

ASIA PROGRAMME

CHINA'S SOFT POWER THROUGH HUMANITARIAN AID IN MYANMAR AND INDONESIA

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For centuries, the quest to control and influence Southeast Asia to its advantage has been a goal for many a major power, both regional and global. The territory has been coveted for its geostrategic assets including the economically significant waterways where transits 60 per cent of international maritime trade¹. Equally as attractive, underwater fields containing 290 trillion cubic feet of natural gas have been detected and the seas account for approximately a tenth of the global annual fish catch². The United States, India, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan³ were prominent influencing powers in the region as China, although geographically close, was closed to the global community under Mao. However, the 1989 incident in Tiananmen Square marked a pivotal turning point for China under President Deng Xiao Ping towards modernisation and its repositioning as a participant in the global economy⁴. The new “Open Door” policy for economic growth came with the establishment of a “good neighbour” strategy, whereby China started to actively improve relations with the countries in its immediate periphery⁵ and persuade them of Beijing’s peaceful intentions regarding its rise to power⁶. Southeast Asia was from then on considered a pilot area and regional platform for China to test strategies that would be subsequently carried out globally, ultimately to emerge as a major world power⁷.

As shaping its “back yard” was defined as the most accessible gateway for China’s global expansion, it became strategically critical to attract Southeast Asian countries into its sphere of influence and away from that of competing powers; much like the United States’ application of the Monroe doctrine throughout North America. One of the main arguments used by China was a shared concern regarding United States’ trade and their enforcement of human rights policies⁸. As Southeast Asian nations banded together to create the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), their aim was to ensure domestic and regional stability, economic development, as well as a group effort to balance the American influence in the region. China

¹ Schrag, J. (2020, August 26). *How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?* ChinaPower Project.

² Kurlantzick, J. (2015). *A China-Vietnam Military Clash* (No. 26). Council on Foreign Relations: Center for Preventative Action.

³ Schmidt, J. D. (2008). “China’s Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia”. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 26(1), 22–49.

⁴ Ralston, D. A., Gustafson, D. J., Terpstra, R. H., & Holt, D. H. (1995). “Pre-post Tiananmen square: Changing values of Chinese managers”. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 12(1), 1–20.

⁵ Ba, A. D. (2003). “China and Asean: Renavigating Relations for a 21st-century Asia”. *Asian Survey*, 43(4), 622–647.

⁶ Rouiaï, N. (2018). « Sur les routes de l’influence : forces et faiblesses du soft power chinois ». *Géoconfluences*. Géoconfluences ENS de Lyon.

⁷ Stromseth, J. (2019). *China’s rising influence in Southeast Asia and regional response*. Global China, Assessing China’s Growing Role in the World.

⁸ Ba, A. D. (2003). *Op. Cit.*

was able to find common ground with the multilateral organisation on these bases to form a “community of common destiny⁹”. Through this new relationship, Beijing multiplied its policies both multilaterally with the ASEAN and bilaterally with the individual member states in the interest of creating a stable regional environment. This would enable continued Chinese economic development and the creation of foundations for future economic growth, both to ensure the domestic and international legitimacy of the communist regime¹⁰, as well as, ultimately, use the achieved regional hegemon status to springboard towards global influence.

The United States have had an economic-political-military relationship with Southeast Asia since the 1890’s and have often acted unilaterally, insensitively and with impunity in the region¹¹. By using military force and economic strength, the United States’ presence in the region can be coined as using Hard Power, defined as an ability to reach one’s goals through coercive actions or threats¹². However, as ASEAN increasingly started looking to balance Washington’s influence, China opted to tap into that narrative and formulated a Soft Power strategy, based on the ability to attract people to their side without coercion¹³. As legitimacy is key, China’s “benignity” discourse would be able to generate Soft Power through the production of gratitude and sympathy, enabling Southeast Asian nations to unlash themselves from the United States’ influence and simultaneously support their nation’s growth through economic ties with Beijing. By persuading nations to shape their agendas according to China’s foreign policies and allure a sense of cooperation rather than confrontation¹⁴, Beijing ensures its “peaceful ascendancy”¹⁵.

In order to achieve its ultimate goals of developing its economy and securing its energy supply¹⁶, Beijing works towards integrating its neighbours into a Sino-centric network of economic, political, cultural, and security relations. Within this overarching strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This multibillion-dollar project has been called a Chinese Marshall Plan and constitutes a state-backed campaign for global dominance through Chinese

⁹ Stromseth, J. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

¹⁰ Ba, A. D. (2003). *Op. Cit.*

¹¹ Stevenson, C. (1992). “U.S. Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: Implications for Current Regional Issues”. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 14(2), 87-111.

¹² Raimzhanova, A. (2015). *Power in IR: Hard, Soft, and Smart*. Institute for Cultural Diplomacy and the University of Bucharest.

¹³ Pallaver, M. (2011). *Power and Its Forms: Hard, Soft, Smart*. Department of International Relations of the London School of Economics.

¹⁴ Po, S. (2017). “The limits of China’s influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective”. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, 1(2), 61-75.

¹⁵ Hsiao, M. (2008, November 24). *Transformations in China’s Soft Power toward ASEAN*. The Jamestown Foundation.

¹⁶ Rouiai, N. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

investment worldwide¹⁷. The BRI aims to connect Asia, Africa and Europe by land and sea. Specifically in Southeast Asia, this connection of countries would enable China to have control over ASEAN member states' transport links, work towards dominating Asia's inland waterways and gain control over the South China Sea¹⁸. Equally, the BRI would enable China's less developed provinces to access increased opportunities for economic development and for Chinese companies to sell off their excess stocks and develop their operations at an international scale¹⁹. To successfully implement the BRI, China began reconnecting with its 30 million "overseas Chinese" residing across Southeast Asia²⁰. By engaging the "Huaren" local citizens of Chinese descent and the "Huaqiao" Chinese citizens abroad, China seeks to influence local politics and use the communities as a bridge to effectively implement the BRI.

After more than three decades of economic growth, China is now well aware of its position as a regional power and as such has made policy changes in accordance. Officials have increasingly become engaged in "linking up with the international track²¹", which entails China's wish to refine its global role through Soft Power strategies in order to pave a clear way to achieving hegemony. One aspect of China's Soft Power influence is mediated through becoming more present in peace-making operations and the dispatch of humanitarian aid without infringing on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence²². This study will analyse how China's "Charm Offence²³" through Humanitarian aid was received by both Myanmar²⁴ and Indonesia. This will enable us to determine how successful China has been in its race towards regional hegemony.

MYANMAR AND CHINA'S INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN BILATERAL HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS

Nargis, Kachin internal displacements and the Rohingya Crisis, implications for China

The 2000-kilometre border separating China and Myanmar has been a marker for significant

¹⁷ Kuo, L., & Kimmenda, N. (2018, July 30). "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *The Guardian*.

¹⁸ Kurlantzick, J. (2006). *Op. Cit.*

¹⁹ Riga, D. (2019). « Les Nouvelles routes de la soie : Projet sino-centré ou projet d'hégémonie ? » *Asia Focus*, 121, 1–22.

²⁰ Stromseth, J. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

²¹ Wang, H. (2007). "Linking Up with the International Track. What's in a Slogan?" *The China Quarterly*, 189, 1–23.

²² Holliday, I. (2009). "Beijing and the Myanmar problem". *The Pacific Review*, 22(4), 479–500.

²³ Kurlantzick, J. (2006). *Op. Cit.*

²⁴ This study focuses on Myanmar prior to February 1st, 2021, military coup, as China's implications in this country after the re-implementation of a military regime are yet to be observed.

relations between the two nations for centuries. Only 200 years ago, Myanmar, then Burma, was still required to pay tribute to China²⁵. However, it was not until Myanmar declared its independence from the British that they started developing formal state-to-state ties. In fact, Myanmar was one of the first non-communist countries to recognise the People’s Republic in 1949. Since then, both countries have upheld a strong relationship firmly rooted in pragmatism, shaped by China’s Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence²⁶. These principles support sovereignty and non-interference in other countries’ affairs. Any interventions by the Chinese on Myanmar soil are therefore officially termed by Beijing as essential rather than imperialist in order to ensure peace and stability, and by extension to protect China’s interests which mainly reside in security and economic investments. Bilateral links are historically based on financial investments as well as the sale of arms and machinery to the military junta, which was in power up until 2010. According to the Myanmar Constitution, however, the junta still presides over the Ministry of Home, Borders and Defence²⁷ and holds 25 per cent of the seats in Parliament.

With this former military faction still present in government and swaying state decisions even during the democratic transition (2015-2021), Myanmar’s policies regarding crises, both climate and political, have been criticised by the international community. China is the notable exception, having continuously supported Myanmar’s position throughout. The first of note in recent years was Cyclone Nargis that hit Myanmar in 2008 and was one of the deadliest in the region. A Category 4 storm, it caused extensive damage with a death and missing toll officially estimated at 146,000 – although many believe it to be much higher²⁸. An estimated 2.4 million people were severely affected and as many as 800,000 were displaced from their homes²⁹. The cyclone was deemed to be the most damaging ever recorded in the region, the destruction estimated at US\$4 – 10 billion³⁰. Despite this devastating aftermath, the generals in government initially refused to accept foreign relief materials, to grant entry visas to aid agencies and staff or allow foreign commercial and military ships loaded with humanitarian aid supplies to dock and unload their cargo during the first three weeks post-cyclone³¹. Amid

²⁵ Holliday, I. (2009). *Op. Cit.*

²⁶ Joy, A. (2018). *Understanding China’s Response to the Rakhine Crisis* (No. 419). United States Institute of Peace.

²⁷ Ho, E. L.-E. (2018). “Interfaces and the Politics of Humanitarianism: Kachin Internal Displacement at the China–Myanmar Border”. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31(3), 407-425.

²⁸ Paik, W. (2011). “Authoritarianism and humanitarian aid: regime stability and external relief in China and Myanmar”. *The Pacific Review*, 24(4), 439-462.

²⁹ Seekins, D. (2009). “State, Society and Natural Disaster: Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar (Burma)”. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37(5), 717-737.

³⁰ Paik, W. (2011). *Op. Cit.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

mounting criticism and outrage regarding this response, the junta argued, “Myanmar is not ready to receive search and rescue teams as well as media teams from foreign countries³²”. It took another several weeks before government agreed to open the country’s borders to aid but agencies and humanitarian workers only received very limited access to selected zones³³. This was due to a fear linked to the regime’s survival, where foreign intervention into domestic politics could jeopardise their hold on the country. China, however, was one of the only countries that managed to successfully dispatch relief supplies to Myanmar³⁴.

The Kachin internal displacements followed in 2011 where the Myanmar government failed to ensure safety for what the international community deemed a population that came under Burmese jurisdiction. When the military government was still in power, ethnic minorities on Myanmar soil were ranked as socially inferior to the Burman race. Policies were created which subordinated these minorities and the states in which they lived in³⁵. The Kachin people were spread across northern Myanmar up towards the border with China. The Kachin state’s capital was under the control of the government and military, however the zone closest to the Chinese border was taken over by the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and its military arm, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA); this rivalry has caused tensions in the area since the 1960’s. After a 17-yearlong ceasefire, renewed conflict forced the local population to leave their homes. Some resettled in Myanmar government-controlled areas but faced the possibility of being criminalised through alleged association with the KIA, others attempted to cross the border to seek asylum in China³⁶. Although officially China was said to have refused entry to the asylum seekers considering them would be irregular migrants who might become a security risk for their country³⁷, many displaced Kachins fled to neighbouring Yunnan Province in southern China. By June 2012, more than 10,000 displaced Kachins had entered China’s Yunnan Province³⁸. However, the Chinese government declared that displaced Kachins in Yunnan were not refugees but border residents who had come to Yunnan to stay with relatives and friends for safety reasons rather than recognising them as refugees,

³² BBC NEWS. *Burma shuns foreign aid workers*. (2008, May 9).

³³ Paik, W. (2011). *Op. Cit.*

³⁴ Lee, P., Chan, G., & Chan, L. (2009). “China’s “Realpolitik” Engagement with Myanmar”. *China Security, World Security Institute*, 5(1), 105-126.

³⁵ Ho, E. L.-E. (2016). “Mobilising affinity ties: Kachin internal displacement and the geographies of humanitarianism at the China-Myanmar border”. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(1), 84-97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Han, E. (2016). “Borderland Ethnic Politics and changing Sino-Myanmar Relations”. In M. Sadan (Ed.), *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire, 1994-2011 (NIAS Studies in Asian Topics)*. NIAS Press, 149-168.

³⁸ Song, L. (2018). “Forced migration of ethnic Kachins from Myanmar to China: Law and politics behind China’s response”. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 27(2), 190-208.

which would have entitled them to international aid³⁹.

Finally, the most recent humanitarian crisis in Myanmar has been that of the Rohingyas. According to a Médecins Sans Frontières survey, 6,700 people were killed in 2017 after the Burmese military launched an attack on the Rohingya Muslim minority group in the state of Rakhine⁴⁰. The military's largescale crackdown began in response to violent clashes between Rohingya insurgents and the government forces along the northwest border separating Myanmar and Bangladesh. Myanmar has a long history of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict. But after decades of repression, prosecution and having been denied recognition as an ethnic minority and stripped of their citizenship in 1982, millions of Rohingyas fled across state lines into Bangladesh, creating tensions between both countries⁴¹. Rohingyas have been living in camps with a widespread lack of basic services and opportunities to maintain a livelihood. The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini called the situation a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing⁴²”. To address this complex humanitarian crisis, China provided financial and goods assistance, facilitated a series of bilateral talks between Bangladesh and Myanmar⁴³ and proposed a three-phased solution including promoting a ceasefire, fair efforts, and poverty alleviation⁴⁴.

In the last few years, China has actively been increasingly present when crises have hit neighbouring countries, but this has not been solely for altruistic reasons. Kachin state is rich in natural resources, including jade, gold, rubies and other precious stones, all of which China can profit from by exporting them internationally⁴⁵. Additionally, Chinese companies have a number of development projects such as the Myitsone Dam currently underway within the Kachin State, but also have a particular interest in Myanmar's gas and oil reserves and the country's access to the Indian Ocean. In the same way, the Rakhine State hosts many strategic Chinese projects such as the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone and the gas and oil pipes that pass from Rakhine to Yunnan⁴⁶. It is in China's interest to pursue these projects as the

³⁹ Ho, E. L.-E. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁰ Médecins Sans Frontières. (2017). *Myanmar/Bangladesh: MSF surveys estimate that at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed during the attacks in Myanmar*. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) International.

⁴¹ Islam, K. (2018). *How Newspapers in China, India And Bangladesh Framed the Rohingya Crisis Of 2017* (No. 648). University of Mississippi.

⁴² Joy, A. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Ismail, A. (2018). “Motives and Rivalry of Superpower Countries: The United States and China in Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis”. *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional*, 7(1), 107-117.

⁴⁵ Ho, E. L.-E. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁶ Ismail, A. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

Kyaukpju port and naval base provide an entry point for oil and gas imports from the Middle East and greater access to the Indian Ocean, which would enable China's import routes to be diversified and bypass the contested Malacca Strait⁴⁷. Therefore, China's decisions to pledge US\$15 million worth of aid for Cyclone Nargis⁴⁸, send 150 tons of aid including 2,000 relief tents and 3,000 blankets to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh⁴⁹ or to ensure the rapid implementation of the three-step solution could be considered as Soft Power initiatives to protect its own interests in Myanmar. Furthermore, every displacement occurring in Myanmar has been geographically close to China. This gives Beijing an added incentive to ensure that the crises are managed swiftly to avoid any spill over into Chinese territory, which could create greater regional instability⁵⁰. Finally, China is worried that the international community could make a link between the Uyghur crisis and that of the Rohingyas⁵¹. As both prosecuted populations are of Muslim faith, China fears unsolicited American and Western interventions in its internal affairs⁵², much the same as Myanmar's junta. China therefore might be making its presence known in the humanitarian resolution of Myanmar's Rohingya crisis in order to represent itself as a responsible state in the eyes of the international community and divert attention from its domestic Uyghur crisis.

These immediate reasons justifying China's presence in crisis resolution and support through humanitarian aid are therefore part of the greater Chinese objective to be perceived as a "good neighbour". This would further its own interest of influencing other Southeast Asian countries through Soft Power to secure its position as sole regional power. As Myanmar's only strategic partner during the military junta regime, China has remained firm in opposing the adoption of the UN involvement in Myanmar's crises or any resolutions regarding the sustainable return of Rohingyas to their original places of residence in safety, security and dignity⁵³. As China's most fervently upheld policy is one of sovereignty and therefore non-intervention in another nation's affairs, China has defended the position of the Myanmar government in international forums and called for understanding efforts to promote social stability⁵⁴. In doing so, China seemed to send a message to the international community that

⁴⁷ Li, H. Y., & Zheng, Y. (2009). "Re-interpreting China's Non-intervention Policy towards Myanmar: leverage, interest and intervention". *Journal of Contemporary China*, 18(61), 617-637.

⁴⁸ Lee, P., Chan, G., & Chan, L. (2009). *Op. Cit.*

⁴⁹ Gao, C. (2017, September 13). "On Rohingya Issue, Both China and India Back Myanmar Government". *The Diplomat*.

⁵⁰ Lee, P., Chan, G., & Chan, L. (2009). *op. Cit.*

⁵¹ Aung, A. (2020). "The International Politics of the Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar: China, Japan, and the United States". *Kyoto Working Papers on Area Studies*, 134, 1-50.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Islam, K. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁴ Ismail, A. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

no country or multilateral body could intervene in the domestic affairs of the country. Indeed, in presenting itself as Myanmar's ally and promoting the principle of non-interference to the country's sovereignty, China furthers its Soft Power strategy in the pursuit of Chinese geostrategic interests. These include both narrowing the income gap between China's landlocked south-western region that borders Myanmar and the more prosperous coastal provinces⁵⁵, and avoiding turning Myanmar into a failed state thus increasing the potentiality of more security issues⁵⁶. Finally, providing humanitarian aid and backing at the UN is a tactic China is implementing to limit the influence of other major powers in the region, establish itself as hegemon and further its economic interests free from competition. China sees the Burmese crises as opportunities for the United States, for instance, to boost its presence in the Rakhine State and throughout Myanmar in the name of human rights and humanitarian support through multilateral organisations⁵⁷. The sought-after role as sole influencer is however yet still out of reach as China is not currently Myanmar's largest economic partner. Competition still stands with Thailand, India and South Korea⁵⁸ who have already seized most of the oil and gas projects. This could potentially present issues in China's expansion plans for its BRI project through Myanmar.

Myanmar opens its borders to the BRI as China proves to be an indispensable ally

As part of China's objective to expand the BRI throughout Southeast Asia by creating networks that will allow for a more efficient and productive free flow of trade as well as further integration within international markets⁵⁹, Myanmar is geographically ideally positioned to carry out China's plans. Myanmar and China signed a 15-point Memorandum of Understanding in 2018 for the implementation of the Myanmar China Economic Corridor (CMEC) as part of the BRI. The CMEC runs from Kunming in the Yunnan province of China through to Mandalay and then splits into two corridors towards Kyaukpyu in Rakhine state which faces the Bay of Bengal, and Yangon the business centre of Myanmar⁶⁰. Accompanying the creation of the CMEC corridors came the construction of highways, pipelines, railroads, deep-water ports, airports, new cities, special economic zones, and power grids⁶¹, as well as

⁵⁵ Lee, P., Chan, G., & Chan, L. (2009). *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁶ Li, H. Y., & Zheng, Y. (2009). *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁷ Aung, A. (2020). *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁸ Li, H. Y., & Zheng, Y. (2009). *Op. Cit.*

⁵⁹ Gyi, M. (2019). "The Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) and Its Implication on Myanmar". *Mandalay University of Foreign Languages Research Journal*, 10(1), 106–113.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Chan, J. H., & Rawat, D. (2019). "China's Digital Silk Road: The Integration of Myanmar". *RSIS Commentaries*, 84, 379–405.

digital infrastructure. The Burmese government has proclaimed its enthusiasm regarding the new developments in its relationship with Beijing as Chinese investments have not only enabled the country to enhance its development and brought much needed new financial opportunities, jobs and infrastructure to the country but have allowed Myanmar to avoid economic repercussions for its lack of human rights enforcement⁶². Indeed, the secretary of the Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC) assured that, “[Myanmar’s] infrastructure is ready for BRI⁶³”. Additionally, digital connectivity has expanded through the Digital Silk Road’s (DSR) CMI cable that runs across the 1,500 km between South China and the west coast of Myanmar, to be connected to the cable projects based in Djibouti in the near future⁶⁴. Moreover, China’s Huawei is working with Myanmar’s Ministry of Transport and Communications to deploy 5G broadband services throughout Myanmar within the next five years⁶⁵. As Myanmar is still one of the lowest ranking countries on the World Economic Forum’s Network Readiness Index (NRI) and what with only 20 per cent of the population has access to 4G internet services⁶⁶, Naypyidaw sees the CMEC branch of the BRI and DSR implementation projects as advantageous opportunities to further integrate the country within the region and enable a rapid economic lift⁶⁷. Although Myanmar has seen its foreign investment sources diversify since the warming of its relations with Western countries in 2011, China remains its largest source of FDI to date, amounting to around 20 per cent of total FDI in Myanmar⁶⁸.

Though the CMEC section of the BRI was only signed recently, China has invested over US\$100 billion in projects within Myanmar thus far⁶⁹. These sums to ensure the viability of the CMEC have inevitably been linked to the restoration of peace in Myanmar. As projects such as the highspeed rail cross through interethnic and religious conflict zones, fighting and unrest represent serious concerns for the Chinese. This would partly explain China’s fervency in becoming a mediator for peace and stability between the government, Bangladesh and some of the armed groups outside the National Ceasefire Agreements (NCA)⁷⁰. However, this role is

⁶² Olinga-Shannon, S., Barbesgaard, M., & Vervest, P. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*. Transnational Institute: Myanmar in Focus, AEPF (Asia Europe People’s Forum).

⁶³ Gyi, M. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁴ Chan, J. H., & Rawat, D. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁵ Vineles, P. (2019). *Tweaking BRI: What Southeast Asia Can Do* (No. 122). RSIS Commentary. S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

⁶⁶ Chan, J. H., & Rawat, D. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁷ Gyi, M. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

⁶⁸ Yao, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2018). *Public perception of Chinese investment in Myanmar and its political consequences: A survey experimental approach* (No. 53421). International Growth Centre.

⁶⁹ Gyi, M. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

not impartial. The Chinese have been supplying weapons the United Wa State Army (UWSA), one of these Burmese armed groups and has been reluctant about using its links with the ethnic militias to pressure the Myanmar government into ending the ethnic crisis⁷¹. China can therefore be deemed as more interested in regional stability through the use of Soft Power in order to further its BRI projects rather than solving the root causes of Burmese conflicts and work towards sustainable peace. This aid can also be considered as the first step in making Myanmar entirely dependent on China. Although Myanmar's confidence in China vacillated in the early 2010's which temporarily halted the CMEC projects, by offering large sums of aid and its peace-making services to Myanmar, the Burmese government has been more inclined to reignite BRI-linked projects and agree to what China often coins as a "win-win situation" when describing economic cooperation⁷². However, one country evidently wins more in this scenario. China's rising influence over Myanmar through humanitarian aid and multi-billion-dollar investments has created the possibility of an extremely heavy debt, making Myanmar susceptible to falling into a debt trap and eventually succumbing to China's power. This process, although absolutely refuted by China⁷³, could be perceived as an imperialist tactic to become the regional hegemon.

In the face of this looming debt trap, an anti-Chinese sentiment has arisen throughout Myanmar. One of the CMEC projects, the Kyaukphyu US\$7.3 billion deep-sea port and US\$2.7 billion 1,000-acre industrial park triggered apprehensions amongst the Burmese public⁷⁴. During the then-President U Thein Sein government, Myanmar and China agreed that the latter would hold an 85 per cent stake in the project, while the Myanmar government would hold the remaining 15 per cent. The agreement was extremely unpopular, forcing the government to renegotiate the shareholder settlement. The result was 30 per cent for China and 70 per cent for Myanmar⁷⁵. However, concerns persisted regarding the scale of the loans that such a large project would require. Naypyidaw decided to down-scale the project as a result and officials are still in talks with a Chinese consortium to reduce the project's original US\$7.3 billion investment to US\$1.3 billion⁷⁶. Moreover, analysts worry that expanded Chinese commercial presence could eventually lead to an expanded military presence as most of the ports constructed through the BRI, such as Kyaukphyu, could have a dual use for both

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Min, K. (2018, November 15). *Myanmar Opens a New Chapter in Dealing with Big Neighbor China*. East-West Center.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Gyi, M Gyi, M. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

commercial and military purposes⁷⁷. If true, this would create a real threat to Myanmar's security and sovereignty. Of China's four existing mega-projects in Myanmar, the Myitsone Dam has also been stalled as the potential environmental damage of the hydropower project created a backlash from civil society-led environmental movements⁷⁸. Moreover, the local Rakhine community blame Chinese projects for an increase in social problems rather than the advertised peace-making attempts as well as little interest in providing both community development initiatives and protection of local livelihoods⁷⁹. Although attracting FDI remains a crucial strategy and urgent agenda for the Burmese government to move the country towards a path of sustainable development and poverty alleviation, there is an explicit bias against Chinese investments. Japanese firms are perceived much more positively than Chinese companies, even when firms from both countries similarly collaborate with military-affiliated local organisations and do not directly engage with local communities in their operations⁸⁰.

Through the supply of humanitarian aid and foreign investment, as a Soft Power tactic, China has managed to become a highly influencing force in Myanmar's choices regarding the influx of FDI and to whom it will look to for help when crises hit. Although there has been non-negligible pushback from the Burmese civil society and Naypyidaw has as a result managed to stall and influence BRI activities in the country⁸¹, China has succeeded in extending and anchoring the BRI within the country. The vice president of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce (UMFCCI) mentioned that, "Myanmar can't sidestep the One Belt One Road Initiative, even though there are many views regarding the debt threat. We need to be cautious when negotiating the details of the deals but overall if the projects provide jobs, security will be better⁸²". China, even with competition from India, Thailand and the United States, has managed to assert itself by using its Soft Power as a leading power in Myanmar in the quest to further its economic interests.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Tritto, A. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative as a Catalyst for Institutional Development: Evidence from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar* (No. 30). HKUST IEMS Thought Leadership Briefs.

⁷⁹ Joy, A. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

⁸⁰ Yao, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2018). *Public perception of Chinese investment in Myanmar and its political consequences: A survey experimental approach* (No. 53421). International Growth Centre.

⁸¹ *Selling the Silk Road Spirit: China's Belt and Road Initiative in Myanmar* (No. 22). (2019). Transnational Institute: Myanmar Policy Briefing.

⁸² Gyi, Gyi, M. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

INDONESIAN HUMANITARIAN DISASTERS: CHINA AID AND HOPE OF IMPROVING ITS IMAGE

Natural disasters and state violence: China's aid as an attempt to reinforce its image

Since 1950, when China and Indonesia established official diplomatic ties, their relationship has been complex; it has seen a difficult beginning, a close friendship, turbulence and mutual hostility and suspicion⁸³. Very quickly, China established ties with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) which then attempted a coup in 1965. Following a regime change in Jakarta, Indonesia-China relations deteriorated alongside the rise of an anti-communist stance amongst the Indonesian population⁸⁴. In 1967 once Major-General Suharto came to power after the Indonesian Armed Forces removed Sukarno, Jakarta officially announced the diplomatic relations between both countries as “frozen”, followed by a similar declaration by Beijing a few days later⁸⁵. The links established between China and the PKI, whose actions had destabilised the nation, led Indonesia to believe that China and the Chinese ethnic minority in the country would be a threat to Indonesia's national security⁸⁶. Propaganda was then disseminated across the country throughout Suharto's term in government in order to preserve the regime's legitimacy. It was this “triangle threat” referencing the People's Republic of China, PKI, and ethnic Chinese that prevented Jakarta from restoring diplomatic ties with Beijing until 1990. When diplomatic relations were finally restored, an adjustment period ensued whereby both countries had to let suspicion and sensitivity subside. When China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs voiced its concern over the anti-Chinese riot in Medan in April 1994, Indonesia's government accused China of interfering in its internal affairs and warned that “China had better mind its own internal affairs⁸⁷”. In 1996 and then in 1998, massive terrorisation of the Chinese minority including the massacre of hundreds of ethnic Chinese in Jakarta⁸⁸ further evidenced the still existing deep divide between the locally called “Pribumi” Indonesians and the non-Pribumi of indigenous or Chinese descent.

Despite the ongoing strife between Indonesian and Chinese communities, the bilateral

⁸³ Sukma, R. (2009a). “Indonesia-China Relations: The Politics of Re-engagement”. *Asian Survey*, 49(4), 591-608.

⁸⁴ Sukma, R. (2009b). “Indonesia's Response to the Rise of China: Growing Comfort amid Uncertainties”. In J. Tsunekawa (Ed.), *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan*. The National Institute for Defense Studies, 139-155.

⁸⁵ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Nagata, J. (2003). “Local and Transnational Initiatives Towards Improving Chinese-Indigenous Relations in Post-Suharto Indonesia: The Role of the Voluntary Sector”. *Asian Ethnicity*, 4(3), 369-381.

relations between Beijing and Jakarta have become increasingly dynamic, especially in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. China quickly offered aid packages and low-interest loans to several Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia after refraining from devaluing its own currency⁸⁹. More specifically, China contributed US\$400 million in standby loans as part of an IMF rescue package for Indonesia and provided export credit facilities amounting to US\$200 million. Through this large-scale support, China managed to “[puncture] the prevailing image of China in the region as either aloof or hegemonic and began to replace it with an image of China as a responsible power⁹⁰”. The following year when riots broke out in Jakarta against the ethnic Chinese minority, Beijing had no choice but to speak out. It was estimated that several hundred Chinese were killed or wounded, several dozen Chinese women were reportedly raped, and hundreds of mainly Chinese-owned shops and houses were burned. Hundreds of thousands fled the country⁹¹. However, when referencing publicly the anti-Chinese riots, the Chinese ambassador to Indonesia emphasised that the problem “is a part of Indonesia’s domestic politics. Its resolution must come from the Indonesian government itself. The Chinese government must not act as if it could be the chef in somebody else’s kitchen⁹²”. To counteract this stumble in relations, the Chinese government then agreed to sell 50,000 tons of rice to Indonesia and provided a US\$3 million grant of medicines and pharmaceuticals⁹³. By making it clear that it had no intention to allow the issue to affect the overall bilateral relations, Beijing sought to emphasise its willingness to help Indonesia. This attitude from China was well received by Indonesia and contributed to the absence of strong reaction from Jakarta⁹⁴ as it would have had a few years prior.

The image China had started to cultivate as a “good neighbour” and benevolent major power through these two crises was then enhanced when the 2004 Tsunami hit Indonesia. China was quick to respond in providing humanitarian relief for victims and announced initial emergency aid of US\$3 million. The then-Prime Minister Jibao pledged that China would be committed to reconstruction and long-term development of tsunami-hit areas in Indonesia and would provide assistance to the best of its abilities⁹⁵. Through the application of its Soft Power policies by appearing ready to participate in relief efforts and allocate humanitarian

⁸⁹ Sukma, R. (2009a). “Indonesia-China Relations: The Politics of Re-engagement”. *Asian Survey*, 49(4), 591–608.

⁹⁰ Shambaugh, D. (2005). “China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order”. *International Security*, 29(3), 64–99.

⁹¹ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

⁹² Zha, D. (2000). “China and the May 1998 riots of Indonesia: exploring the issues”. *The Pacific Review*, 13(4), 557–575.

⁹³ Sukma, R. (2009b). *Op. Cit.*

⁹⁴ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

⁹⁵ Shambaugh, D. (2005). *Op. Cit.*

aid to disaster-struck countries, China continually reinforces its standing as a friendly ally and tips the scales in its favour, paving a smooth path for China to influence the target country and assert itself as hegemon.

Beijing's strategy to spread its influence regionally and internationally therefore includes an aspect of progressive implication in peace-keeping operations and a quest to have a significant presence within multilateral organisations⁹⁶. China's involvement in Indonesia's economic, social and environmental crises have contributed to its rise in becoming the sixth largest financial contributor for peace-keeping operations⁹⁷. With its increasingly accepted image as the "benevolent dragon" both competitive and friendly⁹⁸, an atmosphere of trust and comfort has permeated Jakarta's reengagement with Beijing⁹⁹. During the first year of Wahid's presidency, Indonesia-China relations improved significantly. President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who replaced President Wahid in July 2001, continued to undertake the policy of improving ties with China. The matter of forging new and improved relations with Beijing became an imperative within Indonesia's foreign policy. This was crystallised in 2005 when President Yudhoyono and Chinese president Hu Jintao signed an agreement to establish a "strategic partnership" between the two countries¹⁰⁰. However, a level of suspicion, especially within the military, remains. China's assertive policy toward territorial disputes in the South China Sea has created unease. Concerns have arisen regarding the rise of China's military capability and how the aspiring hegemon would use it in the future¹⁰¹. More specifically, Indonesia is concerned that China's claim in the South China Sea might also infringe upon its sovereignty over the Natuna Islands.

Indonesia's wish to enhance the bilateral cooperation with China was therefore due to the latter becoming an essential ally in terms of aid, but not exclusively. Indonesia had increasingly expressed its dissatisfaction with the West's dominance in international affairs¹⁰². Members of the Indonesian elite have felt betrayed by the West, especially by Australia, over East Timor. Instead of supporting Indonesia's territorial integrity, Jakarta believed that the West took advantage of Indonesia's civil unrest to separate East Timor from

⁹⁶ Struye de Swielande, T. (2009). *La Chine et le Soft power : une manière douce de défendre l'intérêt national ?* (No. 2). Université catholique de Louvain.

⁹⁷ Rouiaï, N. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

⁹⁸ Courmont, B. (2009). *Chine, la grande séduction : Essai sur le soft power chinois*. Paris, Choiseul.

⁹⁹ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

¹⁰⁰ Sukma, R. (2009b). *Op. Cit.*

¹⁰¹ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

¹⁰² Sukma, R. (2009b). *Op. Cit.*

the Republic¹⁰³. Additionally, Indonesia has become increasingly uncomfortable about its “excessive dependence on the United States¹⁰⁴”. By forging closer ties with China, Indonesia could balance out the American influence and limit the possibility of an external power undermining the nation’s sovereignty.

However, China, who wishes to be seen as Indonesia’s new most influential ally, missed the opportunity to put this into action. Although China was quick to react in the aftermath of the tsunami and sent Indonesia large sums of humanitarian aid for disaster relief, it did not compare to the level of aid sent to Indonesia by other great powers with an interest in the region. In the days following the 2004 tsunami, the United States, Japan, Europe, Australia and Canada all continued to contribute to the aid packages sent to Indonesia amounting to a total of over US\$4 billion. China only pledged US\$50 million. A few months later, the US\$63 million sent by China was again surpassed by Taiwan’s very visible humanitarian teams on the ground and the United States’ helicopter fleets transporting medical food and construction supplies from America Aircraft carriers and support ships to the refugees on shore¹⁰⁵. Indeed, the New York Times reported that huge American, Japanese, and European aid campaigns were “a reminder that the world’s most populous country is still far from being the dominant power in Asia¹⁰⁶”. The United States evidently continues to maintain considerable influence in international development aid. China, after its 2004 disaster relief blunder, is now doubling down on its efforts, swiftly gaining terrain and steadily becoming the main influencing power through Soft Power policies revolving around humanitarian aid and crisis support in Indonesia. The Chinese goal of influencing Southeast Asia in a way that puts them in the centre of regional politics¹⁰⁷, and as such reclaim the title of hegemon, is steadily becoming reality. However, the still topical American threat does not set a clear and straight path for China’s BRI implementation throughout Indonesia.

China and the challenging Indonesian section of the BRI

As part of President Xi Jinping’s launch of the 2013 BRI came the inauguration of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) during his visit to Indonesia. The aim of this concept was to promote maritime cooperation and trade between China and other countries in the region, more

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Dillon, D., & Tkacik, J. J. (2006). *China’s Quest for Asia*. Hoover Institution.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

specifically in South and Southeast Asia¹⁰⁸. As the largest country in Southeast Asia, constituting ASEAN’s largest market, largest GDP and strongest domestic demand¹⁰⁹, Indonesia was coined as a crucial link for China to deepen its economic ties with ASEAN and an essential piece of the puzzle to ensure the successful implementation of the BRI. Making Indonesia an ally would enable the New Silk Road to connect Central Asia, China and Southeast Asia, especially since the change of Indonesian regime resulted in the end of the “China threat” mentality practiced under Suharto¹¹⁰. Simultaneously to China’s change of outlook regarding Indonesia, Indonesia decided to emphasise the development of its maritime sector as a means of improving connectivity within the country and with the world. Indeed, as an archipelago which boasts a strategic location linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans¹¹¹, maritime activities are both a source of economic resource and a means of connecting different parts of the country and other nations that are separated by the sea¹¹². This convergence of interests was perceived by China as the perfect opportunity to crystallise the bilateral relations and push for the implementation of the MSR segment of the BRI. Trust was therefore built upon China’s “good neighbour” actions including humanitarian aid relief during recent crises, the PRC’s repeated assurance of its support for Indonesia’s territorial integrity and China’s diplomatic support in the United Nations during the East Timor issue¹¹³.

Although Indonesia is well-positioned to benefit from Chinese BRI as a number of the MSR planned transport infrastructure projects could access funds from China’s multilateral lending institution the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF)¹¹⁴, the implementation of these projects have been extremely slow to bear fruits. Indeed, although President Xi announced the great potential for partnership between China and Indonesia’s maritime fulcrum, domestic challenges and latent negative perception about Chinese investments¹¹⁵ in the country have created significant challenges. In order to achieve its own security interests, Indonesia still treads carefully around its neighbour and has chosen to strategically create a balance against China. To do this, Jakarta has been calling upon the United States military presence to mitigate China’s assertive maritime behaviour in the

¹⁰⁸ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *A Maritime Silk Road and Indonesia’s Perspective of Maritime State* (WPPIR-201701). Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

¹⁰⁹ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *Op. Cit.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

¹¹⁴ Negara, D. S., & Sanchita, B. D. (2017). *Challenges for Indonesia to achieve its Maritime Connectivity Plan and Leverage on Regional Initiatives* (No. 3). Perspective ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

region¹¹⁶. As the territorial conflict in the South China Sea (SCS) could potentially increase the insecurity of the regions bordering Indonesia, the nation's primordial concern lies in the protection of its sovereignty claims over the Natuna sea as its richness in natural gas reserves are vital towards Indonesia's energy security¹¹⁷.

Moreover, major concerns can be found amongst the Indonesian public opinion regarding Chinese investment which have led to a limited expansion and progress of the BRI across Indonesia. One resides in the fear surrounding a potential influx of a large number of Chinese workers as Chinese investment in the country increases¹¹⁸. Indonesia currently is struggling to create more than two million jobs annually to accommodate new entrants into the labour market and, therefore, wishes to limit the entry of foreign workers. Xenophobia and anti-foreign sentiments amongst the population have been refuelled by the presence of Chinese funding, with communities accusing President Joko (Jokowi) Widodo and ministers of inviting Chinese blue-collar workers and a communist ideology into Indonesia along with the MSR¹¹⁹. Another concern involves land acquisition for the implementation of BRI projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Railway Project (HSRP). This flagship project was one of the main aspects of Jokowi's ambition to upgrade Indonesia's lagging infrastructure, funded by a China Development Bank (CDB) loan¹²⁰. As well as causing intra-government tensions, the project to date has not seen significant progress despite the issuance of the construction permit in July 2016, which has in turn made project implementation prices rise significantly¹²¹. As the CDB agreed to the deal pending the entirety of the land needed to construct the HSRP being acquired, the government issued changes to policies to expedite the process. The construction was to begin in August 2016, but as of September 2017, only around 55 per cent of the total 600-hectare land needed for the 142-kilometre railway project has been cleared¹²². As this process has proven to be lengthy and costly, the CDB has since halted the loan to the project¹²³. Finally, both scholars and officials have debated whether China's attempts to use the MSR were to reinvoke the ancient Silk Road – a practice they

¹¹⁶ Beddu, D., Cangara, A., & Putra, B. (2020). "The Implications of Changing Maritime Security Geostrategic Landscape of Southeast Asia Towards Indonesia's "Jokowi" Contemporary Foreign Policy". *Proceedings of the 1st Hasanuddin International Conference on Social and Political Sciences, HICOSPOS 2019, 21-22 October 2019, Makassar, Indonesia*, 1-8.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Damuri, Y., Perkasa, V., Atje, R., & Hirawan, F. (2019). *Perceptions and Readiness Of Indonesia Towards The Belt And Road Initiative*. Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

¹¹⁹ Negara, D. S., & Sanchita, B. D. (2017). *Op. Cit.*

¹²⁰ Dharma, S., & Suryadinata, N. (2018). *Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail Project: Little Progress, Many Challenges* (No. 2). Perspective ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute.

¹²¹ Damuri, Y., Perkasa, V., Atje, R., & Hirawan, F. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

¹²² Dharma, S., & Suryadinata, N. (2018). *Op. Cit.*

¹²³ Damuri, Y., Perkasa, V., Atje, R., & Hirawan, F. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

believe to have been designed around tributary relations between China as the centre/superior and the periphery/inferior states¹²⁴. A parallel was made between the MSR and the “string of pearls” concept in which the MSR would be a part of a strategy to secure China’s military and commercial routes at sea as well as its sea lines of communications (SLOCs), which in turn would aim to counter India’s expansion in the region¹²⁵.

Despite this strong anti-China public sentiment, China’s growing economy fits well with Indonesia’s current economic requirements¹²⁶, which is why President Jokowi went ahead with following in his predecessor’s steps and continued to court medium to long-term Chinese investments to fulfil national development goals¹²⁷. Although Indonesia has kept its relationship with the United States close, both to balance out China’s regional influence and due to their aid after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis¹²⁸, China presents an unexploited opportunity for Indonesia. A “strategic partnership” between both countries as intended by President Yudhoyono and Chinese President Hu Jintao¹²⁹ would revive Indonesia’s labour-intensive manufacturing industry through FDI and skill transfers in sectors such as agriculture, electronics, machinery and transportation¹³⁰. As Indonesia is far from being integrated into the global economy¹³¹, Jokowi instigated a plan to direct Chinese and other foreign investments to four Indonesian provinces: North Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, North Sumatra, and Bali. By doing so, Jokowi hopes to increase infrastructure and FDI in these relatively underdeveloped areas and to connect them to the rest of Indonesia¹³². Indonesian government unfortunately faces a budget constraint to finance and fund these infrastructure projects. Indonesia needed at least US\$460 billion during 2015-2019 to carry out its infrastructure development objectives. In light of this, Jakarta increasingly engages cooperatively with China, now consistently ranked as Indonesia’s second largest trading partner, if not the largest¹³³. Beijing progressively provides financial assistance opportunities for Indonesia to succeed its Global Maritime Fulcrum ambition for maritime infrastructure development and connectivity which would reinforce its position in the global market¹³⁴.

¹²⁴ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *Op. Cit.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

¹²⁷ Tritto, A. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative as a Catalyst for Institutional Development: Evidence from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar* (No. 30). HKUST IEMS Thought Leadership Briefs.

¹²⁸ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *Op. Cit.*

¹²⁹ Sukma, R. (2009a). *Op. Cit.*

¹³⁰ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *Op. Cit.*

¹³¹ Damuri, Y., Perkasa, V., Atje, R., & Hirawan, F. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

¹³² Tritto, A. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

¹³³ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *Op. Cit.*

¹³⁴ Beddu, D., Cangara, A., & Putra, B. (2020). *Op. Cit.*

Although Indonesia-China relations have not been smooth or mostly positive throughout, China has managed to persuade Indonesia of its need for their help. Initially through a Soft Power tactic of delivering speedy disaster relief and humanitarian aid, Beijing convinced Jakarta of its good will and value as an ally, devoid of any threats to Indonesia's sovereignty. Once influence assured, even in the face of Indonesia's preestablished links with the United States or India, China was then able to push for the implementation of the MSR section of the BRI. Setbacks and issues were inevitable due to Indonesian public opinion's limited trust and confidence in China's intentions, but China persevered. Now one of Indonesia's main investors, China has managed to assert itself as a contender to becoming Indonesia's sole hegemonic power. The title is not entirely won yet, the United States are still very present, even though their main strategic focus lies in the Middle East¹³⁵.

CONCLUSION

China's Soft Power influence over ASEAN nations through the means of humanitarian aid and crisis relief, be it due to economic, social or environmental causes, is usually desperately needed by the target country. The dispatch of humanitarian aid does not however automatically lead to a smooth transition into becoming the country of reference during a crisis, ensuring the implementation of the BRI for heightened economic growth or establishing the acceptance of China as regional hegemon. While Myanmar was eager to forge strong bonds with its neighbour and welcomed the BRI projects, Indonesia has proven to be more sceptical of China's presence and investments. The debt trap is a reality for both countries where China has made significant loans through the AIIB and SRF to further its BRI and MSR projects, and both Myanmar and Indonesia have resisted becoming entirely subjugated to China. Furthermore, China does not yet represent the sole major power with influencing capacity in either country; the United States, Japan and India still have a hold on both. However, Myanmar and China have recently been supporting each other at the UN on geostrategic matters such as the potential UN intervention in the Rohingya crisis, whereas the Indonesian Foreign Minister Natalegawa stated that Indonesia was "disappointed" with China's deployment of oil from contested waters in the South China Sea¹³⁶.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Damuri, Y., Atje, R., Alexandra, L., & Soedjito, A. (2014, December). *Op. Cit.*

Although Beijing's quest to become regional hegemon has had heterogeneous results, it is undeniable that since the start of its "good neighbour" strategy implementation, China's influence has skyrocketed. Its Soft Power strategy has had an effect on both countries we have studied and the BRI has been successfully implemented. Myanmar and Indonesia, along with many other ASEAN countries, have now signed agreements to participate in the building of Beijing's intricate geostrategic network. By 2050, it is highly possible that the international community will experience a shift in dominating powers from the United States to China if the latter continues to implement its current strategies¹³⁷. However, will this transition be peaceful? Challenges have arisen across the region, even within countries aligned with China. Major powers are not ready to back down or lose their own sphere of influence within the region and the South China Sea issue is causing a spike in tensions. These factors cannot be overlooked as they are likely to contribute to a possible clash between China, ASEAN states and other powers invested in the area. Thirty years ago, very few would have predicted the current state of geopolitics, therefore, it is hard to predict the trajectory of the next 30 years and even less, as the recent military coup in Myanmar has demonstrated. ■

¹³⁷ Riga, D. (2019). *Op. Cit.*

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CHINA'S SOFT POWER THROUGH HUMANITARIAN AID IN MYANMAR AND INDONESIA

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