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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical explanation for Myanmar's persistent and consistent choice of non-aligned foreign policy since independence in 1948. It focuses on exploring multiple causal factors in search for a comprehensive explanation, inspired by the analytic eclectic approach, including (1) geopolitical factors, (2) domestic factors, and (3) ideational factors, informed by neorealist, neo-classical realist, and social constructivist insights, respectively. Being a small country surrounded by big powers during the Cold War, struggling with internal conflicts, both ethnic and ideological, and guided by the Buddhist philosophy of the middle way, the newly established government of Myanmar chose non-alignment. Successive governments went between activism and passivism in their foreign policy and maintained the stance of non-alignment. This article argues that non-alignment could be a logical choice for weak powers such as those striving to find their way amid the ever-intensifying strategic rivalry between the USA and China.

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Introduction

This article explores the key factors driving the persistent and consistent choice of non-alignment foreign policy in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (previously Burma) since its independence. As the union minister for International Cooperation, U Kyaw Tin, proclaimed at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in 2019, "[s]uccessive governments in Myanmar […] consistently pursued […] non-alignment as a key component of their Foreign Policy" (*The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 2019).[1] Myanmar was a founding member of NAM in 1961 and an active organiser of the Bandung Conference in 1955, which had become a stepping stone for NAM. The non-alignment policy, as officially adopted by NAM, emerged in the historical context of the Cold War. Its popularity waxed and waned during the Cold War and declined to minimal after this period. Nevertheless, Myanmar never gave up the non-alignment stance, although its foreign policy has oscillated between activism and passivism (Myoe, 2016: 2017). The policy of non-alignment has received renewed interest in the twenty-first century, as the prospect of strategic rivalry between the USA and China accelerates in East Asia. In this context, it is worth studying Myanmar's persistence and consistence in practising the non-alignment policy from both historical and theoretical perspectives.

In this article, the author argues that Myanmar's choice and practice of the non-alignment policy is far more than anecdotal and deserves a careful theoretical analysis. First, the choice of non-alignment was not an obvious one given that, in the historical context of the Cold War and the struggle with domestic Communist insurgents, the leadership in Yangon was tempted to take the bait that the West – the UK, the erstwhile colonial power, and the USA, a new superpower – was more than willing to offer. Second, its practice of non-alignment was not easy either because it was pressured to join regional anti-Communist security alliances, such as the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. Over the years, Myanmar's commitment to non-alignment strengthened such that, in 1979, it withdrew from NAM because it believed NAM was not "non-aligned" enough and, in 2008, amid the intense international sanctions and alienation by the West and deep dependence on China for diplomatic protection and economic transactions, a newly adopted constitution explicitly stipulated an "active, independent, and *non-aligned* foreign policy" (Article 41, emphasis added). Thus, the case of Myanmar's persistent non-alignment policy raises at least three related questions. First, upon independence, why did Myanmar choose a non-alignment policy for its foreign and national security? Second, how was it able to maintain the policy stance despite the adverse environment that pushed it towards political alignment (e.g. the sanctions by the West and diplomatic protection offered by China)? Third, why was Myanmar's commitment to non-alignment strong enough that it was explicitly stipulated in the constitution?

This article tries to offer some, if not complete, answers to the research questions. The first part describes how successive governments in Myanmar have applied non-alignment policy while vacillating between foreign policy activism and passivism. In the second section, three clusters of causal factors are explored to explain the choice and practice of

the non-alignment policy guided by theoretical literature in International Relations (IR). In doing this, the purpose is not to test any of the theories in terms of their explanatory power; rather, the aim is to make the explanation as comprehensive and robust as possible through the eclectic approach (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a). Finally, this article goes beyond a case study of Myanmar to argue that this research's finding has a general quality (i.e. the non-alignment policy could be a logical choice for weak powers[2] amid feuding great powers). The concept of non-alignment exemplifies a non-Western contribution to the so-far West-dominated field of IR (Acharya and Buzan, 2019). As such, this study on non-alignment policy sheds light on the predicament of Southeast Asian countries that are striving to find an appropriate policy stance amid the ever-intensifying strategic rivalry between the USA, the global hegemonic state, and China, a regional superpower.

Policy of Non-Alignment and Myanmar

The policy of non-alignment is more of a historical than analytic concept. It arose in the historical context of the Cold War, where two superpowers – the USA and the Soviet Union – together with their close allies, waged an all-out competition in many fields, including military, economic, political, and diplomatic. In the process, the Cold War produced various international fallouts, such as national divisions as well as civil and international wars. Many newly independent countries, including India, Indonesia, and Myanmar, had become uneasy, and attempted to find a way to stay out of the Cold War competition, and therefore non-alignment was conceived. While there is no universally accepted definition of "non-alignment," it generally means keeping away from joining any military alliance, the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, and the like. It is different from and broader than neutrality, just as alignment is broader than alliance (Wilkins, 2012). A neutrality policy is enacted for a particular war or conflict and not a general principle of foreign policy of the state (Khanna, 2018: 55–56; Lyon, 1963).

On the contrary, non-alignment is more like the permanent neutrality of Switzerland, in that it refers to a general policy rather than a stance on a specific conflict. It is said that "non-alignment" as a policy was mentioned by V. K. Krishna Menon, Indian permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) in the early 1950s (Rao, 1981), but it was fully articulated by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in June 1954 together with the principle of *Panchsheel*[3] or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Jackson, 1983: 6). The policy received further support by surging newly independent states in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and guided a political and diplomatic movement in 1961 when NAM, the second-largest international organisation next to the UN, was established. Yet, NAM was not completely free from Cold War politics, in that it was abused and misused by some members for their diplomatic manoeuvre, and NAM as a whole was tilted towards the Communist bloc. Hence, non-alignment became more of a political slogan than a principle that guided the state's foreign policy, except in the sole case of Myanmar.

Myanmar became independent from more than sixty years of the British colonial rule in January 1948. The ruling coalition, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), then led by the Prime Minister U Nu, was basically the same as the one that co-operated with and then defected Japan during World War II (WWII). They were anti-colonialist and nationalist. Still, despite the political and somewhat mythical statement that Myanmar had consistently practised non-alignment policy, the country did in fact seek support from the West, the UK, and the USA, in its struggle with ideological and ethical insurgents (Myoe, 2020: 768; compare Severino, 1968). Nevertheless, so as to pave a path for the later non-alignment policy, Myanmar had been non-committal, or "hedging," between the competing blocs.[4] A couple of factors had contributed to such a non-committal stance. First, it was a default state of affairs coming from the long struggle for independence. The first thing that the new government decided was to decline the British invitation to the Commonwealth. Second, they could not simply determine which side of the Cold War they would join because they were generally inexperienced in foreign affairs. Johnstone (1963: 41) stated that, practically, "they were predisposed to play it safe until they could learn by experience in foreign relations. Inexperience [...] was also a factor in shaping Burma's policy of non-alignment and neutralism,"

Non-alignment is different from hedging. Hedging is the policy of being non-committal, but with the possibility of keeping any alignment open (Goh, 2005; Jackson, 2014). Non-alignment means that the path of any alliance is foreclosed. By 1954, the U Nu government of Myanmar had chosen such a policy of non-alignment, and successive governments have adhered to and even strengthened it. When U Nu said, as early as in 1948, that "of the three great powers, the UK, the US, and the Soviet Union, Myanmar should be in friendly relations with all three," he set a tone for non-alignment if not expressed in the term. In 1950, U Nu confirmed that Myanmar was unwilling to align "with a particular power bloc antagonistic to another opposing bloc[s]" (Aung-Thwin, 2001). The non-alignment stance of Myanmar's foreign policy became clear when U Nu visited the USA in July 1955 and explained its non-alignment policy to an American audience at the National Press Club of Washington as follows:

> In the present circumstances of Burma, her membership in any alliance with a great-power military bloc is incompatible with her continued existence as an independent state. This may seem to be putting it strongly, but it is a fact. Our recent history is such; our experience with great powers is such that in the minds of the people of Burma an alliance with a big power immediately means domination by that power. It means the loss of independence. You may question the validity of that belief. But perhaps you will accept my statement that it is a political fact of life today that any Government of Burma which aligned itself with a big-power bloc would at once lose the confidence and support of the people. (cited in Barrington, 1958: 2)

Staying away from any of the blocs, however, would not guarantee the state's independence. On the contrary, a few newly independent states and/or weak powers, including Thailand and South Korea, actively pursued military alliance with either of the

superpowers in search for support in their struggle with local enemies. Myanmar endeavoured to solve the problem by actively leveraging the global community. Initially, Myanmar sought to buttress its national security strategy by seeking the guarantee afforded by the UN umbrella of collective security. In its 1947 constitution, Myanmar adopted two substantive provisions under Articles 211 and 212, which emphasised the principles of international law and promoting peace and friendly co-operation among nations through justice and morality (Maung, 1956: 127; Than Han, 1986: 10). Myanmar joined the UN in 1948, three months after its independence. The Myanmar leadership believed that international peace and co-operation among world nations is a basic concept of non-alignment. Myanmar participated on the world stage as nearly "the top of neutral class" in the 1950s and 1960s (Pettman, 1973; Tarling, 2017: 91). For instance, Myanmar had some voice in world affairs, such as Chinese intervention in the Korean War in 1950,[5] the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and the Indo–China border conflict in 1962.

But Myanmar had increasingly become disillusioned by the UN, which could not help Myanmar regarding the Kuomintang (KMT) intrusion. Hence, it also turned to multi-lateral diplomacy among newly independent states; for example, signing the agreement on the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence with India and China in 1954, serving as an initiating member of the Bandung Conference in 1955, and becoming a founding member of NAM in 1961. According to Liang (1990: 222):

> Burma was very active in conference diplomacy. At the Bandung Conference, the Burmese Prime Minister acted as a behind-the-scenes conciliator. He personally arranged many of the meetings between Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-Lai and non-Communist delegates who were seeing him for the first time.

U Nu was also active in bilateral diplomacy, receiving visits of Indian Prime Minister Nehru, Indonesian President Sukarno, and Yugoslavian President Tito, and he travelled widely around the world including to Israel, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and the USA in 1955–1956. It is said that U Nu wanted to benchmark the "independent" foreign policies of Israel and Yugoslavia (Selth, 2002: 46). The foreign policy activism under U Nu earned Myanmar's U Thant the position of the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG) for two terms, in 1961–1970. The leadership of U Thant as the first UNSG from a non-European country was distinct because he represented a non-aligned country. Indeed, his mediation could not be ignored as he played an important role in ending the civil war in Congo, diffusing the Cuban missile crisis, and attempting to end the Vietnam War.

The non-aligned stance and foreign policy activism amid the intense Cold War and mushrooming of new states in Asia and Africa earned Myanmar a unique and enviable status in the world, competitively coveted by two superpowers. This status was carried over to Ne Win who took power through a coup d'état in 1962, despite his isolationist[6] policy and antagonistic or xenophobic[7] attitude towards the outside world. For example, he was invited to and treated well by Washington in September 1966 (Clymer, 2015).

India has accepted hundreds of thousands of Indians expatriated by Ne Win since 1964 without complaint (Liang, 1990). Subsequently, however, Ne Win's pursuit of the Burmese Way to Socialism and extreme isolationism removed one of two pillars of foreign policy under U Nu (i.e. non-alignment and active leveraging of the global community or internationalism). Instead, the policy of non-alignment became the sole component of its foreign policy. In 1974, when Ne Win finished twelve years of extra-constitutional rule by the Revolutionary Council, the "independent foreign policy" was explicitly specified in the constitution of 1974 (Article 26) and fully practised in foreign policy. Ne Win's non-alignment policy was so "non-aligned" that when the NAM Summit held at Havana, Cuba, failed to adopt unequivocal criticism of the invasion and Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979, Myanmar announced its withdrawal from NAM by saying that "sitting on the fence is not non-alignment" (Liang, 1990: 223; Myint Maung, 1999; Taylor, 2015).

The end of the Cold War brought Ne Win's reign to an end through the 8888[8] student uprising, if not the military rule. Yet by then, Myanmar had lost its erstwhile international standing and instead had to appeal to the UN for the status of a Least Developed Country (Clymer, 2015; Steinberg, 2013). Although it was a desperate attempt to save the economy by engaging the international community, it did not help much because Myanmar and its ruling regime soon found themselves increasingly isolated and alienated by the world due to, first its brutal suppression of the student uprising, and then its standoff with Aung San Suu Kyi (Suu Kyi), the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 1991, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Suu Kyi. The USA downgraded its diplomatic relations with Myanmar to a Charge d'Affaires level, and other Western countries followed suit. China emerged almost as the sole exception to embrace Myanmar, after normalising relations in 1989. The military governments of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, 1988–1997) and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, since 1997) attempted to remove the alienation by improving relations with India, re-entering NAM in 1992, and then joining the ASEAN in 1997. Yet, Myanmar's position was sliding down further, as the USA and the West imposed cascading economic sanctions, which began in 1997 (Martin, 2013).

China filled the diplomatic vacuum in Myanmar rapidly with its fast-industrialising economy and its privileged position as a permanent member to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with veto power. As the USA endeavoured to extend its sanctions from bilateral to multi-lateral through the UNSC in 2006, China saved Myanmar by wielding its veto power. Myanmar had become a diplomatic protégé of China, with ensuing economic dependence. By the end of the 2000s, China's presence in Myanmar had become overwhelming and its influence overbearing (Sun, 2015). It was at that point in time when the USA administration under Barack Obama signalled its willingness to engage Myanmar, and the latter responded. In 2011, the twenty-three years of extra-constitutional rule by the SLORC/SPDC was over, and a quasi-civilian government led by President Thein Sein was inaugurated. The Thein Sein government brought Myanmar back to international prominence through ambitious programmes of reform, and the world quickly embraced the new Myanmar led by the USA, whose sitting president paid

a visit to Myanmar twice, in 2012 and 2014 (Haacke, 2016). Still, Myanmar's commitment to non-aligned foreign policy was ever strengthened such that the new constitution of 2008 adopted an article that specified "independent, active and *non-aligned* foreign policy" (Article 41, emphasis added). Through a "fair and free" election in 2015, NLD led by Suu Kyi came to power. Although it was expected that the NLD government with the international prominence of Suu Kyi would accelerate the reform, Myanmar has found itself in a foreign policy predicament and under international pressure due to the so-called Rohingya[9] issue. Yet, as late as 2019, Suu Kyi said:

> We've always maintained that our foreign policy will be vibrant and independent, and based on friendship towards all nations. So, we welcome all friends who are happy to cooperate with us. And we would not like our country to become a bone of contention for any other group of countries.[10]

Myanmar's bold move to democracy since 2010 surprised almost everyone and has been analysed from many different angles. By now, however, there is little doubt that one of the primary motives by the military regimes of SLORC/SPDC and then the Thein Sein government in normalising relationship with the USA, with the eventual cost of losing power to NLD, was to eliminate its dependence on China. Diplomatic and economic dependence on China was precisely the opposite state of affairs that U Nu and his successors had struggled to maintain through the policy of non-alignment, which by now has become a tradition or strategic culture on which Myanmar people pride themselves.

In sum, the newly independent state of Myanmar under the leadership of U Nu was tempted and pressured to take sides with the Western bloc during the early phase of the Cold War. It was tempted to do so, as it had to struggle with Communist insurgents in the Burmese Communist Party (BCP). And it was pressured to do so because the USA led an effort to build a regional network of an anti-Communist alliance in terms of SEATO in 1954. Nevertheless, Myanmar had chosen to resist the temptation and pressure, and led – if not initiated – an international effort to remain non-aligned between the West and East blocs. Since then, although its general foreign policy orientation has oscillated between activism and passivism, or internationalism and isolationism, Myanmar has shown an unwavering, rather ever-strengthened, commitment to non-aligned foreign policy. Non-aligned foreign policy has become institutionalised in the constitution and is deeply engrained in its foreign policy tradition or strategic culture. Next, this article offers an explanation why Myanmar, a weak power among great powers, has practised such a staunch non-alignment foreign policy.

Explaining Myanmar's Non-Alignment: Three Cluster Causal Factors

This section explores three clusters of variables that might have influenced Myanmar's persistent and consistent choice and practice of non-alignment policy. They are

geopolitical factors, domestic factors, and ideational factors based on the country's traditional values and culture.

Geopolitical Factors

Geopolitically, Myanmar's security outlook was affected by its strategic location and the regional security context. The strategic location is at the centre of Myanmar's security concerns, and its immediate relationship with neighbouring countries is critical. The second level of concern for Myanmar is regional level, based on the security dynamics among regional states and power projections by the major powers in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. These security considerations in the external factors have driven and influenced the practice and policy of non-alignment by successive Myanmar governments.

Strategic Location.   The most enduring factor in shaping Myanmar's foreign policy towards non-alignment is its strategic location. Myanmar is squarely located between two of the oldest and largest civilisations – India and China. Throughout history, Myanmar's fortune has been deeply affected by what happened there. In addition, with over 2,000 km of coastline along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, proximity to the western entrance of the Malacca Strait, situated at the gateway to Southeast Asia and South Asia, and a direct linkage to the Indian Ocean, Myanmar is a geographically significant country in entire Asia. Therefore, the Chinese, British, and Japanese all historically strove to control Myanmar. The Qing Dynasty launched repeated invasions from the northeast into Myanmar's territories in the mid-1700s; Myanmar's kings managed to successfully repel these invasions. Then came the British. The British Empire saw Myanmar as a strategic backdoor into China. After the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885, the British colonised Myanmar until WWII. At the war's onset, the Japanese occupied Myanmar to disrupt the Allies' critical logistical routes in Asia and use it as a backdoor to the Indian subcontinent. These historical experiences continue to shape the perception, caution, and attention to geopolitical dynamics that could threaten the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity among Myanmar's political elites (Myint-U, 2007, 2011).

   Indeed, soon after its independence, Myanmar's leadership found that a geostrategic landscape was shaping up so as to limit its room to manoeuvre severely, such that Prime Minister U Nu lamented in his speech before the Parliament in September 1950: "we are hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cactus. We cannot move an inch."[11] In such a situation, he felt that Myanmar had no choice but to maintain friendly relations with all the great powers, instead of aligning with any of them. In fact, when the KMT of China was defeated by the communists in 1949, a significant portion of KMT forces escaped to Myanmar territory and established an effective domain with the help of the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well as KMT in Taiwan. Myanmar leadership was greatly alarmed and fearful of a possible Chinese attack and that Myanmar might become another battlefield of Chinese civil war. Now unified, victorious from the civil war, armed with communist ideology and huge experienced armed forces, China

was simply too big and too close to Myanmar. Myanmar quickly recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its accession to permanent membership in the UNSC.

Regional Security Context. Since its independence in January 1948, Myanmar leadership watched the formation of a bipolar world structure with great alarm. The global Cold War was soon overlaid onto the Indochina Peninsula, causing many wars, starting from Vietnam, then to Cambodia and Laos, fuelled by the major powers (Thee, 1976). The very fact that the region had become a battlefield of the Cold War with great powers intervening had alarmed the leadership of Myanmar, which had already been waging its own war of ideologies with the BCP. When the USA together with its local allies in the Philippines and Thailand established SEATO in 1954 to stop the spread of Communism and extended an invitation to Myanmar, Myanmar rejected it. Instead, Myanmar, together with India and Indonesia, organised the Bandung Conference in 1955. That was the beginning of non-alignment policy. Myanmar had formidable challenges other than the BCP – ethnic insurgents inside its newly formed Union.

Domestic Factors. Upon independence, Myanmar was in disarray, divided and devastated by war. At least two major issues, political instability and political economy, had the greatest influence on Myanmar's non-alignment policy. Regarding political instability, the British "divide-and-rule" strategy pitted ethnic minority groups against the Burman majority throughout the colonial period, giving rise to post-colonial instability. Political protests by different ethnic groups erupted immediately after independence. Within eight months, Myanmar plunged into a civil war, now known as the longest civil war in history (Miliband, 2016). Although the civil war and insurgencies were internal to Myanmar, they had foreign components and support. The rise of post-WWII communist ideology in the giant northern neighbour, China, also affected Myanmar. The new government was faced with two distinct categories of insurgencies – ideology-based communist insurgency and ethnic-based insurgency (Johnstone, 1963; Myoe, 2020: 771).

Domestic political instabilities fuelled by the communist insurgency, with assistance from Communist China, had left indelible marks on Myanmar's foreign policy. The BCP was formed with assistance from the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing in 1953. Through such insurgent groups, the Communist Party gained, maintained, and leveraged pressure points to command and exploit successive Myanmar governments and people (Communist Influence in Burma, 1950; Lintner, 2018). Although the government quashed the communist uprising over time, the Chinese influence continued through other armed ethnic groups in China–Myanmar border areas. Today, China's support has shifted to armed ethnic groups, such as the United Wa Army and the Kachin Independence Army.

Myanmar's government had to contend with ethnic minority separatist insurgents at the dawn of independence. The Karen National Union (KNU) emerged as one of the strongest ethnic minority opposition groups. It established a formidable army, the Karen National Liberation Army, and declared war against the central government in January 1949[12] (Kyi, 2019). The Karen State, located along the Thai–Myanmar border, was

historically used by the Thai government as a buffer zone against the Burman dominant central government. As the BCP gained momentum in Myanmar, the Thai and US governments supported the Karen rebellions to prevent the communist insurgency from spilling over into Thailand. General Bo Mya, leader of the KNU, said that the KNU was Thailand's "foreign legion" (South, 2011). In such a situation, aligning with and getting support from any of the great powers could not only result in dependence, but it could also bring in counter-intervention by other great powers such that domestic conflicts would become internationalised. Non-alignment was a logical choice.

While the pursuit of non-alignment was influenced by domestic security considerations, political economy should also be considered. For constructive economic development, a need to depend on foreign aid is unavoidable and the best outcome can be achieved by the adoption of non-alignment, which can tap several sources in multiple spheres of influence without being subservient to any one big power. Myanmar also adopted non-alignment because the country wanted a diverse market for its varied products (Rao, 1981). As Myanmar was a war-torn country, it desperately needed foreign capital and developmental aid for rehabilitation and development. Yet, it did not closely ally with any great powers because support had strings attached. Instead, it practised a market economy diversified by signing a series of barter trade agreements with the Sino-Soviet bloc with China, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, the USSR, Poland, Rumania, and Bulgaria (Myoe, 2020: 779). Regarding the economic plan, at the first Union Welfare Conference in August 1951, Prime Minister Nu (1952: 28–31) re-emphasised his government's policy of non-alignment via the following four fundamental principles:

1. We must use our own consideration to either support or object to any matter on its own merits.
2. We must establish the friendliest relations with all nations whenever possible.
3. We must accept from any country any assistance for the creation of a Welfare State provided such assistance is given freely and does not violate our sovereignty.
4. We must render our utmost assistance to any country which needs it.

Measures like deploying independent foreign policy, maintaining friendly relations with all nations, avoiding alignment with any power blocs, accepting economic aids only when there were no strings attached, and participating actively in world affairs served the interests of the fragile nation. Such domestic conditions have hardly changed even until today, and later leadership found little reason to move away from the non-alignment policy, which has become a tradition.

Ideational Factors

While the first two factors are based on foreign and domestic political realities that Myanmar faced as a weak power, the ideational factors represent a foundational element in how the state identity, interests, and policies work together. First, the term "identity"

in "state identity" is defined differently by diverse scholars. Wendt (1999: 231) assumes that all interests come from identities, and the "state identity" is a core idea of constructivist realism and analyses of state sovereignty (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1992). State identity refers to the perception of the state and its role within the international community to determine the state's foreign policy orientation. Moreover, it comprises a core component of culture and a set of ideas intertwined with norms and values, which are important for the constructivist argument (Alexandrov, 2003). In this article, the state's domestic culture is a source of state identity. This meaning-making has been shaped by the surrounding culture,[13] which comprises values, norms, and traditions. As such, the broader Myanmar culture has also shaped the country's political and strategic cultures[14] (Gyi, 1983; Khin Ma, 2004; Than, 1999).

Since political culture is nested in the leaders of a given society, their beliefs and views have a significant effect on the formulation of the country's strategic culture as a set of shared views and normative judgements held by the population (Kamrava, 1995; Pye, 1962). In Myanmar, this has been heavily influenced by Buddhism, which promotes the principle of the "middle way"[15] (Sarkisyanz, 1965; Thittila, 1956; Wichmann, 1965). This refers to the Buddha's enlightened view of life, actions, and attitudes. It is the path between two extremes, but it is not considered a compromise, instead moving believers towards achieving happiness and harmonious co-existence. Buddhism in Myanmar's political philosophy is analogous to Hinduism in India and Confucianism in China, and it drives policymakers' choices towards policies that are in line with these beliefs. It also makes some policies more acceptable to the public. Even if the systemic factors during the Cold War had a different degree of "non-alignment" under U Nu and General Ne Win, while the policy of non-alignment and neutrality was in line with the middle way concept, the Ne Win government's isolationist policy could be easily accepted in terms of self-reliance. Ne Win's perception of isolation was based on the Buddhist philosophy of *attahi attano narhtaw* ("self-reliance is the best alliance"; Myoe, 1993). Then, the international pressure and Western sanctions put Myanmar on China's side. A group of SPDC military personnel tried to reduce their dependence on China when they reengaged with international and regional organisations. Learning from this, the successive leaders never strayed from the cornerstone of non-alignment policy. Myanmar's governments gravitated towards non-alignment even when NAM was no longer popular within the international community. This commitment reflected the deep-rooted influence of the ideational factor.

The strategic culture plays a prominent role in shaping the state's "external behaviour"; such strategic culture "has both a societal or domestic and an international or externally oriented dimension" (Keith, 1999: 12). Booth and Trood (1999: 8) state that it is "a distinctive and lasting set of beliefs, values and habits regarding the threat and use of force, which have their roots in such fundamental influences as geographical settings, history and political culture." In this article, strategic culture mainly focuses on security strategy concern with external influences. According to Than (1999), the Myanmar government's strategic attitudes and behaviour are influenced by socio-cultural trends embedded in the notion of Myanmar-ness.[16] Myanmar has multiple borders and has been confronted by

numerous security dilemmas internally and externally throughout its history. Since the ninth century AD, Burma (Myanmar) has faced intense competition with other emerging nations. Myanmar's dynastic history was full of wars and conflicts with external powers, such as Mongolia, China, and Thailand. Three Anglo-Burmese wars, which resulted in complete annexation by the British in 1885, and the Japanese invasion during WWII are considered "the most traumatic episodes of [Myanmar's] history" (Than, 1999: 168). Therefore, Myanmar's historical experiences of war and conflict feature prominently in today's mindset and formulation of its national security interest and strategic culture (Than, 1999: 178).

Myanmar's strategic culture has not changed much since its independence in 1948. From Prime Minister U Nu to the current administration under the NLD led by Suu Kyi, Myanmar's political leaders have continued to view the world through the same strategic lens in the post-colonial period, and these views have shaped foreign policy choices. State representatives or political leaders hold leading roles in determining foreign relations, which reflect the state's identity, interests, and foreign policies. From the perspective of state interests, successive leaders have realised that the policy of non-alignment is most appropriate for Myanmar, which has struggled with giant neighbours since independence. For instance, Myanmar has always tried to avoid making military alliances, whether bilateral or multi-lateral, with any other states. Its experiences with the KMT and Communist insurgencies reinforced the desire to remain non-aligned and preserve the "cherished independence of decision" (Than, 1999: 175). Moreover, Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" and closed-door policy during the highest competition of the Cold War and the "Burmese Way to Democracy" under the SLORC/SPDC are prominent features of Myanmar's way of practising in the country's political and economic matters. The "Burmese Way to Democracy" was the ideology of military leaders known as the military version of a "discipline democracy," which aimed to transform from a military to a democratic government through the current constitution of 2008. Such a concept of military culture was rooted in the strategic culture and security concerns of Myanmar's leaders before independence (Than, 1998). The notion of Myanmar-ness was invoked , if implicitly, when the governments used such phrases as "Burmese Way to Socialism" under Ne Win and "Burmese Way to Democracy" under the SLORC/SPDC. In this way, political culture together with strategic culture has reflected Myanmar's non-alignment strategy through the ideational factors.

While the three key factors are sequentially and categorically analysed in this article, they are interlinked. They explain why successive Myanmar governments persistently pursued non-alignment policies after independence. Despite wandering between activism and passivism or internationalism and isolationism, Myanmar's non-alignment strategy has been consistently practised, guided by theoretical implication via analytic eclecticism. Any single factor of them alone does not provide satisfactory explanation for Myanmar's rather unique practice of its foreign policy. This is why this article relies on the guidance of analytic eclecticism, as discussed in the next section.

Implications for Theory and Policy

In the previous two sections, this article has tried to highlight Myanmar's persistent and consistent practice of non-alignment policy since independence. In the early years of its independence and in the context of the looming Cold War, Myanmar had chosen to be non-aligned, that is, not to join either the West or Soviet blocs. Myanmar had buttressed the non-alignment policy by actively engaging the global community through international organisations, multi-lateral diplomacy, and bilateral diplomacy – therefore earning international recognition to produce the first UNSG from a non-European nation, namely U Thant. Over successive governments, however, Myanmar has been isolated from the outside world either by its own choice or by the sanctions imposed by others, unintendedly becoming dependent on China while still actively engaging the West at a risk of losing power. Also, the commitment to non-aligned foreign policy has become increasingly strong, to the extent of being stipulated in the constitution. Such an unwavering commitment to and practice of non-alignment policy was explained in terms of geopolitical factors – being a small state located between large powers and in a region that had become a battleground of the Cold War; the domestic conditions with a war-torn economy and active internal conflicts with many insurgents either ideologically or ethnically based; and ideational factors such as Buddhist beliefs in *Panchsheel* and the middle way. Furthermore, through the unwavering practice of the policy, non-alignment has been so deeply ingrained in its institutions (the constitution) and the strategic culture that it will guide future foreign policy very profoundly.

   Such an analysis of the case of Myanmar's non-alignment policy yields some significant implications for both theory and policy. Theoretically, it points to the inadequacy of the existing literature of IR, particularly neorealism that has dominated the field in the area of national security policy, including alliance and alignment. To the neorealists, Myanmar's choice and consistent practice of non-alignment policy would seem an outlier. First, being a weak power compared to neighbours, alliance rather than armament would be relatively cheap and a more affordable means of national security (Morrow, 1993). It is particularly so because Myanmar was born into an international environment where two superpowers were competitively luring other states in the midst of the Cold War. It may either bandwagon on the power of the stronger side for sure security or balance against the stronger side by choosing the weaker side where the state is safer and more appreciated (Waltz, 1979: 127). Such a logic is too rigid to be applied to a weak power like Myanmar because it does not possess the pivotal power to play a balancer, as Waltz (1979) predicted balancing behaviour "provided […] that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength." Also, political realities that faced Myanmar leadership were so complex that while the risk of abandonment was not out of the question, the risk of entrapment looked too great (Snyder, 1984, 1997). That is to say, Myanmar was so close to China and so weak in power that it was questionable if any of the superpowers would intervene to save Myanmar if it were to be attacked by China. Also, its multi-front civil war could well become internationalised if Myanmar joined any of the blocs and thereby provided the opposing block the rationale to support insurgent groups (Severino, 1968). Thus, the structural factors that the neorealists say determine state behaviour need to be substantiated through the perceptual lenses of the

leadership before they determine policy, as argued by neoclassical realism (Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998).

Furthermore, the policy of non-alignment was well admissible to the leadership and populace of Myanmar when it was presented in terms of *Panchsheel*, a Buddhist principle, while the vast majority of the population including the top leader U Nu were devout Buddhists. While such an ideational factor may explain the initial choice of non-alignment policy to an extent, the repeated practices of non-alignment policy over successive governments have made the policy ingrained in its strategic culture and even in its state identity, through which the future leadership would gauge its policy stance when needed. This finding also goes in line with the constructivism that emphasises the importance of the ideational factors in IR (Wendt, 1992).

In sum, this article renders some support to analytic eclecticism, particularly for case studies. Analytic eclecticism is a pragmatist research with the combination of research traditions to explore the complex sets of research problems (Friedrichs, 2009: 647). It is clarified with three distinctive eclectic characteristics by Sil and Katzenstein (2010b: 412). First, the eclectic uses middle-range theory to address specific problems of world politics, rather than defending any single set of assumptions. Second, analytic eclecticism offers a better understanding of a given problem, which reflects the complexity of real-world politics through analysing a wide-ranging scope of causes, consequences, and background conditions. It fills the gap to solve the complexities of real-world affairs, which cannot be explained by a single theory of IR scholarship. Third, it produces complex causal stories by capturing different types of causal mechanisms within separate research traditions. It also provides evidence to support the recent exposition of non-Western contributions to IR literature (Acharya and Buzan, 2019). While *Panchsheel* was a non-Western concept (Acharya, 2010) that has played a significant role in terms of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in post-WWII IR, non-alignment, not neutrality, is also a non-Western concept that has broadened the conceptual discourses in IR.

Altogether, this article calls for recasting the prevailing literature on IR in Asia-Pacific. As China has risen fast in power and become increasingly aggressive in foreign policy, IR scholars have hotly debated whether smaller nations in Asia would balance or bandwagon on China – the balancing–bandwagoning dichotomy redux. As no balancing was forthcoming, scholars have developed a new concept in terms of "hedging" so as to depict their behaviour. As Ciorciari and Haacke (2019) aptly point out, however, hedging, an opportunistic and tentative behaviour amid feuding great powers, is tentative not only in behaviour but also in concept. That is to say, in asking "still hedging?" (Goh, 2016) or saying "shrinking room for hedging" (Korolev, 2019), the prevailing discourse implies that hedging behaviour is tentative, if not abnormal, and cannot be endured. This author thinks such a discourse is misdirected. As mentioned before, a balancing–bandwagoning dichotomy is an unfortunate simplification or misapplication of choices to weak powers that do not possess pivotal power to balance. Non-alignment is the logical choice for them, before they consider where or not to align and, if to align, which side. Moreover, hedging is an integral part of the decision process during uncertainty, not a policy in itself.

Conclusion

This article highlights how the successive governments of Myanmar since independence have chosen and practised the policy of non-alignment, and has tried to explain why in terms of multiple causal factors. The choice of non-alignment by the first government of the country was in part by default. After the long years of colonial rule and hard struggle for independence, Myanmar leadership, consisting of freedom fighters, was not inclined to be aligned with any of the great powers for fear of dependence, although it needed assistance from them for its struggle with domestic insurgents. The policy looked increasingly attractive for the purpose of security, as it avoided foreign intervention in the civil war, and for the purpose of influence because it provided certain leeway to receive aid from both sides of the Cold War and to lead the non-aligned movement among newly independent states. But it required active engagement of the global community through multi-lateral diplomacy in international organisations and conferences, and in bilateral diplomacy. The government, then led by Ne Win, took a different course of non-alignment through isolation and disengagement. He was able to do so in part by the legacy of previous governments and in part by generating aloofness on the part of great powers. It is interesting to note that after long years of self-imposed isolation and the West-led alienation, and ensuing dependence on China, albeit unintended, Myanmar ever strengthened the commitment to non-alignment by institutionalising the policy in the constitution. Then, Myanmar returned to erstwhile internationalism by normalising relations with the USA and the West at the cost of losing power to political rivals Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD.

This finding leads to a couple of tentative conclusions that deserve further research. First, through cultural affinity and repeated practices, the policy of non-alignment has become so deeply ingrained in the strategic culture of Myanmar that it became part of state identity or "Myanmar-ness." Second, it has turned out as a hard-learnt lesson for Myanmar, that non-alignment policy is scarcely compatible with isolationism, unless the state is self-sufficient in all directions, economically, politically, and militarily. Otherwise, the state must actively engage the world, through multi-lateral and bilateral diplomacy, so as to establish its international standing and influence and maintain "friendly relations with all." This article renders a few general lessons for theory and policy. First, a single factor explanation of a case is hardly complete and a single case explanation for the purpose of theory-testing could be counterproductive both theoretically and empirically. Rather, theoretical pluralism or analytic eclecticism is called for. Second, the field of IR needs to pay more careful attention to weak powers, or non-great powers in a generic sense. Existing theoretical frameworks, developed out of great power politics in the Western tradition, are often inadequate for use on weak powers. This is the case because the foreign policy problems faced by weak powers are different from those of the great powers, and many of the weak powers are non-Western countries whose culture and way of thinking may be different from what is embedded in the mainstream literature. Finally, with the existing discourse on balancing–bandwagoning–hedging in Asia-Pacific in the face of rising China and its strategic rivalry with the USA, non-alignment is almost a logical choice to many of them.

Notes

1. This is only the latest statement in this regard. Similar statements were made at the top level, by former President Thein Sein in his inaugural address in 2011, and the State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in 2016.

2. Weak power is an ambiguous and potentially controversial term. In this article, a weak power is conceptualised according to the two following dimensions: (1) weak "power" versus weak "state" and (2) "weak" in terms of (i) objective and subjective senses and (ii) absolute and relative concepts. First, in IR, it is arguable that "powers" denote great powers, so weak powers are not powers at all. In this sense, "weak power" is a contradictory and misleading term; consequently, Handel (1990: 7) prefers the term "weak states." Meanwhile, Buzan (1991) conceptualised a weak "power" as weak vis-à-vis other powers in the international system, while a weak "state" is weak vis-à-vis its society. According to some scholars (Benedict, 1967; Krause and Singer, 2001: 15), fundamental sources of weakness are low access to national power; others assert that weak powers are weak in a relational sense (Barston, 1973; Rostoks, 2010: 87). In the absolute and relative concepts, weak powers are naturally weak or weaker than others in the international system, most significantly their immediate neighbours. Some states may seem weak because they cannot mobilise their power sources for international politics. This could be seen after WWII, with most former colonies of great powers becoming independent or otherwise joining the international system, with such nations as India and Indonesia, although great in terms of resource endowment, continuing to struggle with the problem of state-building, nation-building, or both (Morrison and Suhrke, 1978: 194–197). For instance, India was weak in the 1950s, but Indonesia and Myanmar were much weaker than India. Many newly independent countries share the same foreign policy problem. Moreover, they share politico-cultural values and moral policies that contribute to the establishment of non-alignment foreign policy. This study mainly focuses on the relational concept of weaker powers through a behavioural approach in line with the strategic security environment. Ultimately, although weak powers are weak compared with greater powers, they still have bargaining power in terms of their material resources and geostrategic position. Thus, India, Indonesia, Egypt, Myanmar, and Yugoslavia played a leading role in IR by pursuing non-alignment policy and founding the NAM in the midst of Cold War power politics.

3. *Panchsheel* (Sanskrit: *panch*-five, *sheel*-virtues) or the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence includes: (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) mutual non-interference; (4) equality and mutual benefit; and (5) peaceful co-existence. These principles are well known in world civilisation for international conduct,

and they can be called five precepts of political conduct; these were first formulated by Chinese Vice-Minister of foreign affairs and the Indian ambassador to China for an agreement over the Tibet issue in April 1954. Later, *Panchsheel* became a passionate watchword among countries as the fundamental principles of Bandung Conference (Khanna, 2018). Myanmar participated in the agreement on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954 with India and China (Johnstone, 1963).

4. As will be discussed later, non-alignment is different from hedging. Hedging is the policy of being non-committal, but with possibility of any alignment open. Non-alignment means that the path of any alignment is foreclosed.

5. Myanmar actively supported the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC's) action on 27 June 1950 regarding the Korean War (Maung, 1956; Myoe, 2009: 22).

6. The isolationist policy may work against the interests of the state internationally. Myanmar's foreign policy of the Ne Win period (1962–1974) matched some criteria of isolationism. It is a stronger version of non-alignment, and the proper counterpart of alignment. That is, while non-alignment is a modified version of neutrality with military connotation, isolationism refers to a policy of general aloofness or disengagement from most forms of international alignment. Thus, isolationism is conducted by the state with an extremely low level of international involvement, no military or diplomatic alliance commitments, few external transactions, little tourism, and minimal foreign development assistance (Holsti, 1982: 110).

7. The concept of xenophobia is a significant characteristic reflected from the political value of "autonomy," which can be learned during the colonial period. Most of the Burmese intellectuals sensed deeply humiliated staying under the alien rule. Therefore, this sentiment encouraged nationalist ideas and xenophobia within the society of people's common view, and political actors in particular. In order to protect changing society under the alien administration, this xenophobic behaviour can be observed under the Ne Win administration, since the administration thought foreigners, particularly Westerners whom it imagined to be the capitalist agents, destroy his way of Burmese socialism (see more detail in Gyi, 1983: 198).

8. The 8888 uprising is a series of nationwide popular pro-democracy movements, which was started by university students and later joined by hundreds of monks and common people including children, housewives, etc. The key event took place on the 8 August 1988 (8-8-88).

9. The term "Rohingya" is not officially used in Myanmar, as "Rohingya," who settled down in Rakhine states, are excluded from the list of "135 ethnic groups" under the 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law. Thus, the term is officially used to refer to the (illegal) Bengali migrants by the Myanmar government. Based on this fact, the pressure for the international community has been intensifying, particularly with the USA (see more details in Myoe, 2017: 107).

10. Interview by *Nikkei Asia*, "Questions & Answers with Aung San Suu Kyi: We see China and Japan as friends," 23 October 2019. The *Nikkei Asia* interviewed Myanmar State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, during her stay in Tokyo, one day after she attended the enthronement ceremony of Emperor Naruhito.

11. U Nu's speech to Parliament, 5 September 1950, in *From Peace to Stability*, the Ministry of Information, Government of the Union of Burma (p. 102).

12. The KNU's declaration of war in 1947 was followed by many ethnic insurgencies around the country. The instability and violent conflicts accelerated as the Panglong Agreement, established in 1947, dissolved after ten years of independence.

13. The definition of culture is vague, and the concept of culture in this article is concerned with only the constructivist notion of socially shared beliefs, which is directly related to IR.

14. The concept of strategic culture was developed by several strategic thinkers in the late 1970s to argue that the approach of the Soviet Union's nuclear strategy questions was different from that of the USA (Ball, 1993: 45).

15. Buddhists seek *nirvana* (enlightenment) by breaking away "the wheel of life" through the middle path defined by eight right paths – right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration – in three stages of morality, concentration, and wisdom. The five precepts are essential to morality. See Thittila (1956). Dr. Khin Maung Nyunt, a historian and Professor Emeritus of Yangon University and Mandalay University, Myanmar, and former chief political advisor to the Myanmar president, U Ko Ko Hlaing, whom the author interviewed in September 2019, concurred with this characterisation.

16. Myanmar-ness means "a distinctive Myanmar way of accomplishing whatever tasks are at hand," which the people of Myanmar have always insisted on (Than, 1999: 165).

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