

China's Intervention Policy in Myanmar Facing Challenges from India

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Myanmar, China, India, Strategic Competition, Indian Ocean.

Received : 14 October

Revised : 15 November

Accepted: 16 Desember

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the 21st century, Myanmar holds a significant geopolitical position, serving as a hotbed of competition between India and China in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia region. To counter India's influence, China has employed various tools to increase its sway in Myanmar. This article investigates China's intervention policies in Myanmar in the face of challenges from India. The research results indicate that China is implementing four main policies to intervene in Myanmar: (1) Approaching political factions; (2) Exploiting ethnic issues, particularly the Rohingya; (3) Creating economic dependence through investment and trade; (4) Enhancing military and defense cooperation. However, Myanmar's policies have undergone numerous changes, causing China's influence to waver. Nevertheless, in the current volatile context, Myanmar tends to rely on China economically and militarily. This has posed challenges to India's position, especially since the National League for Democracy (NLD) leader - Aung San Suu Kyi was ousted.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, Chinese leaders have publicly decided to expand their influence to South Asia and the Indian Ocean, areas traditionally seen as under India's influence (Pant, 2014). This issue has severely impacted India's national security policy, especially as both powers have disputes and conflicts in the Tibet border region, but to date, there is no solution that suits the core interests of both India and China. This has eroded the trust of the leaders of the two powers in a comprehensive, friendly, and reliable cooperative relationship in the current global context (Kiet, 2023). Therefore, China has built the "String of Pearls" strategy through the "Belt and Road" (BRI) initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to establish a network surrounding the entire spatial range of India from land to sea (Dabas, 2017). To counter China's power expansion, Indian leaders have implemented the "Look East Policy" to increase power and influence over Southeast Asian countries, simultaneously counterbalancing China's strategy with countries in this region (Mehrotra, 2012). In this, Myanmar is a country with an important geopolitical position in the competition strategy between India and China in the Indian Ocean region, so both powers have comprehensive cooperation policies with Myanmar. Myanmar is a country with an important strategic position in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (Ayob, 2016). In the context of increasingly fierce strategic competition between India and China, the struggle for influence in Myanmar has become a fierce race (Hien, 2018). As a neighbor of Myanmar, China has and is striving to strengthen its influence in this country through various policies and tools to prevent India, while consolidating its position (Liem et al., 2021, p.47).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of China's intervention policy in Myanmar in the face of challenges from India is a topic that is receiving significant attention from academia. Previous studies have analyzed Myanmar's role in China's and India's foreign policies and strategies. Ayob (2016) affirmed that Myanmar is a gateway for India to access Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Das (2010) argued that controlling Myanmar is strategically significant for India's maritime security. Similarly, Konovalov (2022) and Hoa (2022) also emphasized the importance of Myanmar in China's "String of Pearls" strategy to surround and contain India. In addition, some studies have specifically analyzed China's policies and strategies to increase influence in Myanmar. Binh et al (2020) pointed out that China is using Myanmar as a "barrier" to prevent India. Wee (2015) noted that China is exploiting ethnic conflicts to intervene in Myanmar. Meanwhile, Liem et al (2021) analyzed how China uses economic leverage and security and defense cooperation to increase influence. However, previous studies still have some limitations. First, most only analyze the overall importance of Myanmar to China or focus on a specific aspect of Beijing's intervention policy. Second, the studies have not deeply evaluated the effectiveness of China's intervention policies nor analyzed in detail the competitive context with India. Therefore, this study proposes to specifically analyze the policies and tools that China is using to intervene and increase influence in Myanmar, while evaluating

effectiveness and the strategic competition context with India in this country. The research results will contribute a deeper insight into China's foreign policy for Myanmar, and also be the basis for policymakers to make appropriate countermeasures in the context of increasingly fierce strategic competition in the region. Thus, this study contributes to a comprehensive view of China's intervention policies in Myanmar, and a deeper analysis of the fierce strategic competition context with India - an issue that lacks in-depth research.

METHODOLOGY

The article uses qualitative analysis methods, specifically international relations research methods, content analysis methods, historical and logical methods, statistical methods through secondary data sources related to the article's topic to clarify the policies and tools that China is using to intervene and increase influence in Myanmar in the face of challenges from India. From there, it provides a basis for policymakers to make appropriate countermeasures in the context of increasingly fierce strategic competition between India and China in the region in general and Myanmar in particular. Accordingly, the article has 02 specific objectives: (1) Analyze the importance of Myanmar in the competitive relationship between India - China in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia region; (2) Analyze 04 policies, strategies applied by China to intervene in Myanmar. Specifically: (1) Approach political factions; (2) Exploit ethnic issues, Rohingya people; (3) Create economic dependence through investment, trade; (4) Enhance military, defense cooperation. To achieve these objectives, the article focuses on answering the following 07 research questions: (1) Why does Myanmar have a strategic position in the competitive relationship between India and China in the region? (2) What tools and policies is China using to increase influence in Myanmar? (3) What is the purpose of China's strengthening relations with political forces in Myanmar? (4) How does China exploit minority ethnic issues to increase influence in Myanmar? (5) What economic tools is China using to create Myanmar's dependence? (6) Why is defense cooperation an important tool in China's strategy for Myanmar? (7) What is the biggest challenge to China's influence in Myanmar today?

RESEARCH RESULT

1. The Importance of Myanmar in India-China Relations

The competitive relationship between India and China in the Indian Ocean region originates from historical disputes over border conflicts and competition for control of vital maritime routes on the ocean, which has strongly impacted the political and security situation of countries in the region (Kiet, 2023). Myanmar is a country located in Southeast Asia with an area of 676,577 km², geographically bordering India in the west on land and the maritime region of India in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in the south, and bordering China in the north (Myanmar National Portal, 2023). Therefore, Myanmar is a neighbor of India and China, and also shares similarities in history, culture, and religion with the ancient civilizations of

India and China (Konovalov, 2022). Along with the explosion of globalization and the rise of economic power and influence of China and India, Myanmar, with its strategic geographical position bordering both powers, plays a core role in the competitive strategy of India and China in the Indian Ocean region. As a result, Myanmar quickly became the center of power competition between these two powers in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia regions.

Firstly, Myanmar holds a significant strategic position for both India and China. For India, Myanmar is the gateway to Southeast Asia and ASEAN (Ayob, 2016). Through Myanmar, India can expand its economic, political, and security influence to the East. Infrastructure projects connecting India with Myanmar and Thailand will help India expand its export and import markets (Paode, 2013). In addition, India also wants Myanmar to become a security partner to control maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait (Liem et al., 2021, p.153). For China, Myanmar is an important part of the "String of Pearls" strategy aimed at encircling and restraining India's influence in the region (Binh et al., 2020). Controlling Myanmar will help China expand its influence to Southeast Asia and South Asia (Hoa, 2022). Furthermore, China can also use Myanmar as a military and intelligence base to monitor India's military activities in the Indian Ocean. In particular, China is promoting the construction of a deep-water port in Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) to ensure energy security and expand its influence in the Indian Ocean (Kiet, 2023). The competition for influence in Myanmar is an important part of the strategy of both India and China. Controlling Myanmar will help each side increase its strategic position in the Indian Ocean-Pacific region. In addition, both countries want to increase their influence in Myanmar for regional security reasons. China wants to control the activities of minority insurgent groups on its southern border that threaten China's security, while India wants to prevent China's growing influence in this region (Liem et al., 2021, p.154). This is the reason why Myanmar has become a hot spot of competition between the two Asian powers.

Secondly, Myanmar possesses abundant natural resources and significant economic development potential, attracting the interest of both India and China. Myanmar has the third-largest oil reserves in Southeast Asia, along with many precious minerals such as copper, lead, zinc, and gold. It also has significant potential in hydropower and agriculture (Myanmar National Portal, 2023) 2 . Access to these resources brings significant economic benefits to both India and China. In addition, Myanmar's economy is in a development phase, attracting many investors. Infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, seaports, airports... will stimulate Myanmar's development and open up large business opportunities for Indian and Chinese companies. Strategically, Myanmar is the gateway for India and China to expand their influence to the South and access the Southeast Asian market (Pant, 2014). Therefore, strategic infrastructure projects such as deep-water ports, oil pipelines... in Myanmar also become hot spots causing disputes between the two countries. Therefore, with its large economic development potential, Myanmar is an attractive destination for Indian and Chinese investors. The competition for economic

influence in Myanmar to access resources and expand the Southeast Asian market is an important aspect of the strategic competition between the two Asian powers.

Thirdly, Myanmar holds a central position in the regional connectivity initiatives of China and India, where the competition for influence between the two countries is fierce. Myanmar is in a key position in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Binh et al., 2020). Important infrastructure projects such as the deep-water port of Kyaukpyu, the Kunming-Kyaukpyu railway, and the China-Myanmar economic corridors all aim to connect China with the Indian Ocean through Myanmar. Myanmar's participation in the BRI has helped China increase its economic and strategic influence in the region. Meanwhile, India also has a regional connectivity initiative, the East-West Economic Corridor, in which Myanmar plays an important role (Kiet, 2023). This corridor project aims to reduce the dependence of countries on China, while enhancing trade connectivity with India. Therefore, the competition for economic and strategic influence between India and China is fierce in Myanmar. In addition to infrastructure projects, China also uses diplomatic tools such as aid, investment, and signing free trade agreements to increase its influence in Myanmar (Wee, 2015). Conversely, India also promotes security and military cooperation with Myanmar to consolidate its position, making Myanmar one of the strategic competition centers of India and China in the Southeast Asia and Indian Ocean regions (Mehrotra, 2012).

Fourthly, Myanmar holds a strategic position crucial to India's national security. Myanmar serves as a barrier preventing China's southward expansion, a region traditionally influenced by India. If China gains control over Myanmar, it would pose a direct threat to the security of India's northeastern border (Kiet, 2023). Therefore, India needs to maintain its influence in Myanmar to curb China's expansion. Additionally, Myanmar holds a strategic position vital to India's maritime security. Controlling ports and islands in Myanmar would help India protect the Bay of Bengal, control the Strait of Malacca, and the Indian Ocean-Pacific Ocean shipping route (Das, 2010). Furthermore, Myanmar is a potential military base for India to expand its influence throughout the region. Access to strategic infrastructure such as seaports, military airports... would facilitate India's deployment of forces and strengthen its military power in the Indian Ocean region. Therefore, when China publicly expanded its influence southward in the late 1990s, this event caused a fundamental shift in India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia in general and Myanmar in particular through the "Look East Policy". The Indian government quickly shifted to a more pragmatic approach to the military government in Myanmar, while not condemning opposition to democracy issues in this country as before 1991 (Alam, 2018). Therefore, with its strategic position in security and military, Myanmar has become a hot spot of competition between India and China, which has made the dispute over influence in this country increasingly fierce.

Thus, with its strategic geographical position, large economic potential, and regional security importance, Myanmar is considered a hot spot in the India-China competition. The competition for influence in Myanmar is a top

priority for both Asian powers in consolidating their regional and global positions.

2. China's Intervention Policies in Myanmar

Entering the 21st century, China has increasingly shown interest in its neighboring country, Myanmar, aiming to expand its influence there and create favorable conditions for the development of its "Southward" strategy (Binh et al., 2020). Currently, the geopolitical competition between China and India in Myanmar is intensifying, but it is trending in China's favor. Chinese leaders have constructed an "arc" to approach and encircle India's territorial space with the goal of implementing a "Strategy to Encircle India". Myanmar has become a "barrier" to curb India's influence to the East, while also providing a vantage point to observe India's actions in the Indian Ocean region. In addition, China is also strengthening its relationships in the region and with India's neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and its ally Pakistan to counter India's influence to the West and in South Asia. Moreover, China is implementing a neighbor diplomacy policy, pursuing core strategic objectives in a rapidly changing international and domestic context, which includes many unforeseen fluctuations, different from when Xi Jinping first came to power in 2013 (Hoa, 2022). For a long time, Myanmar has considered China a priority partner in its foreign policy, thus, dependence on China is inevitable. The two countries maintain a special relationship and the geographical position, domestic and international situations dictate that Myanmar cannot sever ties with China (Hien, 2018). Meanwhile, China is taking every opportunity to establish its position and enhance its influence in Myanmar. This is demonstrated in the following points:

Firstly, China is enhancing its influence with political forces in Myanmar.

Myanmar's political situation is extremely complex and unpredictable. Therefore, at different stages, China always seeks ways to approach and demonstrate flexible political attitudes. During the period 2011 - 2015, China paid special attention to the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), considering it an important partner and showing active interest. This was demonstrated by the official visit to Myanmar in November 2014 by Chinese Prime Minister - Li Keqiang, who committed to cooperation in various fields with Myanmar during the visit. At the same time, China played an observant role towards the NLD, especially towards the Party Chairwoman - Aung San Suu Kyi, who was seen as a symbol of global democracy. After the overwhelming victory in the 2015 election, China changed by showing respect for Chairwoman Aung San Suu Kyi. Her position was elevated while China sought to soothe bilateral relations and affirm mutual interests (Binh, 2015). Subsequent visits by NLD leaders were all received by Chinese leaders and promised important political-economic cooperation. In addition, China also took the opportunity to establish close relationships with other senior leaders of the NLD. In Myanmar, the military plays an important role and has decision-making power on political issues in Myanmar. China has succeeded in influencing and approaching Myanmar's political factions. During the military

regime, the Myanmar military government received comprehensive support from China. Although the political situation in Myanmar is complex and constantly changing, China's influence on the military does not change. During the "one country, two governments" period from 2010 to 2015 in Myanmar, the political situation was seriously unstable when the civilian government could not influence the military. China was flexible in balancing diplomatic relations with political forces, depending on the timing and its interests. The coup in February 2021 in Myanmar raised suspicions about China's role and China's indecisive response further confirmed this suspicion. The NLD's change in foreign policy, reducing dependence on China and diversifying relations with India, the US, Japan... has shaken China's position. However, there is evidence that China may have supported the military in seizing power in this country and maintaining its influence.

Secondly, China uses ethnic-religious issues and the Rohingya people to intervene in Myanmar.

Myanmar is a country with an important geographical position, possessing abundant natural resources. Moreover, with a colonial history of over 100 years and the diversity of 135 different ethnic groups, Myanmar is facing many political entities participating in the democratization process (Loc, 2022). Despite undergoing democratic reforms, ethnic-religious issues remain a major challenge in Myanmar's democratization and international integration process. Ethnic conflict in Myanmar is an important tool for China to intervene in this country, as China benefits in both conflict and peace situations between the Myanmar government and armed ethnic groups, especially in the northern border region adjacent to China. The Beijing government will benefit when Myanmar maintains peace, as this will facilitate border economic relations, enhance cultural diplomacy, create investment opportunities, and limit the impact of refugees on China. Meanwhile, China also benefits when conflicts occur, due to the enhancement of influence, control, and covert power in Myanmar. China clearly demonstrated this after political reforms in Myanmar, such as playing the role of mediator between the civilian government of Myanmar and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). China provided negotiation venues, ensured security for negotiations between the two sides, and played a coordinating and reconciling role in the direction of "pursuing peace and promoting dialogue" (Wee, 2015). In this context, China has put pressure on Myanmar to resolve the situation in its favor. China is believed to have exerted pressure to maintain conflict when the Myanmar government carried out political reforms that were not beneficial to China and intervened in the peace negotiation process in Myanmar. The issue of the Rohingya people, a Muslim ethnic group, is a complex issue in Myanmar. The Rohingya have become the target of attacks from the Myanmar military and Rakhine people, after the Myanmar government did not recognize them as an official ethnic group in the 1982 Constitution (Alam, 2018). This issue has received attention and criticism from the international community. On August 25, 2017, an attack by Rohingya gunmen on Myanmar police stations and military bases triggered

a military crackdown on the Rohingya (Liem et al., 2021, p.295), causing tension in relations between Myanmar and Western countries. In the first two decades of the 21st century, China has increased its influence in Myanmar by continuously protecting the military government, opposing criticism and sanctions from the international community (Binh et al., 2020). Sanctions and criticism from organizations and the international community have put Myanmar in a passive position in international relations. In this context, China has taken the opportunity to demonstrate its role and influence by supporting the Myanmar government's efforts to ensure peace and stability for Rakhine state, while "protecting" Myanmar from international pressure and sanctions at the United Nations Security Council. This is an opportunity for China to establish and affirm its position as well as its influence on Myanmar and autonomy in regulating "great power diplomacy".

Thirdly, China leverages its economic influence to create a dependency of Myanmar on it.

Scholar Tran My Hai Loc (2022) argues that Myanmar is described as a "virtual satellite of China", serving as a security barrier and a strategic "buffer zone" for China. Economic leverage is a crucial factor in China's implementation of key strategies to achieve the "Chinese Dream". During Myanmar's political reform, China had to adjust to restore its economic influence following fierce competition from India and the policies of the Myanmar government. China has enhanced its investment in social welfare projects and changed the social responsibilities of local businesses in Myanmar, while expanding trade and economy through commitments in the BRI (Liem et al., 2021, p.302). These tools have created a positive image of China among the people of Myanmar. China has consistently developed investment and trade in Myanmar in recent years, especially after announcing the BRI in 2014. From 1998 to 2010, China was Myanmar's largest trading partner (Konovalov, 2022). However, political fluctuations in Myanmar have changed trade between the two countries from 2011 to the present, but overall, China remains one of Myanmar's largest and longest-standing trading partners. The implementation of trade and investment agreements such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), connecting infrastructure projects with the BRI, and improving the power grid between the two countries have been carried out. In addition, improving China's image through economic diplomacy has increased China's influence in Myanmar. China's ODA aid has become an important resource for the military and the country, especially during the economic embargo. China wants to "consolidate" its relationship with Myanmar through investments and aid over time, while enhancing the signing of a series of important cooperation documents, including the 5-year plan for China-Myanmar economic and trade development, the economic and technical cooperation agreement between the Chinese government and the Myanmar government, as well as China's free emergency Covid-19 vaccine aid to Myanmar.

Fourthly, China uses military and defense cooperation to control Myanmar's security and enhance regional and international influence.

Sanctions and strained relations between Myanmar and Western countries have created opportunities for China to continue to be a leading partner in military and defense cooperation with Myanmar. Currently, China is the main weapons supplier to Myanmar, including fighter jets, armored vehicles, ammunition, and naval vessels (Liem et al., 2021, p.352). Military and defense cooperation has become an important pillar in the relationship between the two countries. This relationship is maintained and developed through China's construction of a military base on Myanmar's Coco Island in the Indian Ocean, near the border with India (Binh et al., 2020). This poses a threat to India's security and influence in the region and globally. With this strategic geographical position, China has long built the "String of Pearls" strategy in the Indian Ocean region. In the past, China was a close ally of Myanmar, especially in the military and defense sectors. Although there have been some changes after political reform in Myanmar, diversifying relationships has made Myanmar's defense relations more favorable and has more cooperation partners, leading to a decline in China's position in this field. However, the Myanmar military is still considered China's closest ally due to the close relationship between the Myanmar military regime and this country.

In recent years, foreign relations between Myanmar and the US have not changed much, the imposition of sanctions continues due to the Rohingya issue and the coup in February 2021, which has hindered military and defense cooperation with countries, especially Western countries and allies. In this context, China has been and is actively enhancing its position and strengthening cooperation with Myanmar in the field of military and defense. With a modern defense industry, strong reform, and the increasing military strength of China, it is an important prerequisite for cooperation between Myanmar and China in this field. The defense industry is one of China's important export sectors, and Myanmar is a major export market. China transferred a submarine named UMS Minye Kyaw Htin to Myanmar in 2021. From 2010 to 2019, China sold weapons to Myanmar with a total value of about \$1.3 billion (Vietnamese Broadcast, 2021). Myanmar has received heavy weapons from China and the two countries have cooperated in military force training. In January 2020, Myanmar and China signed 33 bilateral agreements within the framework of the BRI, including the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port project and the railway project along the economic corridor connecting China's Southwest region with the Indian Ocean (Liem et al., 2021, p.385). The Kyaukphyu deep-sea port project is also in the Cambodia-Myanmar Economic Corridor and is considered a strategic project in cooperation between the two countries, while facilitating China to expand influence and operations in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean regions.

Therefore, security and defense cooperation between China and Myanmar brings benefits to border security and China's strategies in the region and globally, especially in maintaining military presence, preventing and limiting India's influence in Myanmar. With its important geopolitical position,

Myanmar becomes a prerequisite for China to enter Southeast Asia and South Asia, especially in the strategy of encircling and preventing India's influence. In the increasingly tense and complex world situation, especially in the South China Sea, China can limit interference and monitor India's military activities in the region by "consolidating" relations with Myanmar.

DISCUSSION

This section allows you to describe your research findings academically. You may not enter figures related to your statistical tests here; instead, you should explain those numbers here. You should structure your discussion with academic support for your studies and a good explanation according to the specific area you are investigating.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of increasingly fierce strategic competition between India and China, Myanmar plays a pivotal role in the strategies of both Asian powers. With its strategically important location, large economic development potential, and regional security influence, Myanmar has become a hot spot of dispute between New Delhi and Beijing. To consolidate its position and counter India, China has been using various tools to intervene and increase its influence in Myanmar. Specifically, China is implementing four main policy groups. First, China approaches various political factions in Myanmar to establish relationships and influence successive governments, from military dictatorship to civilian rule under the NLD. Second, China exploits ethnic and religious issues to intervene in Myanmar, particularly the Rohingya issue. China has supported the stance of the Myanmar military government when criticized by the international community, helping to increase its influence and position. Third, China leverages its economic influence to create a dependency of Myanmar through investment, trade, and aid. Finally, military and defense cooperation also becomes a tool for China to increase control and influence over Myanmar's security. China's intervention policies in Myanmar have been somewhat successful in controlling Myanmar's foreign policy. However, Myanmar's foreign policy has also changed since the democratic reform, reducing dependence on Beijing. Therefore, China's position in Myanmar has also been shaken recently. In the current context, Myanmar faces many criticisms, international sanctions, and domestic instability. This has led them to seek China's support and tend to rely on Beijing economically and militarily, posing challenges for India in maintaining influence in Myanmar. In general, the competition for influence between India and China in Myanmar will become increasingly fierce.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Each study has limitations. This study mainly uses secondary data sources to analyze China's intervention policies in Myanmar facing challenges from India. Further research could conduct more primary data collection through fieldwork, interviews with experts and policymakers to provide additional empirical evidence. Specifically, future studies could interview officials and

experts in Myanmar and neighboring countries to gain deeper insights into the actual impacts and effectiveness of China's policies. Surveying perspectives of various stakeholders within Myanmar on China's influence would add richness. Additionally, more comparative analysis between China and India's policies would shed light on their ongoing competition. Examining public sentiments towards China and India within Myanmar through opinion polls or focus groups could reveal valuable information. Finally, investigating implications for regional dynamics and ASEAN relations would be worthwhile. Conducting primary research to supplement the current analysis would strengthen the findings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Thank you to the International Journal of Applied Research and Sustainable Sciences (IJARSS) for publishing this scientific work and to the authors of books or authors of previous articles that have become references.

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