



**Doctoral School of
International
Relations and
Political Science**

THESIS BOOKLET

to the PhD dissertation of

Hnin Mya Thida

titled

**Myanmar-China Asymmetrical Relations
The Case Study of the Myitsonne Hydropower Dam
Project through the Lens of Small Power's Strategies**

Supervisors

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Budapest

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**Department of Geopolitics and Sustainable
Development**

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1. Research background and the justification of the topic

In history, most of the theorists have emphasized international relations on the analysis of great powers' competition and the relations between great powers, particularly in Western countries. Though small nations are important components in international relations, the role of small country (weak power) has less attention in international relations.

At the same time, small powers are characterized as helpless pawns in the grand schemes of the great powers. Small states are characterized as “a weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, which is unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own” (Archer, Bailes & Wivel, 2014).

Womack's 'asymmetrical theory of international relations' has already explained that the asymmetrical relations can be managed by both small and big sides, and it cannot be controlled only by the big power. According to Womack, the greater size and strength of the bigger state cannot always easily dominate the smaller ones.

The stronger power cannot absolutely eliminate the weaker ones by using its relative power in an asymmetrical relationship because the relative power does not denote absolute power. He claims that relative power does not mean absolute power or victory. It means that the stronger side cannot always impose its will on the weaker side. So, it must be managed by both sides since the asymmetrical relationship cannot be fully solved by the use of force. In this sense, how a small power can manage its asymmetrical relations with a great power neighbor. This is research problem (1).

The small and great powers relations are noted as the unchanging relationship in which small states are viewed as ‘power consumers’ while great powers are regarded as ‘power suppliers’ and the bandwagoning or the cooperation of small countries with great powers stands for the small’s consuming common goods (including international and domestic stability and security) provided by the great ones (Amstrup, 1976, p. 170 & Anis, 2015, p.532). Moreover, small powers choose the balancing (confrontation/ conflict) against the great power. Balancing and bandwagoning strategies are significant

strategies to reflect the behavior of small powers in small-great power relations.

In asymmetric politics, the weaker power never attempts to use confrontation methods with the stronger powers except in a condition in which the stronger state falls into its constraints. However, it does not mean that the small power must have always been influenced by the bigger power.

Regarding this relationship, the weaker sides mostly employ two prominent strategies—such as balancing, bandwagoning, (conflict/confrontation or cooperation)—that have been influencing international relations for a long time. According to the literature on international relations, small countries utilize either confrontation or cooperation methods in relations with great powers. The confrontation method is mostly applied by small countries even when they don't have another option except choosing this strategy. But this is so dangerous for small states, because their lack of capacity is incomparable to the rival great power's capability. On the other hand, the price of cooperation is too risky for small powers to totally rely on the big powers because the former's autonomy can

be threatened in any circumstance. On top of that, the second research problem coherently and consistently comes out: ‘How does a small power cooperative with a big power without deteriorating its sovereignty, by protecting its national interest, and by avoiding confrontation with the big power, as well as by preserving the bilateral relations between them?’

The research tends to emphasize the Myanmar-China asymmetrical relations as the heart of the study. Within the distinct feature of asymmetrical nature between the two countries, the Sino-Myanmar relations is the excellent choice to exemplify the small-great power relations. Myanmar-China relations are discernible asymmetrical relationship due to the power disparity between the two countries. Under this situation, the unexpected watershed turned out in Myanmar-China asymmetrical relations in 2011 with the unilateral suspension of the Myitsone dam project by the Myanmar government without any intimation to its Chinese counterpart.

The interesting point was that there were great changes in Chinese behaviors toward Myanmar after the dam issue. The Myitsone Hydropower Dam issue is a

unique example of identifying how the asymmetrical relationship can be changed in favor of the smaller power despite power disparity with the greater power. Then, the following research question comes out as an appropriate question.

1.1. Research question

What tactics and strategies does Myanmar use to increase its room for maneuver in its asymmetric relationship with China?

The research chooses Myanmar-China asymmetrical relations as the relevant subject of analysis by doing the case study of the ‘Myitsone Dam issue’ which was a critical issue in bilateral relations. The research tries to prove that small powers have opportunities to change the behavior of great powers even under the extreme asymmetric relationship. By doing so, the research will investigate the Myanmar government’s adroitness to manipulate its tactics and strategy to achieve its intended political purpose in a general cooperative manner by avoiding confrontation.

1.2. Hypotheses

The research will investigate two main hypotheses:

H (1) The behaviors of small powers can be identified between a tactical and strategical level in an asymmetric relationship.

From the perspective of small powers' behavior, small countries use several tactics and strategies in handling their relations with great powers in the asymmetric relationship. In this sense, balancing and bandwagoning strategies are the traditional strategies of small powers among other strategies which are significant small powers' behaviors. They employ these strategies not only for sake of their own interest but also for the enhancement of mutual benefits. The previous lecturers have proved that small powers could do the behavioral changes of big powers by using these two significant strategies in favor of getting the former's interest. However, the literature has not discovered the small states' behaviors through tactical and strategical levels. Based on this point of view, the research wants to investigate if it is possible to identify the behavior of small powers between the tactical level and strategical level in an asymmetric relationship.

H (2) Small powers are capable of changing the behavior of big powers in different ways besides by using balancing and bandwagoning strategies.

Small powers might need to employ lots of ways in manipulating relations with great powers apart from popular small powers' strategies. In this case, we can hope that the more effective the strategies of small powers, the more changes in the behavior of great powers. The second hypothesis will identify the different methods of small states in dealing with great powers. From both theoretical and empirical points of view, the small countries have preferred using the bandwagoning strategy or balancing strategy to the threatened great powers. Apart from using these prominent strategies, the research wants to investigate other supporting ways of a small power that can help to extend its room in relations with a powerful state. Then, the research will observe that a small state can use several methods to counterbalance the great neighbors or threatening power without deteriorating the existing relations apart from using balancing and bandwagoning strategies.

2.Methodology

2.1. The Myitsone Dam Issue as a Relevant Case Study

The subject of analysis is the case of the Myitsone Hydropower Dam Project (also known as the Ayeyarwady/ Irrawaddy Myitsone Hydropower Dam Project), which is the most controversial issue between the two countries and has strongly impacted bilateral asymmetrical relations.

The Myitsone Dam project is China's largest hydropower project abroad, and it will become the world's fifteenth-largest hydropower project if the construction is finished. The project was signed by the two countries when Vice-president Xi Jinping visited Myanmar in 2009. The project will fulfil the electricity requirement of China's landlocked Yunnan Province. Moreover, the Myitsone Dam project is the largest hydropower dam project in Myanmar. The project was signed under the military government in Myanmar, but it was unilaterally suspended under the semi-civilian government in 2011. That suspension was the first Chinese economic setback in Myanmar.

After that stunning event, there are many progressive changes in Myanmar-China relations that were contrary to the international estimation that bilateral relations were seriously devastated. Myanmar could enjoy favorable positions after the dam issue, and it could say that the bilateral relations evolved a U-turn change contrary to the previous time. This was the unexpected response from China to its less powerful small nation with its great dependence on it.

Through the detailed analysis of the case of the dam issue, the research exposes the Myanmar government's strategies as an attempt to counterinfluence its great power neighbour, China, and how the strategy shift impacts on China's Myanmar policy followed by the behaviour changes of Beijing toward Myanmar. Although the suspension of the dam project by the Myanmar government is the immediate outcome, there were prolonged efforts of the Myanmar government to escape or at least to reduce the Chinese influence in the country. Thus, it is also worthwhile to scan the Myanmar-China bilateral relations. Thus, to reach this conspicuous conclusion, the research also traces the history of Sino-

Myanmar relations since 1988, which was significantly improving the bilateral ties under the Myanmar military governments.

The descriptive case study is chosen as an appropriate research method for this study. The major technique of the data collection method focuses on the interview method. The semi-structured interview is conducted with the aim of exploring the embedded facts of the research. Allowing the participants their open-ended responses, is helpful to achieve valuable information. I made fifteen semi-structured interviews with who are experts in Myanmar-China relations. The thirteen local researchers and two international researchers help to answer the research interview. The retired diplomat, the researcher from the Myanmar Institute of Strategic Studies, and the professors and lecturers from the international relations departments of different universities in Myanmar conducted the semi-structured interviews.

When I started to study about Myanmar-China relations, most of the literatures are written by the international scholars. I found few literatures with reliable

sources written by the Myanmar scholars. If it is totally relied on the literatures, the research will only collect the opinion of the international researchers. As the research is mainly based on the Myanmar-China relations, it is essential to listen to the perspectives of local researchers. Thus, I chose the interview method as the main data collection of my research. By doing so, the research could make a proper balance between literatures of its data collection process, and it could avoid the one-sided opinion of either local or international researchers.

To improve the validity of the research, I also choose triangular data collection method. In social science triangulation is defined as the mixing of data or methods so that diverse viewpoints or standpoints cast light upon a topic. I explore both primary data and secondary data to support the investigation. The newspaper articles, reports, reviews, academic journal articles, books, and book chapters are used in collecting data for both variables. To analyze the behavioral changes of China, I scrutinize official documents, such as statements issued by the Chinese government, the speeches of President Xi Jinping, the agreements between Myanmar and China

after the dam cancellation to the present time, and major achievements between the two countries.

3. Findings of the Dissertation

3.1. Bandwagoning with Limit

In Myanmar-China relations, the two countries have experienced asymmetrical relations since time immemorial. Being under military rule for more than five decades, Myanmar has heavily depended on China both economically and politically as well as militarily. Despite overdependence on China, the research cannot prove that Myanmar entirely chooses the bandwagoning strategy to Beijing. At the same time, it cannot also refuse that Myanmar never uses the bandwagoning strategy because China was the solely close friend of Myanmar while facing international pressure at that time. From a security point of view, China is neither directly threatening the national security of Naypyidaw nor an immediate threat to Myanmar. The bandwagoning strategy largely emphasizes the state's security for the small powers. On the one hand, the strong nationalistic attitude and xenophobic behavior of the Myanmar military leaders restrain the country from becoming a client state of China.

Thus, Myanmar does not necessarily bandwagon with China. But Myanmar still needs Beijing not only for its regime survival but also for its political, economic, and strategic interests. On top of that, these strategies are not only used for the security reason of small powers but for the improvement of their own interest. Both things are correlated in the way that Myanmar needs China not only for its regime survival but also for improving its interest.

On the other hand, perceiving Myanmar's over-dependence on China and its growing influence in Myanmar's internal affairs, the military leaders have sought ways to escape or to reduce the Chinese predominance in the country. The military government attempted to limit its dependence on China through micro-tactics. Notwithstanding tremendous dependence on China, the Myanmar military junta tried to preserve its autonomy with various micro-tactical steps. These deliberate acts are not macro-strategies to take 'hard balancing' toward China; these micro-tactics purely showed the Myanmar government's stance toward its giant neighbor. Based on this finding, the research indisputably affirms that Myanmar was not a puppet state

of China, and it has continuously tried to balance China to the utmost. Even Myanmar visibly leaned on China economically; it did not use a full bandwagoning strategy politically. Myanmar limited its reliance on China in terms of bandwagoning with limit. Myanmar's strategic choice of using bandwagoning with limitation is relevant to the previous literature in which bandwagoning is not to be used only for security reasons to avoid being attacked by the powerful state but it is for economic gains and mutual interest as well. In Myanmar-China relations, Myanmar's strategic choice of limited bandwagoning strategy is consonance with Walt's assumption in two points. Accordingly, Myanmar is unavailable to get allies except for China at that time and Myanmar aims to use this strategy in exchange for mutual benefits or for its own interest.

3.2. Balancing with Limit

By doing the case study of the Myitsone Dam suspension, the research shows that Myanmar has successfully maneuvered its limited balancing strategy toward China. To shape this strategy, the government of Myanmar used several tactical moves. The in-depth

understanding of the Myitsone shows the two main tactics of Myanmar: domestic and international power or internal and external power. Several tactical steps are embedded in these two core tactics. First, the government builds trust between the government and the people. Then, it establishes trust from the international community by recalibrating its foreign policy.

The semi-civilian government's decision to make a rapprochement with the United States intended to reduce Myanmar's huge dependence on China by implementing domestic political reforms and a foreign policy realignment was intentionally labeled as a classic case for the balancing strategy. This was clearly paved for further anti-Chinese steps, like the suspension of the Myitsone dam project, which was a signal to Washington proving Myanmar's willingness to escape from China's influence. But how realistic was it to break away from China's dependency, and was this really the goal of the Myanmar government?

The aim of Myanmar was therefore not to fully counterbalance China or to switch sides for perceived gains, but to increase Myanmar's room for maneuver and

to extract better terms from Beijing. From this point of view, gestures such as the Myitsone Dam are not just a gesture towards the United States, but rather a direct violation of Chinese interests to enforce the change of Beijing's behavior to fight for better conditions for itself in the relationship. The case study shows how micro strategies or small tactics can be successful. In this sense, Myanmar has strategically positioned the balancing with limit toward its big neighbor.

Thus, the result of the research also reveals that the transformation of the Myanmar government's strategies has created changes in Chinese behavior. The change in Myanmar's strategies of Myanmar can be obviously seen by the comparison of past Sino-Myanmar relations under the military government and the semi-civilian government that bore the Myitsone Dam suspension. Regarding the big picture of Sino-Myanmar relations, it has been found that Myanmar practices the "bandwagoning" strategy with limits. In the Myitsone Dam suspension, the Myanmar government used the "balancing" strategy with limits. Myanmar has positioned its strategies by combining the so-called mixed strategies of

bandwagoning and balancing: limited bandwagoning and limited balancing. Moreover, the research undoubtedly uncovers the changes in Chinese behavior after the suspension of the Myitsone Dam. There were both positive and negative changes in Beijing. However, the behavioral changes of Beijing could better bring fruitful results for Myanmar. The research shows that Myanmar did not change its specific relationship with China to an asymmetric-friendly relationship, but it manipulated its strategies with enormous tactical steps to expand its roles and to change the behavior of China.

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