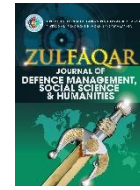




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THE IMPACT OF ONE BELT ONE ROAD (OBOR) INITIATIVE ON MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative is a comprehensive economic interdependent relation which aims to increase regional connectivity and is an enhancement of its geopolitical interest for the benefits of herself, Asia, as well as in European states. Chinese and Myanmar government has invested a significant amount of investment in overcoming the energy technology deficiencies and cultivate the industry to a whole new level of self-reliance. Energy and manufacturing modernisation were made possible through constant cooperation between China and Myanmar. This paper is an attempt to analyze One Belt One Road Initiative and implication towards Myanmar. This paper employed the qualitative method of analysis. The findings of this paper is Myanmar able to enhance its export earnings of the agriculture, fishery and aquaculture, increase countryside employment as well as reduce poverty. Seven advantages experienced by China and Myanmar through 21st MSR Initiative are (1) the modernisation of energy sector, (2) serve as a gateway between Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, (3) employment opportunities for the local people, (4) increase in manufacturing industries, (5) transfer of technology involving all joint venture industries, (6) exploitation of land for infrastructure and industrial development projects and lastly (7) improved Myanmar financial institution. With all the advantages, Myanmar and China need to maintain a strong political commitment for 21st MSR Initiative long term sustainability. There are certain areas such as structural and organisational integration, project management and institutional problems that may act as barriers. As such, these barriers are to be continuously reviewed to ensure smooth decision-making process, regulation, the flow of financial and protect geopolitical rights in Myanmar concerning 21st MSR Initiative.

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Introduction

Myanmar is the second-biggest state in Southeast Asia and located between Southeast and South Asia region (Myint, 2019). Myanmar's vast resources with its high-interest location, which sharing boundary of India and China develop into the concentration of political instability among the major those powers (Karim & Islam, 2018). The people of Myanmar were as well very much influenced by India and China in the context of culture and religion (Pode, Pode, & Diouf, 2016). However, strong bilateral relations with China dated back as early of the ninth century has very much shaped the geopolitical of Myanmar (Sein, 2015). Since independence in 1948, the ever-changing government has come across several critical intrastate issues such as ethnic separatist movements and communist insurgencies. Nevertheless, with

support from China, all the matters were suppressed successfully. Furthermore, during the post-independence, Myanmar declared China as its most reliable and valuable relationship in the context of economic growth and strictly adopted not to go against China's policy (Hallgren & Ghiasy, 2017). The gradual transition of Myanmar towards socialism during the Cold War era transformed the once most industrialized state of the world into an economic basket case (J. M. Malik, 2018). In mid-1990 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) presided over a parliamentary cycle in which the rival National League for Democracy (NLD) gained a majority but was not invited to assume office afterwards (Greenlee, 2016). Then, the military junta put NLD chief Aung Suu Kyi under house arrest along with several others who were detained and held in police detention, following which the West started to enforce economic sanctions. With domestic problems and regional solitary confinement, the military junta switched to China for survival (Kyaw Win, 2017). At this point, marked the beginning of China dominance over Myanmar.

Nevertheless, the dominance of China in Myanmar created widespread resentment, social unrest and more importantly, the use of Chinese labour (Otmakhova, 2017). Ten of thousands of Chinese migrated and populated south of Myanmar's border in which generated fear that the state is turning into another Chinese province. As a result, Myanmar's government began to suspend a few of Chinese investment projects encompassing the Myitsone Dam project, seizure of Letpadaung copper mine operation and the termination of China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) railway project (Bah & Cooper, 2015). The suspension of various Chinese's development program in Myanmar indicates the government at that time sought to distance its dependency to China and assist Myanmar to shed its recluse status (J. M. Malik, 2018). On the contrary, the political situation in Myanmar began to shift entirely, starting from 2011, when the NLD is finally assuming power after five decades (Soans & Abe, 2016). The shift of central government lead by Aung Suu Kyi gathered new momentum for the state to undergo democratisation process. During the process, taking into consideration the importance of China, Aung Suu Kyi decides to visit China first to soothe Myanmar - China close and friendly relationship (Liu, Yamaguchi, & Yoshikawa, 2017). Despite with all the media speculation related to the new government's Pro-West Foreign Policy, the visit highlighted that Aung Suu Kyi's internal domestic priorities of economic development and political stability abroad, taking into account of insurgents, she believed peace is an illusion and only be achieved by not offending its closest superpower, China (Meyer & Thein, 2014). Moreover, such an act of not upsetting can be seen when Aung Suu Kyi decided to relaunch the Letpadaung copper mine to address concerns of Chinese investors (Ruta, 2019). As overall, Myanmar, with its new government carrying the democratic flag, emphasise on the importance of having good relations with neighbouring states over distant powers especially China to assure the aim of internal stability and economic growth (Cox et al. 2018).

Myanmar Participation in 21st Maritime Silk Road (MSR) Initiative

The Chinese President Xi Jinping initiated the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREC) during his tour to Kazakhstan in 2013 and subsequently promoted the 21st MSR at the end of 2013 (Myint, 2019). The goal of both the SREC and the 21st MSR was to encourage greater cooperation between China and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Otmakhova, 2017). Together they named the SREC, and 21st MSR were referred to as One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative (Drinkwater, 2017). The President then scrutinized the OBOR Initiative's goal of developing transport network routes from Asia to Africa and Europe for exchange and commerce (Ujvari, 2019). Nevertheless, the OBOR Initiative is not anything new, but rather against pre-existing or decades-old tangentially linked economic initiatives, extending or repackaging many current or expected ventures (Meyer & Thein, 2014). An article in the Beijing Review of 2 September 1985 entitled 'Opening to the Southwest: An Expert Opinion' clarified the significance of Myanmar's geostrategic position for China's economic development, according to Pan Qi, a former vice-minister of communication. The article primarily illustrated Chinese economic thinkers' intention to re-establish the old Myanmar Route (Burma Route) to link weaker inland provinces, such as Yunnan and Xian Jing, well behind well-developing coastal regions, along with rapid growth of Southeast and South Asian economies. China found an overland path across Myanmar to a port through which allowed to sell inexpensive luxury products to Southeast Asia, India and other more distant developing states (J. M. Malik, 2018). Such an outlet shortened transportation time for some of China's trade and in case of confrontation, aid to escape the Malacca Strait chokepoint (Zhang, 2011).

More than a few Chinese Multinational Companies (MNCs) have signed agreements in Myanmar over the last two decades to invest in hydropower, mines, transportation, and oil and gas ventures (Kim, 2018).

Then in the early 2000s, first as part of the 'Great Western Growth' strategy under President Jiang Zemin, and then as part of its 'March West' policy under President Hu Jintao, China embarked on plans to invest hundreds of billions on constructing trade and economic corridors across Southern, Southwest and Southeast Asia pipelines, highways and railway networks to help improve China's underdevelopment (Liu et al. 2017). All development ventures on or under construction on the drawing board, such as the proposed 1,350 km railway via Laos and Myanmar to Thailand, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) road network and an electricity corridor via Myanmar, were co-opted into the current scheme by officials rushing to connect their proposals to the all-encompassing horizon of Xi (Karim & Islam, 2018). For instance, the BCIM corridor, conceived before the OBOR Initiative, and the US\$ 500 million China–ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund, set up two years before the MSR's declaration, are now critical components of the 21st MSR.

Myanmar-China Cooperation Through 21st MSR Initiative

The economic aspect of the 21st MSR has continued to be stressed by Chinese leaders and official media because it may stimulate economic development in less established regions (Barbesgaard, 2019). This policy was launched amid an investment boom in China that culminated in large-scale overproduction and overcapacity, especially in the steel, machinery and building materials sectors, rendering it essential to pursue new export markets abroad (Liu et al. 2017). With China's domestic demand downturn and increasing incomes, the government now needs to export the excess steel, cement, employees and engineer, and gain higher investment returns (ROI) (Otmakhova, 2017). It includes the development of railroads, ports and trade corridors to connect manufacturing centres in China with markets around the world and natural resources.

China's status as the second-largest economy in the world, the world's largest trader of goods and the world's largest holder of foreign-exchange reserves, provide a strong foundation for Chinese companies to expand their investment abroad (Ruta, 2019). The disbursement of large sums of money through the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as loans and aid to states participating in the 21st MSR to enhance the economic and diplomatic influence of China (Cox et al. 2018). The secret to the progress of the 21st MSR lies in the potential communication partnership and the latest Lancang–Mekong Partnership Framework project that also improved the position of the AIIB in the bidirectional nexus of the two most significant Buddhist nations of Asia (Myanmar and China) (Chan, 2015). To add to that, China has invested almost US\$19 billion into just about 130 mega projects under the same initiative in Myanmar (Sein, 2015).

Similarly, Myanmar has decided to create an exclusive economic zone between Mae Sot's Thai border town and Myawaddy in Myanmar (Vicol, Pritchard, & Htay, 2018). Connection to a proposed deep-sea port in Dawei, Myanmar, would further improve the link. Mainland Southeast Asia is a crucial gateway for China's 21st MSR to establish transport networks to Central and South East Asia and shift offshore manufacturing to low-cost producers like Myanmar (Zhang, 2011). For this reason, China has been very much flexible in providing funding in the form of loan to support Myanmar's effort in transforming the initiative into realisation (Kapteyn & Wah, 2016). As a result, the total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of China in Myanmar in the year 2016 increased to 28.13% compared to other states such as India and Bangladesh (J. M. Malik, 2018). Apart from that, the government of Myanmar obtained a considerable sum of dollars from China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) who owns oil and gas industries covering Shwe gas platform in the Bay of Bengal, oil shipped towards Myanmar from the Middle East into the locality of Yunnan province (Liu et al. 2017). On top of that, the mass infrastructure development in Myanmar contributed by the long gas pipeline and the construction of a deep seaport at Sittwe in Rakhine along with the establishment of Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone generated a large amount of profits increases Myanmar's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Kyaw Win, 2017). In order to fulfil Myanmar's increasing needs of energy, the state has signed a contract with the China Power Investment Corporation (CPIC) on building several dams at the north of Myanmar, the Irrawaddy (Greenlee, 2016).

Myanmar can be identified as a fast-developing state. Its FDI primarily from China investment in 2016 onwards and others such as Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam from 2013 was approximately US\$500 million and increasing (Pettersson, 2006). Apart from that, Myanmar is aiming to reach US\$6 billion in its yearly FDI between 2017 and 2020 and subsequently increased its aim to US\$8 billion from 2021 to 2030. As a result, international business entities are looking forward to the opportunity to invest in fast-growing Myanmar mega infrastructure market, which estimated reaching US\$130 billion (Barbesgaard, 2019). Hence, Myanmar's ruling party is preparing a plan to attract big players from Japanese, Korean and other

MNC investment particularly to its railway modernisation project, namely the Mandalay – Yangon line and Kyaukphyu SEZ (Myint, 2019).

Impacts of 21st MSR Initiative and Challenges Towards Myanmar

The 21st MSR Initiative has its unique obstacles in the internal reform phase, and the 21st MSR Initiative has been quickly unveiled (Kapteyn & Wah, 2016). Myanmar's participation in such a mega-infrastructure project involving links between land and sea routes has taken place in a parallel democratic transformation and peace process.

i. The advantages aspect

The only sector, which is the energy sector, has been listed by Myanmar as a crucial de facto in its economic development, similarly, increasing its geostrategic importance (Kim, 2018). The neighbouring states such as Thailand, India and China experiencing import needs and forecasted demand in energy is paramount to keep pace with their economic growth (Pode et al. 2016). On the other hand, oil and gas are the most significant component of Myanmar's export basket. The launching of Kyaukphyu to Kunming oil and gas pipeline in 2013 undoubtedly deliver the required supplies to China, India and Thailand. As in return, Myanmar achieved a better GDP (Hallgren & Ghiasy, 2017). The export values of the resources further boosted Myanmar internal socio-economy development for more significant benefits.

Strategic location involving a state is either positively or negatively important in manoeuvring its national interest, mainly when a state is located between emerging and rising power (Sein, 2015). The positive aspect indeed produces substantial economic opportunities and at the same time may as well to come across with uncertainties spread out from growing rival neighbours. Myanmar is presently recognised as a newly developing state for economy reasons taking into consideration of its strategic geographical location (Chan, 2015). Myanmar undoubtedly plays a significant decisive role between the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, with its position on the southern tip of the Indochina Peninsula. Both places serve as China's entrance to the Indo-Pacific regional order and become a trading lane for both giant neighbours (Zhang, 2011). It is at the crossroads of China's Go West Strategy on the one side, and the Look East Strategy of India on the other. Likewise, Myanmar is crucial to the landlocked southwestern provinces of China's market access to Bangladesh and India by transit trade rather than the eastern coast of China (Ujvari, 2019).

The creation of employment opportunities for the local people in Myanmar is also another vital element of the fullest implementation of the OBOR Initiative (J. M. Malik, 2018). Once the infrastructure end with the completion of the roads, railways and seaports, national income to Myanmar would be from facilitating trading and the flow of goods and product between the participating states (Yu, 2019). Consequently, most employment chances would be made available in the service sector, among them the transport and logistic. On top of that, enhancing trade and tourism is another one definite option of increasing employment opportunities in the service sector (Barbesgaard, 2019). Taking into account of the long term effects on manufacturing industries, first and foremost the more substantial part of Myanmar's sectors both in the private sector and public sector could partner with the Chinese as well as other participating states' enterprises in investing in a profitable undertaking in the industrial zone envisaged (Meyer & Thein, 2014). Besides that, Myanmar industries could in a joint venture with their foreign counterparts, availing themselves of the advantages of their host state's finance, technology and management practices, by taking to produce goods for export which are based primarily on resources such as agriculture, fishery, aquaculture, livestock breeding and horticulture of Myanmar which could reap the full benefits one such industry increased (Kapteyn & Wah, 2016).

Furthermore, there are more than 90% of Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) in Myanmar involving in manufacturing industries and mostly focus on producing consumer products (Bah & Cooper, 2015). However, due to their limited technological advancement were effects the productivity and product quality, these SME required massive funding to upgrade and compete against the imported goods in similar markets (Meyer & Thein, 2014). Hence, through OBOR Initiative which attracts significant FDI could feasibly to invest in the supply chain of identified potential SME and begin to assist those SME to produce

export quality components and parts which could create export earnings and finally generate much better economic growth for Myanmar.

Moreover, there are vast land, natural resources, including abundant oil and gas and long rivers that stretch across Myanmar, which are yet to exploit assure huge worth if only opportunities were there (Sein, 2015). Therefore, the OBOR Initiative comes in as a considerable advantage whereby Myanmar can now begin to attract investment through attractive incentive to allow appropriate development to take place in those areas (Kim, 2018). Among the growth could be made available are agriculture, fishery and aquaculture, livestock breeding as well as horticulture sectors up to the stage where these developments would substantially raise export quality towards OBOR Initiative participating states including China. The implementation of 21st MSR Initiative would need expertise in sophisticated financing tools (Greenlee, 2016). It is another benefit for Myanmar to have its finance entities running the project hand in hand with China including loans and transactions, as well as advanced financial tools such as investment banking, services for third party companies, risk mitigation and financial regulation. The 21st MSR plan would also drive Myanmar to grow, thus increasing the need for overseas financial centres. Environmental protection is key to the 21st MSR initiative, and most of it has to come from private investors. It provides incentives for financial intermediaries to help financial institutions and policymakers in defining, tracking, coordinating and assessing green initiatives as knowledge transparency and risk management are progressively in demand (J. M. Malik, 2018).

ii. The challenges aspect

Long term projects of the OBOR Initiative underwent significant challenges. This is similar to Myanmar, where the nation experiences several problems concerning the 21st MSR Initiative (Greenlee, 2016). Looking at the geopolitical perspective, even the OBOR Initiative or 21st MSR Initiative by China in Myanmar promise for shared economic prosperity but having China as the primary contributor creates uneasiness among Myanmar's opposition political party, economy, to its people and societies (Yu, 2019). This solely due to the project's sizes, historical, proximity, and power of China. Another critical challenge here is the strategic mistrust in any bilateral relationship. Myanmar and China relations very much established for an extended period. However, given China's strategy to use it is economical to influence Myanmar economy status creates wariness as there are more about China as compared to the United States, Japan and perhaps even India (Soans & Abe, 2016). China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's statements to his Southeast Asian neighbours in 2010 that China is a big nation and others are small. Hence, China expects the others to respect whatever initiative, in this case, 21st MSR Initiative in Myanmar, by placing them well above their national interest (Otmakhova, 2017). On this basis, it is safe to say that the 21st MSR Initiative is one of China's national revitalizing policy to do more damage than good because it creates fear of spreading global power and dumping surplus resources abroad as the flag of China's economy.

Besides that, even with the government in Myanmar welcome Chinese investments, the opposition party and civil society were taking a step back and exercise more precautionary act towards China's economic dominance (Greenlee, 2016). The aid, loans and investment provided by China is a vital move to sustain regimes which enabled the Chinese premier to push aside the factors of human right and good governance. Yes, there is goodwill; however, one should never neglect that the growing economic interdependence generates its very own stresses (Ruta, 2019). The tensions merely related to the use of Chinese labour in most of 21st MSR Initiative projects, effecting the environmental standards and more significant debt accumulation by Myanmar (Chan, 2015). Despite the fast-growing in Myanmar's economy and taking into considerations, the future is full of uncertainty, be it internally or externally, may hinder a challenge to repay the loan.

Similarly, China's government considers itself heavily embroiled in the racial dispute in Myanmar (Myint, 2019). Many ethnic groups such as Kachin, Kokang, Shan and Palaung face the army that controls both sides of the Sino-Myanmar frontier. The Chinese government had earlier solemnly declared its support for border peace. Lately, however, it has been noticed that China has been operating on both sides for years by negotiating agreements with the government of Myanmar and, at the same time, supporting and grouping rebels (Cox et al. 2018). The explanation why ethnic armed groups are held on a tight leash is to maintain the possibility of scaling up assistance to rebels to reproach Myanmar if it is viewed as moving too fast or tilting towards 'Chinawary' states (Hallgren & Ghiasy, 2017). Nonetheless, boundary tensions, ongoing

ethnic unrest and insurgencies challenge China's 21st MSR Initiative goals, such as boundary defence and communication initiatives, which need the Myanmar government's considerable help at all costs.

Other challenges of 21st MSR Initiative is the very fundamental of the initiative itself, whereby more towards sino-centric unipolar, which is if understood deeply to be found merely opposite to multipolar stands taken by Myanmar (Sein, 2015). The 21st MSR Initiative from the negative side of view can be explained as a Chinese avenue to extend its economic, diplomatic, and perhaps military supremacy. As a result, it reassures Myanmar to seek out for more significant nations such as the United States of America, Japanese, and Indian involvement in regional as well as internal affairs to countervail China (Petersson, 2006). Again from the perspective of geostrategic context, China's advancement in its 21st MSR Initiative in Myanmar would be detrimental to the interest of Russia, United States, Japan and India, which have been a dominance entity in Myanmar for so long, be it in politics and economy. Such effects would place Myanmar existing agreement, predecessor bilateral including trilateral arrangement become doubtful and may not be able to implement as desired, which may eventually place the nation in an awkward position in the future (Greenlee, 2016).

At the international stage, the growth of China has radically restructured the global political system and made all Southeast Asian economies part of a regional development network operated by China (Liu et al. 2017). Such cultural dependence causes discolouration. ASEAN's increasing disunity and the lack of ASEAN centrality in regional relations have culminated in' China's central position in ASEAN relations. Some believe large-scale spending enabled to unlock the floodgates of Chinese economic hegemony. Most development schemes and promises to spend billions of dollars have struggled to materialise. And as they do, they continue to spark sociopolitical resistance fearful of the panda hug's long-term latent costs (Buckingham, David, & Jepson, 2013). Debt for equity loans is triggering domestic uproar because it contributes to international investment. As mentioned earlier, China's increasing economic and political footprint spurred outrage among Myanmarese worried about their state's foreign influence (Greenlee, 2016). One Myanmar diplomat said: ' We don't want the rights of Myanmar to be trampled over by China on the way to dominance.'

Moreover, any economic cooperation between two states or more has its own risk. The 21st MSR Initiative under the umbrella of the OBOR Initiative has its very own strategic entrapment. Much of Myanmar's capital schemes are funded by China, where the Chinese government conducts bankrolling by issuing big loans at a high interest rate (J. M. Malik, 2018). The bigger the debt, the more advantages for China to demand access for land, resources, port, and airports. Therefore, Myanmarese, including the government, have highlighted their dissatisfaction with unequal business deals which in return found as a burden due to China high-interest loan for purchasing Chinese products, services and labour (Kapteyn & Wah, 2016).

Conclusion

In Myanmar, the most critical and highly sophisticated infrastructure project under the 21st MSR Initiative is focused primarily on the Kyaukphyu port involving the development of twin gas and oil pipelines stretching across the state to Kunming in the Yunnan province of China. The port is becoming one of strategic significance for Myanmar as well as for China, which acts as an alternate path to Malacca Straits for imports. But the port building itself isn't necessary. To move goods effectively, the port needs a new rail and improved road infrastructure. This is important since the modern rail and road continues to be a critical component of most land-based routes to Europe and the Middle East. Due to the abundance of minerals and energy reserves in Myanmar, and its proximity to the growth of China, these modern infrastructures are also very much required for China. Nonetheless, better communication and collaboration between Chinese and Myanmar is needed to ensure that a broader range of stakeholder interest and concern is discussed, and that negative spillovers and future mid-and long-term backlashes are mitigated. In many 21st MSR Initiative, transparency and local impact assessment requirements are to increase as Chinese stakeholders gain rapid experience in these areas.

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