

# Myanmar's responses to major power strategies in the Indo-Pacific in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

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## **Abstract:**

Since 1948, Myanmar has advocated implementing a non-aligned foreign policy to maintain its autonomy in international relations. Throughout the country's history, Myanmar's foreign policy towards major powers has resembled a pendulum swinging back and forth between "positive non-alignment" and "negative neutrality". In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the foreign policy adjustments of major countries in the Indo-Pacific region (specifically the US, China, India, and Japan), Myanmar has also had to respond with policy adjustments to ensure its own development. In recent years, as they have faced significant international and regional changes, major powers have adjusted their foreign strategies, including those related to the Indo-Pacific region. By employing a combination of historical and international relations research methods, this article aims to analyse the transition from Myanmar's "positive non-alignment" policy to its "negative neutrality" policy in response to changes in the country's international, regional, and internal situations. Myanmar's policies in recent decades may offer references for consideration in Vietnam's foreign policy formulation.

**Keywords:** foreign policies, Indo-Pacific, major powers, Myanmar, Vietnam.

**Classification numbers:** 5.1, 5.2, 8.1

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, as they have faced significant international and regional changes, major powers have adjusted their foreign strategies, including those related to the Indo-Pacific region. Linking the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific, this region is at the heart of global political and economic strategic interests. Currently, the Indo-Pacific region, with its vast array of resources and numerous "choke point"<sup>1</sup> sea routes, is increasingly of geostrategic importance in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Consequently, some of the region's great powers have adjusted their

foreign strategies to expand their sphere of influence and safeguard their interests, including the US, China, India, and Japan. In this context, as a country within the Indo-Pacific region, Myanmar has adjusted its foreign policy from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the present.

This article employs a combination of historical and international relations research methods to analyse Myanmar's policy responses amid the strategic adjustments of major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to reviewing the studies and evaluations of previous scholars, the author utilises a comparative approach to assess the practical interaction between theory and data, as well as the levels of analysis and policy analysis methods employed in the article. This article comprises three main sections: (i) The strategic

<sup>1</sup>The Suez Canal, Bab-el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, the Mozambique Channel, the Strait of Malacca, the Sunda Strait, and the Isthmus Lombok Sea.

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adjustments of several major countries in the Indo-Pacific region; (ii) Myanmar's responses to these strategic adjustments; (iii) Some lessons learned for Vietnam in the current context.

## **2. An overview of the strategic adjustments of some major countries towards the Indo-Pacific region in recent years**

For the US, despite not being the first country to introduce the Indo-Pacific concept, it is a pioneer in implementing and executing the "Free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy to re-establish its balance in Asia, counterbalancing China's rise, and developing alliances and partnerships to strengthen the interests of the Washington government. The US FOIP strategy is built on three pillars: security, economy, and governance. The goals of this US strategy are: Firstly, to maintain long-term US leadership in the region and globally, in the context of China (and Russia) being publicly identified by the US as competitors in America's leading strategy in the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy; secondly, to promote free, fair, and reciprocal trade. The US does not tolerate trade deficits and trade abuses by other countries. Instead, The US requires its trading partner countries to behave equitably and responsibly towards it; thirdly, to maintain open sea and airspace in the region; fourthly, to effectively confront traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including North Korea's nuclear programme; lastly, to ensure respect for laws and individual rights [1]. The US FOIP strategy focuses on ensuring the country's interests, emphasising the "4P" formula in a clear order of priority: Prosperity, Peace, Power through the deployment of US strength, and finally, influence through US values and Principles [2].

The core goal of the US Indo-Pacific strategy is to build a "Quadrilateral security dialogue" alliance (abbreviated as QUAD, including the US, Japan, Australia, and India) to balance China's growing influence in the region, thereby maintaining the US's economic interests, political power, military,

and diplomatic strength [3]. It can be said that the US's steps in promoting strategic cooperation, strengthening engagement on all economic, political, and security fronts, and building partnerships and alliances with countries in the region demonstrate the US's long-term determination: The US is and will be an Indo-Pacific nation.

For China, as a great power both in Asia and globally, it cannot ignore strategically important regions such as the Indo-Pacific. Since the end of the Cold War, particularly in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's rise has significantly influenced global development, altering the global distribution of power. According to R.D. Kaplan (2012) [4], a professor at the US Naval Academy, "China is currently changing the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere. On land and sea, the country's influence extends from Central Asia to the Russian Far East and from the East Sea to the Indian Ocean". It is evident that through the implementation of the "String of pearls" strategy and the "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI), China has concretised its "big power" ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.

The "String of pearls" is the term used to describe China's maritime route from the south of the country through the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, and the Lombok Strait to the Indian Ocean. Accordingly, military bases on Hainan Island, container shipping facilities in Chittagong (Bangladesh), deep-water ports in Sittwe, Kyaukpyu, and Yangon (Myanmar), and a naval base in Gwadar (Pakistan), as well as Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, are considered "pearls". These "pearls" extend from the shores of mainland China through the East Sea, the Strait of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean, and to the reefs of the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf [5]. Each "pearl" in the "String of pearls" represents China's geopolitical influence or military presence in the Indo-Pacific, the East Sea, and other strategic waters. With this strategy, China aims to expand its influence from Hainan in the East Sea through the world's busiest

sea routes towards the Persian Gulf, with the primary goals of containing India, ensuring energy security, and gaining control of important maritime routes [6].

In 2014, China launched the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative (a land corridor from China through Central Asia and Russia to Europe) and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, which runs from the Strait of Malacca to India, the Middle East, and East Africa (referred to as the BRI). China's BRI places the highest priority on the maritime sector when proposing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, which aims to connect seaports, one of the two main connections between China and Europe [7]. In addition, China is implementing the "two-ocean" strategy to expand its naval forces into the Indian Ocean [8]. This initiative aims to achieve strategic goals in politics, security, economics, and territorial sovereignty, as well as to establish a new framework of rules in the region and the world, in which China plays a leading role [9].

As a continental power and occupying a strategic position in the heart of the Indian Ocean, India is a prominent actor in the Indo-Pacific region and one of the most important supporters of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Implemented since 1992, India's "Look East" policy connected this South Asian country with Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. In 2014, after becoming Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi revised the "Look East" policy to the "Act East" policy. This is a significant step in India's foreign policy, elevating the country's international engagement. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Act East" policy has strengthened India's approach in the Indo-Pacific region, increasing its engagement through a strategic partnership system. In addition, India also offers a vision for the Indo-Pacific region, aiming to promote peace and stability through a fair approach at sea and in the air, freedom of navigation, and maritime crime prevention, while protecting the marine environment and developing a blue economy [10]. In 2015, in the report "Ensuring maritime security: India's maritime security strategy", India clearly stated that the country's

strategic vision had shifted from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, in association with the "Act East" policy. At the Shangri-La Dialogue (June 2016), Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region, emphasising India's participation in regional, ASEAN-centred organisations, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). For India, strengthening security cooperation with the US, promoting a special strategic partnership with Japan, and maintaining relations with Australia are key strategic focuses in shaping the region's economic and security structures, based on the QUAD alliance.

For Japan, this country plays a crucial role in shaping and promoting the Indo-Pacific strategy. In April 2017, the Government of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe launched the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative to emphasise the importance of linking the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean, confirming that Tokyo will expand its strategic role and vision, "actively contributing to peace" in this vast region. This initiative has three pillars: (1) Promoting and establishing an order based on the principles of international law, freedom of navigation, and freedom of trade; (2) Pursuing economic prosperity (improving connectivity and strengthening economic partnerships, including EPA/FTA and investment treaties); (3) Committing to peace and stability [11]. The main goals of Japan's FOIP initiative are: Firstly, to promote connectivity between Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, in which the Indian Ocean is of geopolitical and strategic importance to Japan's security; secondly, to strengthen Japan's image and global position as a major country; thirdly, to cement the alliance with the US; fourthly, to balance influence with China [11].

Unlike the US, Japan views military security cooperation as core and prioritises freedom of navigation, respect, and compliance with the law. To implement its FOIP strategy, Japan has deployed a series of measures such as increasing participation in multilateral military cooperation with Southeast Asian

countries, participating in joint exercises with India and Australia, establishing a military base in Djibouti to support peacekeeping operations in South Sudan, and participating in a training programme for forces in Djibouti. An effective method that plays a crucial role as a source of “soft power” to enhance diplomatic influence and serve Japan’s direct interests in the Indo-Pacific region is financial support for numerous countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. These moves and policies demonstrate Japan’s active efforts to participate in this important strategic area.

It is evident that the strategic, economic, and commercial importance of the Indo-Pacific region has made it the world’s focus of competition and confrontation, altering the nature of international politics. This region has become the “pivot” of international conflicts and power dynamics, creating a significant new geopolitical landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With its location at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region, Myanmar is situated at the crossroads of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, gradually becoming a destination for many world powers. Myanmar is not only a “sliding board” for India to enter the Southeast Asian market but also a key factor in the BRI and China’s “String of pearls” strategy, serving as an important link in the US’s strategic “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region, “controlling” the rise of China and India, maintaining the US’s strategic balance in Asia, and preserving its dominant position in the existing world geopolitical chessboard. Myanmar holds an important strategic position in Asia; no other Asian country possesses sufficient geographical advantages to connect China and India, making it a focal point for major countries (the US, China, India, and Japan) that seek a significant presence in what is considered the “crossroads of Asia”. In this context, Myanmar needs to adopt appropriate foreign policies considering the complex Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

### 3. Myanmar’s policies in response to strategic adjustments by major countries

Since independence, Myanmar’s foreign policies have been defined by one overarching goal: protecting the country’s autonomy, independence, and ability to manoeuvre among major powers [12]. However, this ambitious aim has been pursued in different and sometimes contradictory ways. From a historical perspective, the development and trajectory of Myanmar’s foreign policy resemble a pendulum, moving between two types of policies, namely “active non-alignment” and “negative neutrality”. The policy of “active non-alignment” seeks to assert autonomy and independence in international relations through the diversification of foreign policy, while the policy of “negative neutrality” involves minimising the country’s relationships with other nations (except China).

From the end of the Cold War until before 2011, Myanmar’s foreign policy towards major powers such as the US, China, and India was generally oriented towards the military government’s priority goals of protecting the country’s independence, peace and stability, and minimising external interference in domestic affairs. In the minds of the generals, the country, the government, and the Tatmadaw are a unified bloc. Therefore, a threat to one of these three is considered a threat to all. This explains why the efforts of the US, China, India, and others to urge the generals to conduct national reconciliation and political reform have had almost no results. In response to the strategic adjustments of major powers and the country’s geostrategic importance in the Indo-Pacific, Myanmar has also adjusted its foreign policy since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### 3.1. From 2011 to 2016: Implementing the “active non-alignment” policy

After coming to power in March 2011 under the leadership of General Thein Sein, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) implemented domestic political reforms aimed at gradually reducing the country’s dependence on China, particularly in the



fields of economics and diplomacy. In addition to actively participating in multilateral institutions, the Myanmar government gradually eased restrictions on political participation, media, and the economy. Notably, on 3 November, 2012, the country announced the Foreign Investment Law, which comprises 238 chapters that clearly regulate land use, tax exemption standards, dispute resolution, and financial transactions [13]. The diversification of foreign policy, along with progress in political reform, has helped Myanmar proactively and actively implement its non-alignment policy.

Thein Sein government's moves attracted international support from the US and Western countries that had previously shunned the military government. After commitments to ease economic sanctions, the Obama administration was willing to welcome Thein Sein's government back into the international community. The US vowed to support the real democratic process and free and fair elections in Myanmar. An important event for the process of improving US-Myanmar relations and US policy towards this country was the official visit to Myanmar by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in early December 2011. Hillary Clinton's visit was the first by a US cabinet official in more than 50 years [14]. This historic visit marked a transition from suspicion and confrontation to dialogue, improvement, and normalisation, following more than half a century of cold relations between these two countries. This visit opened a series of visits by foreign ministers of Western countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Norway, Australia, and New Zealand to Myanmar, which financially supported this country and simultaneously promoted the process of quickly lifting a series of sanctions imposed by the US and the West on Myanmar [15].

Thein Sein's strong reorientation of Myanmar's foreign policy is a selective learning of some components of U Nu's active non-aligned stance from 1948 to 1962. The key aspects include enhancing

economic diversification to reduce over-reliance on China, implementing a flexible "non-alignment" policy, having clear views and attitudes towards ASEAN and multilateralism, and emphasising the policy of "goodwill diplomacy". As a result of domestic reforms, the Thein Sein government gradually lifted international sanctions and simultaneously increased bilateral aid, loans, and foreign direct investment (FDI). For example, the US began to ease sanctions and initially invest in Myanmar. The Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) was signed by the two countries in 2013. Meanwhile, the EU also lifted economic sanctions against Myanmar in early 2012 and restored the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) as well as import tax exemptions for goods from this Southeast Asian country. In 2012 alone, Myanmar's textile industry experienced an 18% increase in global exports [16]. As for Japan, the country announced debt forgiveness of 2.72 billion USD in 2013 and committed to invest 96 million USD to develop infrastructure in Myanmar (in 2014) [17]. The Thilawa Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was established with a primary focus on investment capital, mainly from Japan, to compete with the Kyaukphegy SEZ, which is backed by China. Japan became Myanmar's fourth-largest trading partner and most important exporter in the automotive sector by 2016. At the same time, two-way trade between Myanmar and the US increased from \$9.7 million (in 2010) to \$577.2 million (in 2017) [18]. The role of economic diversification in Myanmar is very important, serving as "a hedge" to counter Myanmar's excessive dependence on China.

On the other hand, Myanmar's growing activism in the years 2011-2016 represents a major departure from the diplomatic approach of the 1988-2011 period, when Myanmar was increasingly seen as an "abandoned, reactionary, and isolated state". During those years, Myanmar's negative neutralism was dominated by internal and external factors, stemming

from Western criticism following the brutal repression of pro-democracy movements in 1988<sup>2</sup> and the xenophobic ideology of the ruling military government [19]. With the primary influence of nationalism, Myanmar's leadership has not tolerated any form of Western influence in key areas, ranging from politics and economics to culture and society. Meanwhile, China has asserted itself as the main "diplomatic protector" and the largest supplier of military equipment and weapons to the Myanmar military government, typically with Beijing's veto in place at the United Nations (UN) in 2007 and 2009 to block Western-sponsored resolutions against the military regime [20]. As a result, after taking office in 2011, General Thein Sein enlisted international support to adopt a China "hedging" strategy, reducing Myanmar's excessive dependence on China and relaunching a more diverse foreign policy.

### **3.2. From 2016 to early 2021: Shifting from positive non-alignment to negative neutralism**

In the 2015 election, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won overwhelmingly and gained the trust of the masses. She also retained strong international support as a longtime democracy icon and Nobel Peace Prize winner. A strong level of political legitimacy and appeal correlates with notable diplomatic proactivity and continuity with the Myanmar government's active non-alignment strategy. In its 2015 foreign policy statement, the NLD pledged to pursue "an active and independent foreign policy" consistent with the country's "independent policy of non-alignment" and neutralism dating from the Cold War era [21]. The document also emphasises democratic values

and commits to "working together for the benefit of the region on issues related to regional organisations and programmes, and close relations with the UN, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and other organisations" [21].

At the same time, Aung San Suu Kyi also signalled a desire to seek practical cooperation with China to promote the country's economic and strategic interests. In contrast to Thein Sein, she adopted a relatively "softer" stance towards Beijing and actively supported infrastructure investment in China's BRI in Myanmar through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). This economic corridor connects Yunnan (China) with Mandalay city in Central Myanmar, then expands in two directions, to Yangon city and Kyaukpyu SEZ, forming the three-pillar cooperation platform of CMEC [22]. In an interview with Chinese media, Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi stated that "Myanmar has no enemies, but relations with neighbouring countries are more sensitive than others and need to be paid careful attention" [23]. If Thein Sein's years in power marked a turning point in the relationship between Myanmar and China, her trip sought to mend relations with Naypyidaw's powerful neighbour.

With efforts to capitalise on Chinese investment, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Beijing in 2017 to attend the inaugural "Belt and Road" forum. While rapprochement with Beijing was buoyant, relations with the West cooled over Myanmar's Rakhine State crisis and violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority. Facing growing criticism from Western media and politicians, Suu Kyi's government expounded on the importance of self-reliance and rejected allegations of military atrocities by the Myanmar Army (the Tatmadaw), claiming that outsiders do not understand the complexity of Myanmar's internal problems. These dramatic developments complicated the normalisation process with the US and Western countries under Aung San Suu Kyi's government.

After the Rohingya Muslim crisis, the NLD party became increasingly reactive to international criticism, investor caution, and estrangement from Western

<sup>2</sup>On 8 August, 1988, thousands of students and people in the capital Rangoon and other major cities took to the streets to protest against government corruption, stifling democracy, and incompetence in economic management and development of the country (Burmese history calls it the "8888" event). However, the protest was brutally suppressed by the military government. This caused thousands of students and innocent Myanmar people to die. This event was strongly condemned by the UN, the US, Western countries... and India. This is also the main reason why the US and Western countries implement a policy of embargo and economic sanctions against Myanmar. In that context, China not only did not object but also supported and sponsored the Myanmar military government.

partners. As a result, the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi adopted a pro-military stance to bolster domestic political legitimacy, retreating from active participation in multilateral diplomacy and adopting a “go alone” approach, while increasingly relying on Beijing’s economic and diplomatic patronage. This approach reflects a shift away from the positive non-alignment position pursued by Thein Sein towards a more neutral stance. Growing criticism from the US and European countries over the Aung San Suu Kyi government’s failure to address Tatmadaw atrocities in Rakhine State prompted isolation and condemnation from the international community and ignited Myanmar’s nationalism. The NLD faced pressure from Washington to fulfil its promise to repatriate Rohingya refugees, and in 2018, the Trump administration sanctioned four military commanders linked to the previous year’s violence in Rakhine State [24], as well as Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing in December 2019 [25].

In an election speech in September 2020, Aung San Suu Kyi emphasised that “criticism and pressure from outside are not understanding, sympathy, and help” [26]. This is the clearest manifestation of the Myanmar government’s increasingly isolationist worldview and adoption of negative neutralism. Naypyidaw repeatedly bypassed multilateral institutions, avoiding the UN General Assembly in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Although Aung San Suu Kyi attended most ASEAN summits as a Foreign Minister, she skipped the 32<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Summit in Singapore in April 2018 [27]. Facing condemnation from the US and the West, Naypyidaw strengthened relations with Beijing. In the absence of Western investment, Chinese FDI in Myanmar returned to its previous high, accounting for nearly 40% of total FDI coming from China (including Hong Kong) between 2019 and 2020 [28]. The strengthening of Myanmar - China relations under the NLD reflects the fact that Myanmar is increasingly distanced from the West and multilateral institutions such as ASEAN due to the Rohingya crisis and Aung San Suu Kyi’s defense of the military at The Hague in 2019. Myanmar’s foreign policy from 2017 to 2021 demonstrated a shift towards

self-reliance and a growing distrust of outsiders, while economic growth and peace negotiations stalled. The NLD has failed to tackle economic inequality, instead supporting state-led development projects while promoting individual self-reliance as the path to a more solidary country - all characteristics associated with the country’s negative neutralism [29].

### ***3.3. Since the coup (early February 2021) until now: Deepening negative neutralism***

The developments surrounding the coup event in early 2021 in Myanmar have had a significant impact on the country’s policy and the development of diplomatic relations. On the morning of 1 February 2021, the Myanmar army took control of the Yangon City Hall, declared a state of emergency, and arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi along with a series of powerful civilian leaders. Power was assigned to the army commander-in-chief, Mr. Min Aung Hlaing. The Myanmar military claimed that these actions were necessary to protect the “stability” of the country and accused the National Election Commission of failing to address “major irregularities” in the November 2020 general election. Specifically, the Myanmar Federal Election Commission did not investigate and report on election irregularities that the military and some opposition political parties had requested [30]. The coup was opposed by domestic voters and the international community due to its lack of political legitimacy. The US, UK, UN, and European Union (EU) condemned the coup, calling on the Myanmar military to return power to the civilian government promptly. New Zealand was the first foreign government to take specific action to protest Myanmar’s coup, announcing the end of high-level military and political contact with Myanmar. As a result, Naypyidaw deepened its negative neutralism by turning inward and separating from the world.

The Myanmar military’s violence against civilians has returned the country to a state of international isolation not seen since 2011. The military junta’s internal and external sources of political legitimacy

have gradually declined, apart from limited support from Beijing. China appeared more cautious, emphasising the importance of stability and calling on the international community not to “exacerbate tensions and complicate the situation in Myanmar”. China’s Xinhua News Agency referred to the events of 1<sup>st</sup> February as “a cabinet reshuffle” rather than a “coup”, as characterised by Western media [31]. Both factions in the political upheaval in Myanmar maintain friendly relations with Beijing, leaving China with little option but to “keep quiet”.

The crisis in Myanmar has persisted for three years since the military coup took power in the country. During this time, Myanmar has been deeply embroiled in bloody civil wars between rebel forces and the military government, further exacerbating the country’s economic, political, and social crises. The tense relationship between the civilian and military governments has been a longstanding issue throughout many stages of Myanmar’s politics. On 16 April 2021, the National Unity Government (NUG) was established, bringing together members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), representatives of various ethnic groups, and others abroad to oppose the military government. The NUG’s formation is driven by the aspiration to defy the military regime and restore democratic rule, upholding the results of the 2020 general election [32]. So far, the NUG has primarily highlighted its intention to implement independent foreign policies and cooperate with those who support democratic rule in Myanmar [33]. The main goals of the NUG’s foreign policy include: a) Gaining international recognition as the legitimate representative of the people of Myanmar; b) Garnering widespread support for its struggle against military dictatorship; and c) Increasing international pressure against the military government, thereby denying the military’s legitimacy as a representative of Myanmar on international and regional stages [34]. Under the mediation of China, a ceasefire agreement has been

implemented among the three factions and the military. Myanmar is expected to hold civilian elections in 2025, but it is difficult to predict whether this will lead to a mutually beneficial outcome in the conflict.

Although it is too early to make an accurate assessment of the military government’s neutral foreign policy strategy, some observations can be made at this time. Firstly, the poor economic policies of the State Administrative Council (SAC) and weak efforts to control the COVID-19 outbreak have resulted in a currency crisis, a flight of investors, and the near-total collapse of the financial sector. Secondly, like the rule of Myanmar’s military government from 1988 to 2011, General Min Aung Hlaing’s regime has adopted a distinctive stance on international affairs, espousing xenophobic ideologies while transitioning from a free market economy to self-reliance. Consequently, Myanmar has become increasingly dependent on Beijing for economic and diplomatic support. Furthermore, the Min Aung Hlaing government has actively taken advantage of China’s patronage by announcing the restoration of the country’s infrastructure projects, particularly hydroelectric dams that were stalled under the previous government. Arguably, with Myanmar’s deepening isolation under military rule, the SAC has demonstrated a firm commitment to a brand of negative neutralism and an inward-looking reaction.

#### **4. Conclusions**

With its significant geopolitical position, the Indo-Pacific region holds strategic importance for the development of international trade, playing a crucial role in the transportation of oil, gas, and goods worldwide, from the Middle East to Australia and East Asia. The strategic significance of this region has profoundly influenced the current foreign policy adjustments of several countries within it, including the US, China, Japan, and India. Given its central location in the Indo-Pacific region, Myanmar is increasingly becoming the “focus” of the foreign policies of many major powers. In this geopolitical context, Myanmar has adopted appropriate policy responses.



Throughout history, neutrality has been regarded as a key factor in Myanmar's foreign policy, manifesting differently in accordance with each historical period of the country. Despite certain changes in relations with the US, China, and India, the Myanmar government has consistently adhered to its neutral, non-aligned policy, endeavouring to balance the interests of major powers in its foreign policy. In other words, neutrality and the balance of power will remain fundamental principles in Myanmar's foreign policy and diplomatic activities.

In the context of the new world order being shaped and the rapidly changing regional situation, particularly concerning maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, Vietnam may consider developing appropriate foreign policy planning, contributing to the establishment of common rules of the game in accordance with international law and national interests.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

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