

Myanmar Agreement in Signing the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) Project

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This research aims to explain the reasons behind Myanmar's decision to sign the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) project with China. The problems raised in this study are related to internal and external dynamics that affect Myanmar's foreign policy stance towards the strategic infrastructure project. This study uses a qualitative approach with literature study methods and explanatory analysis. The adaptive model theory in foreign policy developed by James N. Rosenau is used to analyze Myanmar's response to changes in the domestic and international environment. The results show that Myanmar is under pressure from external factors, such as the global power structure, regional alliances, geopolitical situation, as well as internal factors, such as the need for economic development and increased domestic political accountability. Myanmar shows an acquiescent adaptation pattern, which is a form of foreign policy adjustment that shows a tendency to approve the initiative of the dominant partner country, in this case China. The conclusions of this study show that Myanmar's decision to join the CMEC project is the result of adaptation to a combination of external pressures and internal needs, which makes China a key strategic partner in its national development framework.

Keywords: CMEC, Myanmar, China, Adaptive Model, Foreign Policy.

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1. Introduction

National interests are strategic objectives that are the main foundation in the formulation of a country's foreign policy. Several fundamental aspects of national interest include the state's efforts to maintain territorial integrity, protect its political identity, and also protect its cultural culture (Zasztia et al., 2025). National interests reflect the state's response to external and internal environmental dynamics, including in establishing international cooperation (Akhrorova, 2020). Therefore, the direction and shape of foreign policy is highly dependent on domestic needs and global pressures faced by each country.

Myanmar as a country in the Southeast Asian region, has a strategic geographical position between South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. This location makes it an arena of geopolitical competition between two great powers, namely China and India (Alam, 2013). Since the last decade, the intensity of Myanmar-China bilateral relations has increased through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative, especially since the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) project was agreed upon in 2018 (Mizuno, 2016). On the one hand, CMEC is seen as a strategic project in China's economic integration and diplomacy. However, on the other hand, this project seems to raise concerns about Myanmar's political and economic dependence on its main partner (Chenyang & Shaojun, 2018). In addition, there is also the expansion of Chinese economic corridor projects in Myanmar that are mostly aimed at exploring petroleum and natural gas reserves in Rakhine State, as well as the implementation of public infrastructure development (Yang et al., 2021). Therefore, this research will focus on the discussion of the integration of cross-border economic cooperation between Myanmar and China.

CMEC is part of a multi-billion-dollar project connecting the Asian, African, and European continents. CMEC is also a continuation of infrastructure projects that have previously been built in Myanmar, such as hydropower and oil pipelines, to enhance bilateral relations in the transportation, energy, and trade sectors (Aung, 2020). CMEC officially consists of three pillars of development, namely Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ), Border Economic Cooperation Zone (BECZ), and New Yangon City, including the Muse-Mandalay railway project (Indrasari & Argenti, 2025). However, there are several obstacles in the construction of the CMEC project. The legal sector is a major obstacle, due to the lack of public transparency regarding the design of what projects are being built in Myanmar (Cornish & Vivoda, 2016). Another obstacle lies in the issue of China's debt trap. This condition is evidenced by Myanmar's external debt at the end of 2017 reaching 9.1 billion USD or 41 percent of which is debt to China (Mizuno, 2016). Moreover, when the CMEC was agreed, Myanmar's share of external debt to China in 2019 increased again, to 12 billion USD, while its total bilateral trade was worth 16.8 billion USD (Kivimäki, 2016). While it seems that in the short term Myanmar's debt burden is likely to remain manageable, Myanmar's external debt in the coming years will be even more worrying if the CMEC project continues and has the potential to create an estuary of Myanmar's dependence on China's international aid.

A number of previous studies have discussed the dimensions of Myanmar's dependence on China from various aspects, especially in the military, economic, and energy fields. From a military perspective, Myanmar is positioned as a strategic country in the supply chain of defense equipment and the security of cross-border energy infrastructure, such as the oil and natural gas pipeline network that crosses the Indian Ocean (Hong, 2011). Meanwhile, in terms of economy and energy, Myanmar's dependence is affected by limited domestic capacity to manage and develop infrastructure and natural resources independently. This prompted Myanmar to receive large investments from China through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) scheme, although such projects carried the risk of debt burden and foreign economic dominance. Furthermore, the study also notes that the implementation of CMEC contributes to increasing domestic conflicts as well as worsening Myanmar's dependence on external assistance, particularly in the financing and infrastructure development sectors (Simangunsong, 2024).

Using James N. Rosenau's foreign policy adaptive model theory, this study aims to analyze the main reasons behind Myanmar's decision to sign the CMEC project. The main focus of the study is to explain how Myanmar adjusts its foreign policy in response to internal dynamics (such as the need for economic development and political stability) and external dynamics (such as global power pressures and regional alliance structures). In connection with this phenomenon, this research is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the international relations literature, especially in understanding the decision-making processes of developing countries in major geopolitical projects such as the BRI. Thus, this study also offers an update on the adaptive approach in foreign policy studies, by filling in the gaps in the literature that has been focusing more on the consequences of the BRI project than on the adaptive motivations behind a country's participation.

2. Literature Review and Problem Statement

Previous studies have highlighted the economic-political relationship between Myanmar and China, particularly in the context of Myanmar's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. Several studies have examined the impact of the China-Myanmar Economy Corridor (CMEC) project on Myanmar in terms of economy, domestic politics, and the threat of strategic dependence. For example, it shows that the implementation of CMEC triggers an increase in internal conflicts, a lack of project transportation, and Myanmar's fiscal dependence on China (Simangunsong, 2024). In addition, China's dominance of foreign investment in Myanmar's infrastructure is a form of geopolitical penetration that risks Myanmar's national

sovereignty. However, these studies tend to focus on the consequences of Myanmar's involvement in BRI projects, while studies on adaptive models or internal-external dynamics behind Myanmar's decision to approve CMEC are still very limited. Therefore, the research gap wants to be filled by this study through the process of adaptation of Myanmar's foreign policy in responding to external pressures and internal needs.

In connection with answering these problems, this study uses the adaptive model theory in foreign policy developed by James N. Rosenau. This theory assumes that every foreign policy is a product of the country's adaptation process to changes in the external and internal environment, as well as leadership dynamics (leadership idiosyncrasy). Rosenau identified three sources of change, namely (Rosenau et al., 1976):

- a. External Change: including great power structure, alliance, and situational factors. In the context of Myanmar, regional geopolitical tensions, Chinese dominance, and the response to isolation from Western countries are all part of significant external pressures.
- b. Internal Change: refers to changes in domestic structures such as economic development and political accountability. Myanmar after the democratic transition is under pressure to uncover internal legitimacy through development and foreign economic cooperation
- c. Leadership Change: Idiosyncratic factors of leaders, including ideology, threat perception, and personal strategies in maintaining power, also help determine the direction of foreign policy. In this case, Aung San Suu Kyi is a key actor in determining Myanmar's attitude towards China after the Rohingya ethnic crisis.

Thus, this theory offers a comprehensive framework of analysis in explaining how Myanmar not only becomes an object of great power penetration, but also becomes an active subject that adapts to various pressures and needs. In this context, this study contributes to the international relations literature by highlighting the agencies of developing countries in managing structural pressures through adaptive approaches.

3. Method

This paper uses a qualitative approach that refers to the selection of conceptual frameworks and research hypotheses to emphasize the quality of analysis (Waruwu, 2024). Furthermore, this study uses explanatory analysis techniques, which explain the causal relationship between research variables through hypothesis testing. This is because, because the main reason for explanatory research is to test the hypothesis proposed, it is hoped that through this study the cause-and-effect relationship and influence of the variables can be explained (Creswell, 2018). Therefore, this study will show the cause-and-effect relationship between the optional variables of the foreign policy adaptive model analysis framework and the case study of the reasons for Myanmar to accept the CMEC project agreement.

This study uses secondary data collection techniques. This data collection technique mostly uses literature studies through secondary data sources. The data sources used came from books, scientific journal articles, news pages, and official documents from government organizations. In addition, this study uses process tracing analysis techniques by showing the interaction between variables from one to another. This technique can fully show the causal mechanism in case studies with the aim of seeing the sequence of events to the outcome to be explained (Prayogi & Halim, 2024).

4. Results and Discussion

This study found that Myanmar's decision to sign the CMEC project in 2018 was the result of a process of adaptation to various changes in the external and internal environment, and was influenced by Myanmar's

national leadership factors. The three variables were analyzed using the theoretical framework of the adaptive foreign policy model from James N. Rosenau.

a. Myanmar's Adaptation to External Change

Based on the framework of the analysis of the adaptive model in foreign policy, Rosenau explained that foreign policy is a response or result of the country's adaptive behavior to the changes that occur around it. One of these changes occurs in the external environment of a country. To analyze changes in the external environment, Rosenau described three indicators, namely great power structure, alliances, and situational factors. In relation to the following three indicators, it will be known what external influences are behind Myanmar signing the CMEC project agreement with China in 2018.

Structural Changes and Relations Between Major Countries Affecting Myanmar Signing the CMEC Project

Today, the world is moving towards a shift in global power. Historically, in the 1970s and 1980s, the power of the United States faced a double challenge, both in the security sector of the Soviet Union (now Russia) and in the economic sector of Japan. However, in 1991, the glory days of the Soviet Union collapsed, while Japan had new economic competitors, namely South Korea and China (Ramesh, 2020).

With respect to global dynamics, China's economic development appears to be stronger than that of the Soviet Union and its military is also stronger than Japan's. This statement is motivated by the era of reform and economic openness policies during Deng Xiaoping's reign (Yao & Zhang, 2018). China's economic development during the reform period also showed growth of 10% per year, which percentage had never occurred in the previous four decades (Fahrurrahman, 2025). In response to the following conditions, China faces a paradigmatic challenge with the United States. China through the Beijing Consensus implements policies to advance a model of bureaucratic state development that can be realized under the auspices of an authoritarian system of government (Tang, 2016). This policy generally prioritizes the growth of the country, social change of the middle class, and technological superiority, which is actually attractive to countries with authoritarian systems, especially in the Asian, African, and Eastern European regions.

Great power structure indicators support Myanmar's decision to sign the CMEC project with China. This statement is motivated by a change in the structure or pattern of relations between major countries in the international structure, namely the influence of global power shifting from the dominance of the United States and other Western countries to China. This condition was motivated when China began to implement economic reform policies and became the world's largest trading nation in 2013. Furthermore, in 2014, China became the country with the largest economy in the world in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Therefore, China is the country with the second largest economy in the world after the United States and is a source of FDI for countries that need foreign investment flows. With regard to foreign investment, since 1954, China has been a major trading partner for Myanmar. Several infrastructure projects in Myanmar have also been under development since the economic reforms of 2011. Furthermore, in 2018, Myanmar and China agreed to enhance economic and development cooperation through the CMEC framework. Thus, Myanmar adapted to the change in the country's power from the dominance of the United States to China, where geographically China is a neighboring country that has both strategic interests in it. In addition, Myanmar and China are friendly countries, thus facilitating China's access to the development of international trade access through the Indian Ocean.

Changes in Structure and Inter-Alliance Relations Affecting Myanmar Signing the CMEC Project

The application of economic sanctions is not new in Myanmar. Since Myanmar's independence in 1948, the country has been under the influence of ethnic conflicts and conflicts between civil society and the military government. Conflicts between civilians and the military regime first occurred in 1988, at which time

Western countries, such as the United States and the European Union, immediately imposed international economic sanctions for human rights violations. The economic sanctions lasted for two decades and then occurred again from 2012 to 2017.

Human rights violations are no longer a domestic issue in Myanmar or the ASEAN region alone, but the international community has summoned Aung San Suu Kyi, as the Leader of Myanmar Civil Society to the United Nations (UN) International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands (BBC News, 2023). Aung San Suu Kyi's summons was aimed at addressing the allegations levelled against the Tatmadaw for the killings, sexual crimes, and destruction of Rohingya homes in Rakhine State (BBC News, 2017). The International Court of Justice of the United Nations and other international parties have also called the case of ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims a crime of genocide. Thus, in response to the case of the crime of genocide, Western countries again imposed Myanmar with international economic sanctions in 2017.

Economic sanctions have an impact on the embargo on weapons and other war equipment. In addition to the security sector, economic sanctions also have an impact on the increase in the number of unemployed, especially for women workers in the garment industry, which can further threaten an increase in cases of poverty and food insecurity. Therefore, in the midst of increasing trade protectionism as a result of international sanctions, Myanmar needs foreign investment assistance from non-Western countries that are geographically very strategically located, namely China (Renwick, 2014). Thus, indicators of alliance change affect Myanmar's decision to adapt to the phenomenon of imposing international economic sanctions from Western countries, such as the United States and European Union member states. Thus, economic sanctions are behind Myanmar's decision to sign the CMEC project with China in 2018.

Changes in Situational Factors Affecting Myanmar Signing the CMEC Project

Economic liberalization has brought a new paradigm, not only to changes in domestic politics, but also with Myanmar's foreign relations. This is evidenced by the entry of the influence of the European Union, India, and China as emerging superpower countries that play a role in developing Myanmar's economy. Economic and sustainable development assistance from the European Union to Myanmar is under the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme, but in 2017, this policy was temporarily suspended due to cases of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. Furthermore, India also implemented the East Policy Act as its foreign policy, but its competition with China is increasingly fierce for control of Myanmar's geostrategy.

Myanmar is the center of competition between India and China in exploiting and transporting natural gas from the offshore region of Myanmar. On the one hand, India has ambitions for natural gas in the Shwe Gas Field through pipelines built in Bangladesh, on the other hand, China is also exploiting the same energy through pipelines built along the Myanmar-China border (Hong, 2011). China is also implementing the BRI policy through the String of Pearls strategy which is quite massive in building ports around the Indian Ocean region and developing Chinese Navy facilities in the Bay of Bengal. China's ambitions seem to cause concern for India, as it will have long-term implications for the Indian Ocean's security sector, which has long been considered to be India's preserve and increase geostrategic competition between the two regional powers (Pant, 2014). Thus, bilateral relations between China and Myanmar are increasingly developing into major trading partners as evidenced by the agreement on the CMEC economic corridor development project. Changes in the implementation of economic policies from the European Union to India, ultimately prompted Myanmar to adjust the situation in its external sphere, namely agreeing to sign the CMEC project with China in 2018.

b. Myanmar's Adaptation to Internal Change

In addition to responding to changes from the external sphere, foreign policy formulation can also be influenced by changes in the internal sphere of a country. Rosenau sees that changes or demands in the internal scope are influenced by two indicators, including; factors of economic development (societal sources) and political accountability (governmental sources). Therefore, this study will analyze the adaptation process to these two changes that prompted Myanmar to sign the CMEC project agreement with China in 2018.

Economic Development Changes Affecting Myanmar Signing CMEC Project

Economic liberalization marks the easing of international sanctions and could directly boost investor confidence to restore preferential trade access to Myanmar. However, Myanmar is quite ambitious in initiating the process of democratic transition, but lacks substantial experience in sustainable reforms. Previously, during 2000 to 2010, Myanmar's growth rate was the slowest than Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, at 4.7% (Khairunisa et al., 2022). The slow growth rate has an impact on weak bureaucratic reforms in public policy and foreign investment during the democratic transition. Myanmar's domestic condition does not seem to have a strong foundation for the influx of large amounts of foreign investment (Mieno, 2013). This is due to two obstacles, namely external barriers, related to international economic sanctions from Western countries, and internal obstacles, such as difficult public access to electricity and weak management of energy resources.

Reflecting on the slow pace of Myanmar's economy during the reforms, the country actually signed the CMEC project agreement and also designed the Myanmar Sustainable Development Program (MSDP). It can be said that CMEC is an opportunity for Myanmar to implement MSDP as a development agenda in 2030 (Indrasari & Argenti, 2025). There are several objectives of Myanmar's economic development through CMEC. First, CMEC aims to synergize with the MSDP in design and represent the convergence of common interests between the two countries. Second, CMEC aims to be a catalyst for infrastructure development and economic growth in Myanmar. A well-functioning modern infrastructure is a key goal for Myanmar to develop into a more advanced market economy in the reform era. Third, BRI can also provide encouragement to address the significant financing gap in Myanmar. Finally, CMEC will also have a significant influence on the peace process in Myanmar (Oo et al., 2024). It can be said that CMEC complements the Myanmar government's efforts in promoting peace and stability through infrastructure development.

Changes in Political Accountability Affecting Myanmar Signing the CMEC Project

The lack of transparency in Myanmar has occurred during the construction of the Myitsone Dam in 2011. Information on the construction of the Myitsone Dam recommended that two smaller dams be built to reduce losses for local villagers who would be displaced. However, the proposal was ignored and the dam project would continue to operate without the knowledge of the local population. Residents who have felt the adverse effects of the project are demonstrating to cancel the construction of the Myitsone Dam (Ayedh et al., 2019). In response to the demonstrations and rejections, the Myanmar government changed its communication pattern with its citizens. This can be seen when Myanmar and China plan to build the Kyaukphyu-Kunming High Speed Rail project which is part of the BRI project, the Myanmar government facilitated an open meeting to seek views from residents living along the project route. The Myanmar government's efforts are a form of progress in improving the communication pattern between the government and its citizens. Thus, if the results of the public meeting result in projects that are considered bad and are detrimental to local residents will be changed or canceled, then the need to take legal action can be reduced (Crowther, 2020).

The dissemination of information about the BRI project for Myanmar is not published in the same language. The information on BRI provided to local stakeholders is not in Burmese, making it difficult for them to understand the consequences of such investments. In addition, if the project design materials are written in English and Chinese, important details, such as information about the route, the companies involved, or the underlying reason for the project being built, are not included. On the one hand, the information in Chinese, is usually aimed at the local people of Myanmar by listing the positive impact of the Chinese project. On the other hand, information written in English is usually given to international observers, so the information tends to be more critical of the Myanmar government's response. The rest, although information is available in Burmese, is often not provided to local stakeholders. In fact, this situation has been detrimental to the five percent of farmers whose land was affected during the construction of the Sino-Myanmar petroleum and natural gas pipeline alone who received such information (Crowther, 2020). Thus, public opinion that is not heard shows the lack of transparency of the Myanmar government, thus affecting the CMEC project agreement with China.

c. Myanmar's Adaptation to Leadership Change

Leadership in general is an aspect of leadership that exists in the government of a country at a certain time. In the Myanmar case study, the inauguration of the CMEC project with China cannot be separated from the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi who served as Foreign Minister, Myanmar State Advisor, and leader of the NLD Party during the economic reform period. In addition, Aung San Suu Kyi is also a figure behind Myanmar's support process reformasi demokrasi setelah kurang lebih 60 tahun dikuasai oleh rezim otoriter (Caldararo, 2014).

Aung San Suu Kyi seems to be the first person to introduce a democratic system of government in Myanmar. This can be seen from Aung San Suu Kyi's character who always prioritizes a democratic attitude, namely without armed resistance or things that trigger conflict when dealing with differences. Aung San Suu Kyi is also the one who has re-established bilateral or multilateral relations with the international world and international organizations. One of the efforts seen in this paper is the signing of the CMEC project with China as a first step for Myanmar to improve bilateral relations through economic development after experiencing economic isolation from Western countries. His decision to sign the CMEC was the result of external and internal changes that occurred in Myanmar. Therefore, the reason Aung San Suu Kyi has returned to trust China to build Myanmar's infrastructure and economy seems to have gone through a lot of considerations from decision-makers (Cook, 2013). Thus, the idiosyncratic sources of Aung San Suu Kyi, such as the character, principles, or values she holds, are included in her leadership factors that are adapted by Myanmar in its foreign policy, thus forming the reason for Myanmar to sign the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) project in 2018.

5. Conclusion

The CMEC project agreement with China is the result of Myanmar's adaptation process to three variables, namely external changes, internal changes, and leadership. Starting from the first variable, namely external change consists of three indicators. The first indicator is the great power structure which is motivated by the rise of China as a new world power after the collapse of the Soviet Union and also the global phenomenon of power shifting. Later, Myanmar also adapted to the alliance's changes, as the United States and the European Union formed an alliance to impose economic sanctions on Myanmar due to human rights abuses in 2017. Economic sanctions have an effect on the international world's view of the investment environment in Myanmar, which is prone to civil conflict. Along with the situation, China offered a number of infrastructure development projects under the BRI policy framework for Myanmar, namely the CMEC

project in 2018. Lastly, Myanmar has also adapted to changing situational factors, as a number of economic policies during the reform period, namely the Act East India policy and the EU's Everything but Arms scheme, have not shown significant development growth. Therefore, China is further present in the BRI policy which since 2013 has shown more development developments, namely the energy pipeline project and the Kyaukphyu Port in the Special Economic Zone area in Rakhine State.

The second variable is the changes that occur in the internal environment. Among a number of indicators behind internal changes, the government's reason for signing the CMEC project is due to changes in economic development that are sourced from the community (societal sources). During the period of economic and political reforms, Myanmar has planned a number of infrastructure development programs, but it is undeniable that external and internal conditions are still dominated by a number of obstacles. Therefore, Myanmar's economic growth is highly dependent on China's international assistance that can encourage the realization of CMEC and the MSDP program plan in 2030. In addition, Myanmar has also adapted to low indicators of political accountability (governmental sources), namely the public opinion of the local population who mostly reject the project is ignored by the government, so the CMEC agreement is still signed.

The CMEC agreement was then supported by the leadership variable in Myanmar's semi-democratic system of government. Through a number of considerations from Myanmar's adaptation process to changes from the external and internal environment, the decision to sign the CMEC was ultimately left to Aung San Suu Kyi through her attendance at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. The forum, attended by Aung San Suu Kyi and representatives from Myanmar, resulted in the decision to sign and oversee the agreement on 33 MoUs on the CMEC project together with President Xi Jinping and Chinese Foreign Minister Li Keqiang.

Based on the explanation of the above variables, James N. Rosenau also divides foreign policy formulation into four types of adaptation. In general, each country has its own adaptation pattern in formulating its policies. If linked to the case study, the reason Myanmar signed the CMEC project agreement with China in 2018 refers to the pattern of acquiescent adaptation. This pattern can be understood as a form of adaptation of a country to changes that mostly occur in the external sphere. Therefore, this case study is in line with acquiescent adaptation, because this adaptation pattern can occur if there is no opposition from the domestic community, because the government prevents information that could cause turmoil or conflict with government decisions.

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