



ESSENCE OF MYANMAR'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER PRIME MINISTER U NU (1948-1962)

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Abstract. In order to contribute to safeguarding national security and secure work for rebuilding the economy, whereby preserving and maximizing the national interests in general after independence (1948), the foreign policy makers of Myanmar timely had the correction which was appropriate to the internal situations as well as complex developments of international and regional context in the Cold War. This paper mentions Myanmar's foreign policy, explains and analyses its roots and core contents under Prime Minister U Nu (1948-1962).

Keywords. Myanmar, foreign policy, international context, Prime Minister U Nu

1. Introduction

Over the course of more than half a century of British colonial rule, after gaining independence (1948), Myanmar leaders were aware of the increasing tensions in international politics and therefore were engaged in pathing an appropriate foreign policy to secure their national interests. Based on the consideration of both external and internal factors that might have an impact on the development of their country, the leaders of Myanmar chose their own path of external relations. Since then, this policy has been contributing significantly to the achievement of the set objectives.

2. Overview of Myanmar's foreign policy formulation process

A country's foreign policy is a set of strategies that the country uses in its interaction with international organizations and other countries in all dimensions of countries activities. The ultimate goal of one country's foreign policy is to secure their national interests by "influencing and changing the behavior of other political subjects as well as adjusting the actions of each country itself under the impact of the external environment [3]. The way of making Myanmar's foreign policy under the civil government of U Nu (1948-1962) was not separated from the common orbit with the influences and dominations of international, regional context and

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domestic situation. In particular, they bring out the central factors making a turning point in shaping the Southeast Asia country's foreign policy.

Myanmar gained independence when the world situation changed drastically. World War II ending affected international relations, countries, regions and even the newly established world order. Right after the war ended, the relations between the Soviet Union and the United States of America shifted from the alliance, which had played the key factor in the defeat of the fascist forces, to adversaries. In line with a new order established after World War II, the national liberation movement took place ebulliently around Asia, Africa, and Latin America, causing the fall of the colonial system and leading to the emergence of many independent nations that have an active participation in the world politics, including Myanmar. The policy of neutrality and non-alignment in the foreign relations had been chosen by Myanmar leaders after independence (1948) in that internal context.

For the first two years (1948–1949), however, the domestic difficulties that Myanmar faced since 1948 dominated the process of implementing this neutral, non-aligned foreign policy. At that time, the newly formed Myanmar government headed by Prime Minister U Nu faced severe economic difficulties after a long period under the colonial rule (1885–1948), along with the armed uprising by communist forces and ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. Such circumstances required a foreign policy to achieve three urgent objectives: (1) promotion of economic rehabilitation and reconstruction, (2) maintenance of political stability and unity, and (3) safeguarding of national security and independence [2, p. 59].

Thence, besides relying on the United Nations (UN) for the third objective, in 1948–1949, Myanmar *came closer to Western countries* and looked to Britain and the United States for seeking economic and military assistance in order to achieve the first two goals. With that position, in the summer of 1949, Myanmar's Deputy Prime Minister, General Ne Win and Myanmar's Foreign Minister E Maung went to London and Washington to demand help from Britain and the United States. During the visit, Myanmar Foreign Minister also expressed the willingness of the Myanmar government to consider a security treaty in the Pacific with these two powers [12, p. 218]. In a speech on 14 June 1949, Myanmar prime minister stressed: "It is now time that we should enter into mutually beneficial treaties or arrangements, defense and economic, with countries of economic interest. The Union Government (Myanmar) is at present counting this question in all its aspects" [4, p. 209].

Even though, Myanmar's request for help was not met with a positive response from the two countries. The reason is that, by now, the United States concentrated on European affairs, and also regarded military assistance to Myanmar as the obligation of its former colonial power. Britain, for its part, was less sympathetic to the policy of the Myanmar government on the resolution of internal conflict involving the Karens, whom Britain considered as its traditional

friends and anti-Communist. Meanwhile, in Asia, the foundation of the People's Republic of China (1949), as well as the outbreak of the Korean War in January 1950 and the emergence of a neutrality force in Asia, have brought the Cold War between the East and West blocs into a crucial phase. The above-mentioned events have had a significant impact on Myanmar – a country has just gained independence – about how to both secure its young independence and take advantage of the favourable conditions to recover and develop the economy. Thus, the U Nu government has been forced to seriously rethink the based-West approach as well as take consideration quickly to return to the neutral, non-aligned path on Myanmar's foreign policy in the next stage.

It can be said that the neglect of Britain and the United States in assisting Myanmar to deal with domestic problems, along with the effects of the international situation, has become the major catalyst pushing Myanmar back to its original choice for foreign policy – a neutral, non-aligned policy.

3. Neutrality, non-alignment: core content in Myanmar's foreign policy (1948–1962)

From the West-leaning policy for nearly two years after independence (1948–1949), the Myanmar government quickly returned to the neutral, non-aligned path in its foreign relations for the rest of the existence of U Nu's civil government. That consistency is determined by the new perceptions and thoughts of the Myanmar government.

First, the major powers do not work for the interests and benefit of anybody else, but for their own. After World War II, they are building up the strength for global control, and they are making rival claims and shouting each other down for the defense of democracy, respect for human dignity, liberation from imperialism, and the building of heaven on earth. However, whatever ideologies they have, whatever policies they outline, whatever resolutions they pose, whatever slogans they shout, in actual practice, whenever there is a conflict with their interests, they are not ashamed to discard their policies, to shelve their resolutions, and to change their slogans as easily and quickly. Since these great powers are not acting for the interests of anybody else but their own, do not let yourselves be their stooges... never trust them completely to the extent of leaving-out all in their hands [9, p. 88–89].

Second, the decisions of major powers are not always right. Once Myanmar has taken sides with either the Anglo-American bloc or the Soviet bloc, we must support the side taken in any and everything, right or wrong. We will have no choice. Therefore, we do not ever want to be in such a position [13].

Third, alignment with a power bloc increases world tension. Myanmar is a small country with the internal situation unsettled, economy unstable and military strength poor. Therefore, we cannot say that world war cannot break out by such a tiny mite of a country remaining neutral, but we can say this much, however small a country may be, its alignment with any power bloc will more or less help to increase world tensions [1, p. 188].

Fourth, through non-alignment, Myanmar can steer clear of power conflicts and avoid being hurt or destroyed in the quarrels of others. Finally, non-alignment gives Myanmar maximum freedom of action in international affairs, freedom to judge each issue on its merits and to take a stand on what its leaders believe to be right at any given time without dictation or pressure from an external source. A product of outside circumstances and events – the policy of neutralism in foreign relations – was further confirmed and solidified by internal politics. Neutralism enabled a compromise between the two ideologically different political forces in the country where the Rightists were pro-West and the Leftists were pro-East [11, p. 24].

So, in a speech in the Congress on 28 September 1949, Prime Minister U Nu expressed Myanmar's foreign policy emphasizing a neutral, non-aligned foreign policy with five basic principles: (1) not linking to any power bloc; (2) maintaining friendly relations with all countries and not becoming enemies of any country; (3) accepting economic support without political binding provisions; (4) objectively considering all foreign policy issues; (5) willing to contribute to the building of world peace and helping a country in need of help [8, p. 98]. The declaration means that Myanmar government was not interested in either anti-Right or anti-Left pacts, but only in peace and anti-aggression. Therefore, Burma maintains a friendly relationship with Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union on the view that *"Myanmar's relations with all countries in the world are the same."* [5, p. 22]

Although the new non-aligned stance did not exclude Myanmar from continuously seeking Western aid to fight rebels and promote economic development, on 11 December 1949, U Nu spoke of an independent course and non-alignment with any power bloc in foreign affairs: *"Our circumstances demand that we follow an independent course and no ally ourselves with any power bloc... The only political programme which we should pursue is the one which we genuinely believe to be the most suitable for our Union whatever course the British, the Americans, the Russians, and the Chinese Communists might follow"* [6, p. 51].

It can be seen that from the late of 1949, neutralism was finally established as a cornerstone of Myanmar's foreign policy. Prime Minister U Nu had repeatedly explained this policy of neutralism: *"We must find out which country or countries have common interests with us, and if we find one, it is up to us to work together with them. However, we do not desire alignment with a particular power bloc antagonistic to another opposing bloc."* [7, p. 86]

In the speech to Parliament on 8 March 1951, after Myanmar voted with the Soviet Union and its satellites in the UN General Assembly against a United States sponsored resolution to brand Communist China as aggressor in Korea, U Nu justified Myanmar's action within the context of neutralism: *"This House is perfectly aware of the existence of the two power blocs led respectively by Anglo-Americans and Soviet Russia. Although our country is a tiny mite compared with these countries, we can consistently pursue an independent line in tackling international problems with the sole purpose of achieving the Union's peace and world peace without any regard for the wishes of these powers. Because of this independent policy, both the Anglo-American bloc and the Soviet bloc suspect our motives... To be candid, we can never be the camp followers or stooges of any power... The sole criterion for all our decisions is our sense of what is right and proper"* [14].

U Nu, after returning to the post of prime minister in March 1957 and returning to the government in 1960, continued to pursue the neutral, non-aligned foreign policy launched in 1949. In particular, when General Ne Win took over the leadership of the Myanmar Government during 1958–1960, he still maintained the foreign policy put forward by his predecessor: *"My Government does not entertain any notion to introduce any changes whatsoever in the foreign policy being pursued. I wish to announce that my Government intends to continue in the practice of strict neutrality free from any entanglements"* [10, p. 95].

4. Conclusions

As an inseparable entity in global relations, Myanmar's foreign policy under U Nu's government was deeply influenced by elements of the international context, especially the powerful domination of the bipolar order after World War II. This was an important motivation for the Myanmar government shaping a neutral, non-aligned path after gaining independence in 1948.

Knowing that foreign policy is the prolonged arm of domestic policy to maximize national interests and despite other considerations and choices in the years 1948–1949, Myanmar has consistently pursued the neutral, non-aligned policy as the core content in the foreign policy in its first decades after independence.

The remarkable aspect of the foreign policy of Myanmar under Prime Minister U Nu is both assuring national interests when adopting all external economic supports without any political constraints and contributing significantly to shaping the third path – the neutral, non-aligned path – between the two movements – capitalist and socialist – after World War II. In fact, the choice has enabled Myanmar to be independent and self-controlled in decisions related to domestic and international affairs, to take advantage of outside assistance to build the country and contribute to maintaining world peace, and to avoid tensions in the context of so

many countries and regions being drawn into the power struggle between the East and West in the new world order.

Thus, with different names such as “independent neutrality”, “active neutrality”, “positive neutrality”, “strict neutrality”, “policy of nonalignment”, or “neutralism”, the foreign policy that Myanmar pursues since independence has always been the driving force for the Myanmar government in diplomatic relations with countries, regions and the world. It can be said that facing the challenges posed by the international and domestic situation after gaining independence, Myanmar chose the neutral, non-aligned foreign policy, which was essential to the national interest of the country and world peace. Up to now, one of the important objectives in the planning and implementing of the foreign policy of different countries in the world is to ensure the national interests to maximum. However, besides the core factor, each country needs to focus on the global issues for the sake of world peace. Because in today's globalized society, each country cannot survive or develop individually in a global context with many uncertainties.

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