

A Thesis of China's International Relations with Myanmar

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Abstract: As one of China's important neighbors, China-Myanmar relations are a pair of bilateral relations that are difficult to be ignored in the course of China's policy of "strategizing the periphery". In this paper, we summarize Myanmar's overall perception of China from 2016 to the present. On this basis, it analyzes the impact of Myanmar's perception of China on the relationship between China and Myanmar. This study is problem-oriented, and by examining the reasons for the formation of Myanmar's perception of China, it is important for the development of China-Myanmar relations by solving specific problems and carrying out projects in Myanmar, including the "Belt and Road" program.

1. Introduction

Myanmar is one of China's important neighbors in Southeast Asia, and the direction of China's relations with Myanmar has a certain impact on the development of relations between China and other countries in Southeast Asia and even South Asia. Among the paths that China has chosen to enter the Indian Ocean, ^[1]Myanmar is a strategic gateway that needs to be emphasized since Yunnan Province is facing Southeast Asia and South Asia, and it is one of the strategic breakthroughs for China to optimize the geopolitical environment around it. Historically, the Yunnan-Burma Highway, the Hump Route, and the China-India-Burma oil pipeline have all demonstrated that Burma is a geostrategic partner that China cannot ignore. In recent years, under the influence of the U.S. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" on China's neighboring diplomacy, Myanmar, as a node country of China's "Belt and Road" Initiative and a channel for China to broaden its overseas resource imports, has become an important support for China's participation in Southeast Asia and South Asia in the development of its open economy.^[2] China and Myanmar have a long history of cooperation. China and Myanmar have a long history, and 2023 marks the 73rd anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which have gone through fluctuating stages of development.

Myanmar's policy toward China has fluctuated significantly due to political unrest, geopolitical factors, and Western speculation, leading to a series of ups and downs in the relationship between the two countries. Against this background, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between China and Myanmar.^[3]

2. Myanmar's perception of China

2.1 Myanmar government sends a message to China

The perceptions of Myanmar's leaders and officials towards China will directly affect the country's policy toward China. It is easy to see from the expressions and speeches of Myanmar's government leaders and officials on China and the Belt and Road Initiative as well as specific projects that China is a "strategic support" that Myanmar can hardly alienate. This recognition is reflected in the strategic agreements signed between the two countries and the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative in Myanmar, where Daw Aung San Suu Kyi made her third visit to China in a year and a half as State Counselor in 2017, agreeing to China's proposal to build the Myanmar-China Economic Corridor. During President Htin Kyaw's visit to China, he signed the China-Myanmar Crude Oil Pipeline Transportation Agreement as a precursor to the One Belt, One Road oil and gas pipeline project in Myanmar, and indicated that Myanmar was actively studying ways to participate in the One Belt, One Road project. "The premise of "participation" is that Myanmar considers the Belt and Road project as a mutually beneficial initiative of good neighborliness. In 2018, China and Myanmar jointly signed the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on the Co-construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said that Myanmar is in urgent need of solving the problems of backwardness in transportation and electricity, and she hopes to prioritize cooperation with China in these areas through the construction of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The NLD government believes that the "Belt and Road" program will benefit Myanmar through projects involving. Therefore, the NLD government believes that the Belt and Road program will play a positive role in bringing about the results of its administration through cooperation involving "people's livelihoods". At the end of Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to China, China provided 1 billion yuan (225.39 billion kyats, or \$148 million) in grants to Myanmar for livelihood improvement projects, research on major projects, and humanitarian aid for people displaced by the civil war in northern Myanmar, and signed a memorandum of understanding on a five-year development plan for economic and trade cooperation.^[4] Subsequently, a steering committee was set up under the chairmanship of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, with Vice President Myint Swe as vice-chairman, and ministers from Myanmar's divisions and states, government ministers and others as members of the committee. The committee announced that Myanmar supports the Belt and Road Initiative and actively participates in it to help build economic corridors between the two countries, and that Myanmar and China will deepen their cooperative relationship to promote the stable and healthy development of the strategic cooperative relationship between the two countries. The shelved Myitson Dam serves as a typical case where the Chinese company that invested in the initial phase of the project suffered huge financial losses. Meanwhile, the governance of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership over the past five years has allowed China to see the potential for continued cooperation with the NLD government. Aung San Suu Kyi has visited China several times and has expressed the need for friendly relations with China for Myanmar's economic development. Under the NLD government, bilateral economic relations have improved significantly, with Myanmar actively participating in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and, in June 2017, the successful commissioning of the full China-Myanmar crude oil pipeline. As of July 25, 2022, 35.67 billion standard cubic meters of natural gas and 51.3599 million tons of crude oil have been safely transported. However, on the topic of the "debt trap", the NLD government is continuing bilateral cooperation, and the country has put in place responsive measures to avoid possible problems. Myanmar's Minister of Finance U Soe Win said that the Myanmar side will reduce the amount of

investment to ensure that it will not suffer a serious financial risk crisis. As a result, Myanmar's attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative has been positive but slow, in an effort to ease the pressure on the government. The international community's isolation and siege of the interim government following Myanmar's political upheaval has led to a deepening recognition of China as a strategic development partner for the country. 2023 Deputy Foreign Minister U Kyaw Myo Htut thanked China for providing a total of 92 special funds amounting to US\$27.4 million during the Lancang ambassador's tour on February 16, and the two countries' mutual trust and cooperation has not been a major factor in Myanmar's success. The mutual trust between the two countries has not been shaken by the political changes in Myanmar, but rather has emphasized the "brotherly love" at this critical moment.^[5]

The Myanmar government tends to "trust" China as an old friend in the process of formulating its China-related policies and its policies towards China. Positive and optimistic perceptions of China are reflected in the policies, and the relationship between China and Myanmar has been further developed through the interaction between the two countries. "The Belt and Road Initiative and specific projects are a major manifestation of the problematic nature of China-Myanmar relations, and perceptions within the Burmese government are divided. While the Chinese government hopes to deepen relations and build a community of destiny through the Belt and Road initiative, the "caution" and "skepticism" of the Myanmar government has not been a major obstacle to the implementation of the initiative. Even though there are different voices within the government, the Myanmar government's policy toward China still reflects its hope for closer ties between China and Myanmar, and the relationship between the two countries has continued to develop in the process of clearing up the doubts and confusion.^[6]

2.2 Myanmar media's perception of China

The media play a significant role in the process of agenda-setting and opinion management. Negative public opinion in the international community arises from the activation of historical memory, constraints on the level of educational and cultural development, misinformation and misguided "elite opinion". In Myanmar, a country with a low level of press freedom, the media plays a role in helping to defend and monitor the government. As Myanmar people lack direct knowledge of the specifics of China-Myanmar relations, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the stories and images portrayed by the media are particularly important. Negative public opinion shaped by the Myanmar media can inhibit individual awareness of China and related policy cooperation, and undermine the civil society basis for inter-country cooperation. Moreover, negative public opinion is often easier to generate than positive public opinion, and individuals are more likely to favor the more negative public opinion in the process of dissemination and acceptance. The official state media, mainly the New Light of Myanmar,^[7] have portrayed China's national image in a neutral and positive way. However, in the era of integrated media, the way audiences receive information has changed, and the level of trust in official media has decreased. Private media, on the other hand, create news for their audiences according to the "information cocoon" model, thus domestic media, such as the relatively negative China-related reports, are wary of China's development, which makes it difficult for the Burmese people to recognize a three-dimensional and comprehensive China. Especially after the military took over power in 2021, the Myanmar media made many speculations about China's role in the incident, including the opinion that China is a so-called "supporter" of the incident, which added fuel to the fire of people's opposition to China and Chinese-funded enterprises. "The Chinese government's role in the incident has been the subject of much speculation. Myanmar's society in the transition to democracy is characterized by the mentality of "development depends on China, security follows the United States". On the issue

of "choosing sides", 92% of the Burmese people chose the U.S. after the sudden change in the political situation. This kind of biased cognitive results also caused the "distrust" between China and Myanmar, the hearts and minds of the people as Myanmar's democratic process of the rulers attach great importance to the elements, to comply with the public opinion and China "to maintain a distance, cautious treatment" between the two countries' relations. The basic reaction of "people's heart is not close" between the two countries.^[8]

2.3 Myanmar Scholars' Perceptions of China

Myanmar academics and Chinese academics have always maintained good academic relations, and exchanges between scholars of the two countries have become one of the important channels for the development of China-Myanmar relations. As the elite class of Myanmar, Myanmar academics have the opportunity to understand China and China's policies towards Myanmar, as well as to communicate with the public, so Myanmar academics are more objective in their perception of China. As we can see from the above, Myanmar academics recognize China as a "strategic support" for Myanmar, but are more skeptical of the Belt and Road Initiative and its specific projects than the government. However, the level of skepticism towards the Belt and Road Initiative and specific projects is slightly higher than that of the government.^[9] Burmese academics have been the initiators and supporters of protests against the Belt and Road program. Myanmar scholars participate in China policymaking by exchanging, integrating, accumulating and disseminating policy knowledge in a particular area. As a result, Myanmar scholars' perceptions of China not only influence policymakers at the upper levels of the state, but also have some influence in shaping the perceptions of China among the general public. In their strategic perceptions, Burmese scholars hope that Myanmar will use China as a basis for a wider range of international relations activities, while in their specific perceptions, they waver between agreement and skepticism. This cognitive dilemma does not only exist in Myanmar's academia, but is a common situation in Myanmar's perception of China. Although the cognitive dilemma of Myanmar's academia has no direct impact on China-Myanmar relations, as an elite group in Myanmar society, its cognitive views on China directly affect the judgment of China policymakers on Myanmar's "operating environment", thus the two countries have both strategic intimacy and specific cooperation in the relationship of caution and wavering.

3. Analysis of Factors Affecting Myanmar's Perception of China

As a small and medium-sized regional country, Myanmar relies heavily on external trade and investment for its development. At the same time, Myanmar is a country undergoing a "democratic transition", and the simultaneous existence of safeguarding national interests and pursuing Western ideologies, values, and concepts of international order is unavoidable in the course of political transition. The analysis reveals that the factors affecting Myanmar's perception of China are multilayered and multivariate. According to the analytical framework set out in this paper, Myanmar's perception of China can be divided into two parts: strategic perception and specific perception, and the factors affecting perception are mainly caused by a combination of domestic and international factors. Among the domestic factors, the leaders, as the decision makers of the country's foreign policy, their personal experience and judgment of the surrounding environment are one of the direct factors affecting Myanmar's perceptions of China. As political parties are an important part of Myanmar's politics, the change of political parties and their interests will affect the "psychological environment" of the leaders as well as the perception of Myanmar's decision-makers towards China.^[10] In addition, domestic factors such as the public opinion environment will create a top-down "information cocoon" for Myanmar, making it difficult for information receivers to obtain

diversified information, which in turn will create biased perceptions. Negative perceptions of China are difficult to change, which is why it is difficult for Chinese companies to gain public recognition through publicity. Induced Stereotyping, Cognitive Compatibility, and Historical Analogies explain the formation of Myanmar's "misperceptions" of China based on an analysis of the country's realities.

4. Proposals to improve China's international relations with Myanmar

4.1 Enhancing political trust

In the wake of the political changes in Myanmar, China has been actively mediating with ASEAN to regulate the crisis in Myanmar. As the "strategic backer" of successive Myanmar governments, China will clarify its role and responsibility in the political crisis in Myanmar. One of the reasons for Myanmar's "misperception" of China is the relationship between China and the military, and between China and the democratically elected government. As neighbors, China and Myanmar should work with ASEAN to promote political reconciliation under the constitutional and legal frameworks, and encourage all parties in Myanmar to take the overall interests of the country and its people into account, be rational and pragmatic, make mutual concessions and understandings, and take into account the reasonable demands of all parties, so that stability can be restored and peace can be achieved at an early date. Myanmar's democratization process is irreversible, so China should actively cooperate with the Myanmar leadership to help Myanmar restart the democratic transition process, realize the vision of returning power to the people, and explore a path of political development in line with Myanmar's national conditions and with Myanmar's characteristics. The friendly relationship between China and Myanmar stems from the consensus on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and in the current complex and volatile international situation, China supports Myanmar in independently choosing its own path of development in line with its national conditions. China cherishes the traditional friendship between China and Myanmar, and has always placed Myanmar in an important position in its neighboring diplomacy. China will also always support Myanmar in safeguarding its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, exploring a path of development in line with its own national conditions, and supporting the people of Myanmar in leading a happy and peaceful life.^[11]

4.2 Expanding areas of economic cooperation

China and Myanmar have a long history of multidisciplinary economic cooperation. The two countries have maintained good trade relations, even after the sudden political changes in Myanmar and the New Guan epidemic. Myanmar's "misperceptions" of China are centered on the belief that Chinese investment would be detrimental to Myanmar's interests. Therefore, it is important to continue to expand the interests of both countries and help Myanmar achieve its economic development goals through economic cooperation. In 2021, China's direct investment in Myanmar amounted to US\$3.99 billion. By the end of 2021, more than 6,200 direct investment companies were opened in China's ASEAN countries and employed more than 58,000 foreign workers. In addition, ^[12]China's direct investment in Myanmar was \$3.99 billion. China's investment areas in Myanmar are power, transportation, CMP garment industry and other projects, respectively. China is willing to help many developing countries, including Myanmar, to develop rapidly, and most of the Chinese investment entrepreneurs invest in the raw material processing (CMP) industry, and Chinese entrepreneurs have built more than 500 CMP factories in Myanmar to carry out their business.

Myanmar's "misperception" of China in the economic sphere needs to be rationalized by China

in terms of both policy and business. Domestically, China has changed its regulations on overseas investment to protect its image and business interests. The Chinese government needs to put pressure on Chinese companies investing in Myanmar to comply with local laws, regulations and norms in order to maintain social license. By engaging with local people, companies can create a deeper understanding of Chinese investment and Chinese projects, thereby reversing negative perceptions of China in Myanmar society.

4.3 Focus on national image building

The "one country, one policy" approach is the most effective way of communication in an all-media environment. In order to change Myanmar's perception of China, it is necessary to deal with the following issues: the outstanding problems in communication interface, the problem of inertia of the communication body, and the practical concerns of the communication target. To deal with the problem of the inertia of the communication subject, the content of the communication should be clearly delineated to cater to the different needs of each group and reduce the resistance of the Myanmar people to China. The focus of mobilizing the people of Myanmar to understand and approve of China-related information and content, and reducing skepticism about China's decision-making, is to enhance the capacity to communicate the international agenda. China has not seized the opportunity to set its agenda in Myanmar in a timely manner. Therefore, when China makes scientific communication decisions in Myanmar, it should focus on the audience and use issues as a guide to communicate, so as to achieve good results in relieving the audience's concerns, and emphasize the people's concerned agenda when disseminating China's information in Myanmar. Nowadays, China's communication in Myanmar does not emphasize the dimension of communication, which prevents local people from forming empathy. Therefore, when designing its communication strategy, China should take into account the cultural traditions of China and Myanmar and the ideology of the two peoples. Meanwhile, there is a gradual transition from self-talk to dialog. In terms of strategic cooperation between the two countries, they can no longer think in terms of dialogue, and emphasize the need for China's stories to have a "local" communication effect.

5. Conclusion

China Myanmar is a neighboring country for a long time, in the relationship between the two countries, Myanmar people's perception of China plays a very crucial role in it. Studying the fluctuation of Myanmar's perception of China is of positive significance in exploring a series of Myanmar's policies towards China and understanding the fluctuation of the relationship between the two countries, which is conducive to making a more accurate judgment on the future direction of the relationship between the two countries.

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