former independence in 1948 and has stretched over the years. As mentioned earlier, Myanmar has attempted to pursue an independent foreign policy of non-alignment since its independence where it avoided in engaging itself in conflicts between the West and East, and thus, prioritize on internal nation-building (Fang 2015, 30). Myint-U (2011) asserts the importance of Myanmar's vulnerable position between India and China, and accordingly manage its relationship with China cautiously by signing a border agreement in 1960 (Pettman 1973, 3). The foreign politics of Sino-Myanmar has been dominated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in order to reduce interventions of Chinese in the affairs of Myanmar (Pettman 1973, 1).

According to Fang (2015), the Chinese government emerged to be the most important foreign actor in Myanmar as the Western powers continued to sanction Myanmar which makes it easier

for the Chinese strategies to increase their influences (Fang 2015, 30, Swanström 2012, 22). However, the political relation with Myanmar remained fraught with suspicion as the Chinese government continued to intervene in the politics of Myanmar undermined the latter attempt to develop policies to safeguard its autonomy over domestic policies (Fang 2015, 30). The late 1980s saw an increase in trades and economic ties between the two countries which replaced the political distrust where China continued to play a major role in the political transformation and strengthen their position in Myanmar as they are profoundly active as military and economic actors related to the government (Fang 2015, 30). Swanström (2012) asserts that foreign policies of both the government and Aung San Suu Kyi in refusing to open more international engagement in Myanmar have negatively impacted the country by putting in greater isolation of Myanmar which many neighboring and international actors soon recognized (Swanström 2012, 22).

6.2.3 INDIA

The influence of China in Myanmar was first recognized by its neighboring country India as the Sino-Myanmar relations have a great impact on the economy and development of India. Due to the sanctions imposed by Western nations after a military coup, the foreign policy of Myanmar relies on its two neighbors, China and India, and also try to improve its ties with fellow ASEAN member states (Ramya P.S. 2018). The history of the Indo-Myanmar relations has its up and down and has started off long before the colonization by the British empire. The bilateral relations between India and Myanmar has been hugely impacted by the colonial and post-colonial politics. Hence, it has left the two countries with strained relations and has thus been fraught with indifference and hostility towards each other (Ramya P.S. 2018). Furthermore, the support of India for the democratic movement in Myanmar following the military coup in 1962 put a strenuous relation between the two countries (*Ibid.*). General Ne Win's policy of "*Burmese way to Socialism*" was seen as anti-Indian policies by many people of Indian origins in Myanmar, and Myanmar's neutral stand or non-aligned policies during the attack against India by Chinese was seen as a pro-Chinese act by India which put a more strenuous toil on the already strained relation between the countries (Singh 2007, 1).

By supporting and giving refuge to anti-SLORC dissidents, Myanmar saw India as a huge interference into the internal affairs (Haacke 2006a, 34). However, India reexamines its policy towards Myanmar as it feared for the establishment of pro-Chinese regimes in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Haacke (2006a) further asserts

that changes in India's new consideration towards its foreign policy are also due to economic and strategic interests of its security in the border problems that arise in the northeastern part of the country and Myanmar (Singh 2007, 34-35). The bilateral foreign policy between the two countries improves as border trade legalized during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Haacke 2006a, 35).

6.3 FOREIGN POLICY IN MYANMAR POST-2003 TO PRESENT DAY

With the transition of democratization, changes in government occurred leading to changes or continuing its policies towards other countries in safeguarding its security, ensure durable peace and maintain the economic development of the country. After winning the majority of seats and constituting a government in 2011, the USDP government announced the changes and continuities in its foreign policies towards other countries where President U Thein Sein declared that the new government would follow a foreign policy based on the fundamental principles of foreign policy in the 2008 Constitution (Myoe 2016, 124, 127). In article 41 of the 2008 Constitution, the foreign policy of Myanmar is to establish:

“an independent, active, and non-aligned foreign policy that aimed at world peace and friendly relations with nations and upholds the principles of peaceful coexistence among nations” (Myoe 2016, 127).

As such the objectives of Myanmar foreign policy have been to continue in combining to protect and promote national interests and supporting an extensive global agenda by actively contributing towards the maintenance of international security, peace, and development (Sein 2012, 1). Accordingly, Myanmar officials of the newly-transitioning democratic country went on state visits to India and other ASEAN neighbors to demonstrate their continued interests in its foreign investment, tourism, and to retain its friendly relations (Wilson 2007, 82). Wilson (2007) further asserts that due to lack of international experience by the new leadership that represent Myanmar in international meetings, the foreign policy it pursued was more susceptible and defensive than before. Moreover, the foreign policy reflected the increased influenced of military officials which were more reserved, more conscious of its security and less cooperative to its foreign relations (Wilson 2007, 83-84).

6.3.1 U.S.

The bilateral relations between U.S.-Myanmar post-2003 has intensified and deteriorated as the U.S. continues to maintain its campaign of absolute rejection of military rule in Myanmar (Wilson 2007, 90). As the relation between the two countries worsen as the United States imposed more broad sanctions, the U.S. ambassador left Myanmar until 2012 when a new ambassador was appointed (Qingrun 2010, 6). Nonetheless, the Myanmar government has tried to enhance its troubled relations with the United States since the end of 2008 by sending a congratulatory message to President-elect Barack Obama (Qingrun 2010, 6). This gestures of the Myanmar government shows that its willingness to repair its bilateral relation as this would contribute to lifting the sanctions imposed by the U.S. as well in its engagement to the process of democratization.

From 2008 to 2010, the bilateral relations between U.S.-Myanmar continuously harmed and patched each other again as many of the foreign policies that Myanmar practices were seen as an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the U.S. (Qingrun 2010, 7). Qingrun (2010) asserts that Myanmar wanted to improve its relations to the U.S. as it would contribute to the possibility of lifting pressure on its politics and economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other western actors (Qingrun 2010, 8). Moreover, by improving its relation to the U.S., it wants to develop relations with other countries and get more interests. For the improvement of the bilateral relations between the Myanmar-U.S., changes in foreign policy were adjusted towards Myanmar domestically by the U.S. under the administration of Obama which makes it futile for the relations to make significant moves. Furthermore, as Myanmar obtains strategic importance for the U.S., hence, the development of this bilateral relations will have a huge influence on countries associated with Myanmar such as the ASEAN, China and the EU (Qingrun 2010, 8).

6.3.2 CHINA

According to (Haacke 2006a), the bilateral relations with China has huge importance to Myanmar as it significantly contributes to enhancing its security and development by enabling them to avoid the impact of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and western actors (Haacke 2006a, 38). Ganesan (2018) argued that there has always been a disparity in the bilateral relationship between Myanmar-China (Ganesan 2018, 2). Ganesan further opined that China was looked upon by Myanmar as its kinsfolk or *pauk-pauw* which alarmed other countries competing for influence in Myanmar as China also decided to invest in the developmental

assistance and in its infrastructure of Myanmar (Ganesan 2018, 5). Due to the NLD landslide victory in the 2015 elections, the leaders of the country, especially under the wings of Aung San Suu Kyi, are inclined towards the West. This is so as the sanctions imposed by the West are one of the major reasons for the possibility of the politically liberalize country (Ganesan 2018, 5). Hence, remained a little more distance to its bilateral relation with China.

Similarly, China has also become clearly aware of the changes made in Myanmar foreign policies towards China during the democratization process after 2003. By extending friendliness to Myanmar and its new leaders, the Chinese also wish to continue and strengthen its bilateral relations with Myanmar by supporting the efforts made by Myanmar government in protecting its national security which the international community contempt due to the mistreatment of the Rakhine people. Myanmar's foreign policy towards China is focused on maintaining political-diplomatic backing to safeguard its national sovereignty and moreover, to opposes the interference of other foreign countries in the internal affairs of the country (Haacke 2006a, 30-31). Haacke further argued that foreign policies towards China was not altered as it has been extremely effective with strengthening the SPDC hold on power and in preventing Western and Japanese sanctions (Haacke 2006a, 33). As such, Myanmar continued to pursue an independent foreign policy towards China which would reinforce its security and enhance the economic and military relations between the two countries.

6.3.3 INDIA

After post-2003 with the announcement of the "*roadmap to democracy*", it was speculated that the possibility of Myanmar to privilege its ties with India was a possibility after President Than Shwe traveled to India in 2004 (Haacke 2006a, 32). The bilateral relations between Myanmar-India has improved considerably as it wants to counter the growing influence of China in Myanmar, and moreover, it was also essential to counter the security threats in North-East India by actively seeking to enhance its political and military exchanges and economic cooperation with India (Singh 2007, 2). India has continuously tried to reach out to Myanmar through its 'Look East Policy' (LEP), now called the 'Act East Policy' (AEP) by the current government. Under Narasimha Rao, the Prime Minister of India during the early 1990s, the LEP adopted a more pragmatic approach towards Myanmar which initiated economic relations through trade agreements which were a catalyst for the relationship between the countries (Maini 2014).

According to Haacke (2006a), Myanmar has followed inter-related foreign policy in the development of its relation with India as it seeks the contribution of the Indian government for its economic development, security, and political support (Haacke 2006a, 35). Accordingly, as India posed to have been an important key for the development of Myanmar's infrastructure and eventually dominate its foreign policy, hence, the foreign policies approach towards India by Myanmar deals with preserving its national interests and enhances its security by bandwagoning, hedging, and institutionalized cooperation (Ramya P.S. 2018). Myanmar's policy of bandwagoning has enabled the country to engage and deal with the balance of power crisis between its neighboring countries like India and China. Moreover, hedging is a policy in international relations which countries follow two opposite policies, for instance, Myanmar pursuing a balance and engage relation with India to improve and develop its socio-economic conditions. Ramya further asserts that it is important for Myanmar to follow institutionalized cooperation as certain challenges arise from the continuous drug trafficking and insurgency in its border with India.

7. CONCLUSION

The success of Myanmar foreign policy objectives depends on Myanmar's rapprochement with the U.S., China, and India as it requires both domestic political reforms and a foreign policy alignment which will contribute to reducing Myanmar's total dependence on the aforementioned countries. Prior to democratization, Myanmar foreign policy relies on an independent, neutral or non-aligned, and active policy with its neighboring countries and the international community. According to Egreteau (2017), Myoe (2016), (Haacke 2006a), the foreign policy objectives of Myanmar remain consistent throughout post-colonial times to the period of democratization, and has added a new foreign policy of reintegrating Myanmar into the international community (Myoe 2016, 133, Haacke 2006a, 38, Egreteau 2017, 309). Moreover, the foreign policy of Myanmar has repositioned within a complex of relations among major powers in the Indo-Pacific region by maintaining delicately balanced relations with China, U.S., India, Russia, and Japan (Myoe 2016, 144).

With the democratization process, the international community is also willing to lift the imposed sanctions while the country was under the military regime. In accordance with its independent and active foreign policy, Myanmar has shown enthusiasm in continuing to

develop its relationship with the discussed countries above as it will contribute to maintaining peace in the region. Myanmar has also continued to pursue the fundamental principles of its past foreign policy and has also shown to reintegrate itself in the international community by mending its relationship with U.S., China, and India (Myoe 2016, 146).

As a newly transitioning country, many international countries would want to develop relation with Myanmar and influence its foreign policy, nonetheless, it will want to preserve its status as a sovereign and independent state and take actions based on its own perception of what is right and wrong. Myoe (2016) further assert that Myanmar under President Thein Sein has pursued a foreign policy strategy in maintaining balances in the strategic interests of other international countries as well as preserving its friendly relations with neighboring countries, for example, India and China. It is important to note that there is lack of changes in Myanmar foreign policy as the USDP has more or less adjusted the foreign policy. Furthermore, the Tatmadaw has continued to be deeply involved in the process of foreign policy and not less, the new government style of leadership provides little room for change in foreign policy decision-making (Myoe 2017, 89, 114-115). Though there are no exceptional impacts or changes in the foreign policy of Myanmar due to the democratization process, the new government has shown its commitment to pursuing an active foreign policy in re-integrating itself to the international community after its self-isolation from the world for over some decades.

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