

UNRAVELLING PRESIDENT OBAMA'S MYANMAR POLICY: PRAGMATIC LIBERALISM AT PLAY

Liew Wui Chern^a, Roy Anthony Rogers^b and Jatswan S. Sidhu^c

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the US's Myanmar policy from the perspective of pragmatic liberalism and explore the primary factors behind the policy shift in 2009. It fills a gap in the literature by offering a rare analysis of US-Myanmar policy through the lens of pragmatic liberalism. The research methodology employs document search and elite interviews to gather comprehensive insights. The research questions focus on understanding how pragmatic liberalism manifested in Obama's Myanmar policy and identifying the objectives he aimed to achieve. The findings reveal that Obama's Myanmar policy aligns with the principles of pragmatic liberalism. It can be analysed through two dimensions: modelling creation and hegemony maintenance. Within the context of Sino-US competition, the primary factor driving the US's policy change in Myanmar is China. Consequently, the US's policy shift aims to establish a new strategic partner to contain Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, thereby maintaining US hegemony in the region. This study contributes to the understanding of US-Myanmar relations and sheds light on the underlying motivations and dynamics of the US's policy shift. By adopting a pragmatic liberalist approach, the US seeks to shape Myanmar's trajectory while safeguarding its strategic interests in the region.

Keywords: US-Myanmar Relations, Pragmatic Liberalism, Barack Obama, Thein Sein, Aung San Suu Kyi

INTRODUCTION

The US made attempts to restore democracy in Myanmar by imposing sanctions since the 1990s, reaching its peak during George W. Bush's presidency. During his tenure from 2001 to 2009, he issued three presidential executive orders (EO 13310, 13448, and 13464). He approved two new laws (The Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003 and the Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE Act of 2008) to impose sanctions on Myanmar (Martin, 2012). However, prominent American scholars on Myanmar questioned the effectiveness of these strategies in bringing about meaningful change. Scholars such as David Steinberg, Robert Taylor, Helen James, Seng Raw, Kyaw Yin Hlaing, and Morten Pedersen argued that the sanctions failed to produce short-term and

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long-term changes in Myanmar. They concluded that the US had miscalculated internal and external factors in Myanmar, resulting in a counterproductive policy of sanctions (Talyor et al., 2004, pp. 8–10).

Criticism continued to grow as President Bush expanded sanctions following the Depayin incident in 2003 and the Saffron Revolution in 2007. These incidents demonstrated that the safety of democratic icon Aung San Suu Kyi and the regime's human rights record were still not guaranteed despite years of sanctions (Taylor, 2009, pp. 484–485). The administration lacked a credible prospect of achieving its goal of regime change in Myanmar (Wilson, 2007, p. 91). Similarly, observers in Myanmar also questioned the effectiveness of the sanctions, suggesting that they had no impact in moderating the military junta. Some observers, like New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, referred to Bush's sanctions policy as a failure due to its "zero-international capital" (Kristof, 2009).

The mounting criticism began to unsettle Congress, which had previously provided strong legislative support for Bush's sanctions policy. Larry Nicksch, an Asian affairs specialist at a foreign policy think-tank for Congress, published a report highlighting the ineffectiveness of the existing sanctions policy. While acknowledging the failure of US sanctions, Nicksch also pointed out that regional actors such as Japan, China, the European Union (EU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could be held responsible for the failure of Western sanctions. The European, Japanese, and Australian sanctions lacked uniformity, were limited in scope, and did not cut off trade and investment with the Myanmar junta (Nicksch, 2008).

Despite criticism from Congressional think-tank members Michael Green and Derek Mitchell, research associates at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), they concluded that sanctions would not be effective without positive engagement from all key parties. They proposed a new approach called "coordinated engagement," suggesting that the White House should lead ASEAN, China, India, Japan, and the US in developing a coordinated initiative or roadmap with clear goals for a secure and stable Myanmar (Green & Mitchell, 2007, p. 155). These criticisms and discussions laid the foundation for Barack Obama's pragmatic approach to US-Myanmar relations when he assumed the presidency in 2009.

On February 18, 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged the failure of economic sanctions during a speech in Jakarta and announced a comprehensive policy review for Myanmar (Steinberg, 2010, pp. 175–176). As part of the initial policy towards Myanmar, the Department of State introduced a new strategy called "pragmatic engagement," which included integrated engagement and ongoing sanctions (Campbell, 2009; MacAskill, 2009). Under this strategy, the Obama administration lifted entry bans on senior junta officials in 2009, allowing Prime Minister Thein Sein to attend the UN General Assembly in New York. Relations improved further in November when leaders from the US and EU held bilateral meetings on sanctions.

In 2011, relations experienced further improvement following the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, the disbandment of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and the suspension of the China-backed Myitsone Dam project. A significant milestone in US-Myanmar relations occurred in November when Secretary Clinton visited Yangon, becoming the first Secretary of State to do so in over half a century

since 1955. This visit marked a turning point in the normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries and paved the way for the suspension of EU sanctions in April 2012 and the easing of US sanctions in July 2012 (Lowrey, 2012). President Obama's historic visit to Myanmar in November 2012, following his re-election, was seen as part of his broader geostrategic goal of increasing US influence in the Asia Pacific region through the "Pivot to Asia" policy, which aimed to counterbalance China's growing power in the region.

Based on the topic at hand, this paper aims to explore the factors that led to the policy change of the Obama administration in 2009 regarding Myanmar. While the failure of sanctions played a significant role, the paper seeks to delve deeper into other factors that influenced the reorientation of the Bush administration's policy, which was solely focused on sanctioning Myanmar. Additionally, the frequent use of the term "pragmatic" in Obama's Myanmar policy piques the paper's interest, leading to an examination of the topic within the pragmatism theory. Hence, the research questions that arise are as follows: What were the primary factors that drove Obama's policy change towards Myanmar in 2009? How did the principles of pragmatism theory manifest in Obama's approach to Myanmar? In line with the stated topic and objective, this section will provide a thorough review of the existing literature on Obama's foreign policy, particularly focusing on understanding Myanmar's position within the framework of Obama's grand strategy in Pivot to Asia.

Literature Review

Upon succeeding to the US presidency, Obama inherited foreign policy challenges from his predecessor, particularly in the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Israel), South Asia (Pakistan) and East Asia (North Korea). These areas were problematic and sometimes controversial. For instance, the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to effect regime change were heavily criticized by the international community. According to Carothers (2013), Obama viewed these events in the Middle East as a Pyrrhic victory, damaging the credibility of US democracy promotion and fuelling suspicions among Arab nations about the presence of the US in the region (pp. 196–197). Furthermore, the US faced a severe economic crisis at home and abroad, which threatened its position as a global superpower (Carothers, 2013). In contrast, the Asia-Pacific region, where the US had previously been less involved, became crucial for maintaining its hegemonic status in light of China's rapid growth.

The new administration, in this context, revealed its tendency to increase emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region by preparing a "strategic turn" from the Middle East and South Asia in 2009 (Manyin et al., 2012, pp. 1–3). This tendency was followed by the administration's effort to deepen engagement with Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions, broaden the distribution of forces and increase the flexibility of military deployment from 2009 to 2011. After two and a half years of preparation, these efforts were then officially tied to the theme of Pivot to Asia. The policy or strategy was initially introduced by Clinton in her writing to Foreign Policy on October 11, 2011. In her op-ed, Clinton (2011) promotes a strategy of strengthening alliances, engaging with emerging powers like China, advancing democracy and human rights, expanding trade and investment, and establishing a robust military presence in line with shifting global realities. The strategy was then officially announced by Obama himself during his visit to the Australian parliament on November 17. In his speech to the Australian members

of parliament (MPs), Obama referred to the US as a “Pacific nation” and hence emphasised that it should intensify its “larger and long-term role” in shaping the Asia-Pacific region and its future.

The spirit of the US Pivot to Asia was articulated by Campbell (2016), who was the chief architect of the strategy. He identified a “ten-point strategy” to penetrate the Asia-Pacific region. First, the US should clarify and mobilise the American public behind the Pivot through a clear and authoritative declaration of the US’s Asia strategy. Second, the US should strengthen ties with its Asian allies, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. Third, the US should shape the contours of China’s rise. Fourth, the US should develop a new partnership with India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Pacific Island states. Fifth, the US should integrate the Asia-Pacific region through the expansion of regional and international free trade agreements such as the nine-nation Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP). Sixth, the US should build trans-Pacific institutions. Seventh, the US should strengthen and modernise the capability of its military in the Asia-Pacific region. Eighth, the US should support Asia’s transitional states on their democratic journeys. Ninth, the US should strengthen people-to-people ties via new programs while engaging partner countries in high-level diplomatic efforts to boost such ties. Tenth, the US should concert this region with European allies (Campbell, 2016, pp. 197–200).

Given that the discussions around Pivot to Asia were largely centred around China, many debates regarding the US’s relations with Myanmar aimed to incorporate the China factor, especially when Naypyidaw was considered a potential site to counter Chinese influence in the Southeast Asia region. In Campbell’s ‘ten-point plan’ and ‘two-pronged approach’ for the Pivot to Asia, Myanmar was not included as an immediate action plan like Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam. The aforementioned discussion has drawn attention to the fact that the US enlisted most ASEAN members into its partnership to strengthen the Pivot to Asia strategy, but it did not give Myanmar as much attention as it did to other countries. For instance, in Campbell’s famous publication, *The Pivot*, Myanmar was only listed as a potential model for democracy while reaffirming the ineffectiveness of the US’s previous sanctioning policy. In this context, Myanmar was viewed as a “transitional state” that urgently needed democracy; thus, there was a limited linkage between the rebalancing strategy and Myanmar (Campbell, 2016, p. 190). However, as a part of Southeast Asia, Myanmar is a traditional military ally of China and a country sandwiched between two regional powers, namely China and India. Therefore, Myanmar still holds an essential position in America’s grand strategy (Steinberg & Fan, 2012, p. 347).

Identifying the Gap

It is clear from the literature review that there has been extensive research on the US’s grand strategy of Pivot to Asia during the Obama era, with a focus on China as an emerging regional power in Asia-Pacific. The studies have shed light on Washington’s external policy and strategy deployment after 2009, which was a period marked by a global decline of US hegemony (Layne, 2009, p. 152). However, very few studies have explored the connections between the US’s rebalancing strategy and Myanmar’s democracy reform. Although the previous literature review did not include Myanmar in an immediate action plan under the Pivot to Asia strategy, it did not make sense for

the Obama administration to exclude Myanmar from this grand strategy which aimed at regaining the US's hegemony in Asia.

This point could be elaborated based on two rationales. First, the strategic location of Myanmar shared common borders with China and Thailand which received strong attention under the Pivot to Asia strategy. Secondly, the strategy to rebalance the Chinese influence in Southeast Asia could be well executed if the administration was able to engage with the regime by providing more options for Naypyidaw to cast away its dependency on Beijing. These reasons demonstrated the implementation of Pivot to Asia in the US's Myanmar policy. Unfortunately, there are insufficient studies in this context. Therefore, the current study aimed to rectify these shortcomings. Besides that, examining the linkage between the Pivot to Asia strategy and Myanmar's democracy process might help academia to compare Obama's Myanmar policy with that of his predecessor, which has only been covered in a few studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a president who self-identifies himself as a pragmatist and liberalist, pragmatic liberalism became a central tenet of analysis of Obama's foreign policy (O'Connor & Cooper, 2021, p. 647; Ralston, 2011, pp. 81–82). To establish a clearer picture, this section of the article will delve into the theoretical context of pragmatic liberalism, particularly its evolution from classical pragmatism and the subsequent development of the theory. This examination aims to identify the key features of pragmatic liberalism in Obama's foreign policy. It is important to note that while pragmatism as an ideology was initiated by American philosophers in the 19th century, it gained significant scholarly attention in the 1930s following the publication of John Dewey's "Individualism Old and New" in 1930. Dewey challenged traditional liberalism and called for a "reconstruction" of liberal thought on individual freedom (Hay, 2012, p. 141). Initially, pragmatism was viewed as an antagonist to liberalism. Classical pragmatists criticised liberalists for their excessive emphasis on negative liberty and argued that individuals are not fixed but rather can achieve something with the aid and support of physical and cultural conditions (Hay, 2012, p. 144).

To apply pragmatism to international politics, it may require ideological support from liberalism (Anderson, 1990, pp. 2–3). In 1990, Anderson developed pragmatic liberalism, which is another variant of liberalism that combines the practical nature of pragmatism with IR's liberal set of thought. According to Anderson's publication entitled "Pragmatic Liberalism", it is the progressive idea of a method that is concerned with the policy of the state, including how it regulates, coordinates, promotes and supports organised ventures that constitute the larger public life of the society (Anderson, 1990, pp. 4–5). It was not until the Millennium Special Issue conference on the topic of 'Pragmatism in IR Theory' in July 2002 that pragmatism received significant attention and discussion among IR scholars (Franke & Weber, 2012, p. 670). However, there was significant disagreement and division among pragmatists during the conference, as they identified with one of three senses: Generic Pragmatism, Paleo-Pragmatism or Neo-Pragmatism (Ralston, 2013).

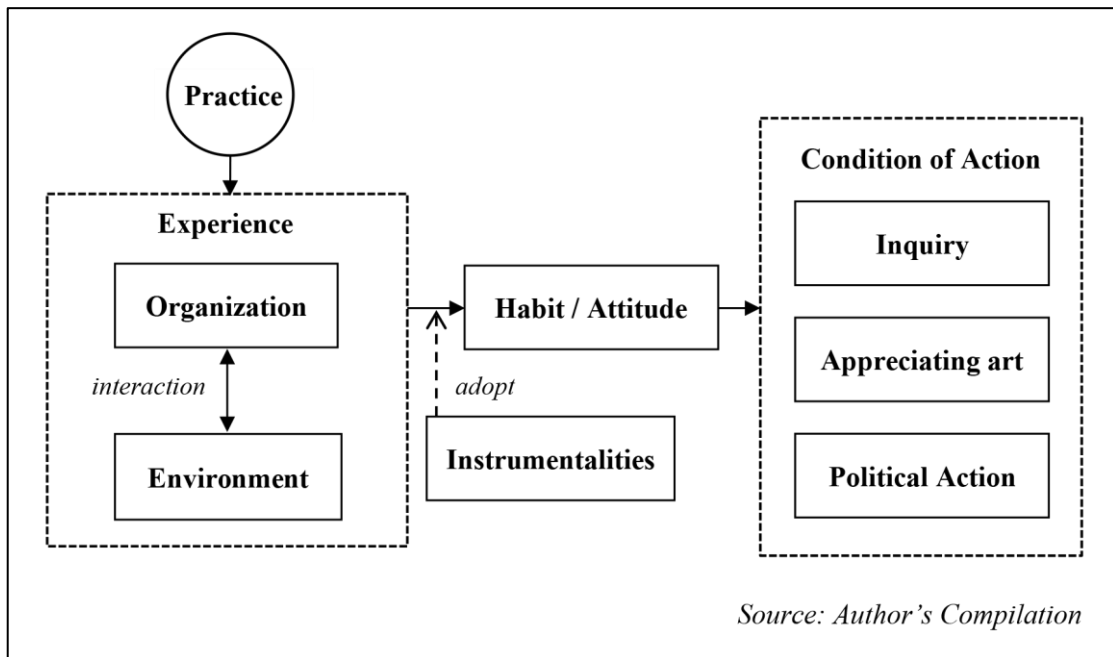
The first sense of pragmatism, known as Generic Pragmatism, refers to a common-sense approach in everyday contexts. (Ralston, 2013) It is characterized by a

“can-do attitude” that is not bound by past practices or rules (Eldridge, 2009, p. 12). Posner (2003), a proponent of this sense of pragmatism, views it as an unreflective practice and an outlook rather than a specific doctrine. In this sense, pragmatic leaders rely on common sense to solve problems without being tied to a particular ideology. Cecil Crabb, a pragmatic researcher, further explored this sense of pragmatism in his work “American Diplomacy and the Pragmatic Tradition.” He outlined the characteristics of pragmatic leaders who adopt pragmatism in a generic sense. These leaders lack clear ideological goals, make decisions without strict moral or ethical principles, prioritize immediate considerations, seek maximum benefit from available opportunities, and demonstrate flexibility and adaptability based on experience. They exercise prudence, seek compromise, avoid extreme solutions, and understand the importance of navigating the possibilities within politics (Posner, 2003, pp. 50–51).

The second sense of pragmatism, which is Paleo-Pragmatism or classical pragmatism, contrasts with the generic or everyday sense and is more sophisticated. This version of pragmatism was initiated by the earliest American philosophers or pragmatists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century such as John Dewey, and was intended to provide a way of thinking about knowledge, existence and social-political affairs (Ralston, 2013, p. 11). Paleo-Pragmatism emphasises the importance of human experiences and considers them to be essential in their theory of action. Unlike Generic Pragmatism, which emphasises practical results, Paleo-Pragmatism is more philosophical and has developed a unique model of thinking that goes beyond everyday pragmatism.

By placing immense importance on experience, classical pragmatists commit themselves to defining it. According to Ralston, John Dewey defined experience as a series of active interactions between an organism and its environment, involving human adjustment, adaptation, and growth. This means that humans react to their interactions (experiences) through the use of various instrumentalities such as tools, methods or approaches (knowledge) (Ralston, 2013). The reaction involves manipulating three conditions: inquiring into the problem, appreciating art, or engaging in political activity. Humans can transform their attitudes and habits of manipulation based on their interactions. Therefore, in the view of classical pragmatists, humans act in distinctive ways, and their habits can be modified to suit changes in particular environments or purposes (Eldridge, 2009, p. 14). To better illustrate this theory of action, Figure 1 shows a causal pathway.

Figure 1: Causal Pathway of Paleo-Pragmatism



Paleo-Pragmatism, with its concrete philosophical structure, has gained popularity among scholars who study pragmatism. This sense has also inspired some contemporary philosophers such as Richard Rorty to develop a new version of pragmatism known as Neo-Pragmatism. This third sense of pragmatism shares Paleo-Pragmatism's emphasis on experience while adopting Dewey's view on the scientific method as one of the significant drivers in the inquiry process (Ralston, 2013, p. 12). However, to distinguish Neo-Pragmatism from Classical or Paleo-Pragmatism, it concentrates on language instead of experience, which Rorty claimed as the pragmatism after the "linguistic turn" (Dickstein, 1998, p. 11). For neo-pragmatists, the language is contingent on use, and meaning is produced through familiar linguistic practices. Therefore, they are more concerned with developing the communicative and deliberative capabilities of society (Yousefzadeh, 2014). Although Neo-Pragmatism appears to be a revival of classical pragmatism, its interpretation has been controversial. Its complete scepticism about any statement claiming to be accurate has made it less popular among IR pragmatists (Vodonick, 2017, p. 5).

Hence, pragmatic liberals, in combination with liberal ideas, often adopt Dewey's Paleo-Pragmatism due to its focus on knowledge, action, and experiences. According to Deweyan pragmatists, knowledge is not separate from action and is based on experiential learning (Vodonick, 2017, p. 11). They prioritize practical solutions backed by facts, evidence, and rational choices. In contrast, liberal idealism emphasizes democratic peace, promoting democracy, individual liberty, and institutional effects. However, Dewey himself rejected the notion of forcefully converting illiberal states into liberal ones and proposed a "reconstruction" of liberalism through "soft power" diplomacy, negotiation, and education (Ralston, 2011, p. 88). This pragmatic turn in liberal idealism gave rise to pragmatic liberalism, characterized by promoting liberal ideas, diplomatic conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, alliance and multilateral agreements, national interest promotion, and strengthening domestic security through economic welfare (Khan, 2014, p. 2).

These features were effectively reflected in Obama's foreign policy, particularly in his concept of "Principled Diplomacy" mentioned during the State of the Union address on January 28, 2014. Hence, pragmatic liberalism seems to be another perspective worth considering in the discussion of US foreign policy. Considering the unique context of Myanmar's transition that began in 2010, as well as the active role played by the US in facilitating that transition, it is valuable to explore Obama's foreign policy specifically within the context of Myanmar. This exploration can provide insights into how pragmatic liberalism influenced the US's approach in that particular region. In light of this context, two research questions arise: How does pragmatic liberalism manifest in Obama's Myanmar policy, and what objectives does Obama aim to achieve following the US's change in its Myanmar policy?

OBAMA'S PRAGMATIC SHIFTS IN MYANMAR POLICY

In 2008, after years of maintaining a deteriorated relationship with the US, the Myanmar junta was surprised by a series of attempts to rebuild communication with Washington through the establishment of the US-Myanmar diplomatic dialogue (Maung Than, 2009, p. 216). Another attempt to improve relations with the US occurred on November 8 when the junta's Chairman, Than Shwe, sent a congratulatory message to Barack Obama on the occasion of his presidential election. However, the ruling entity of the junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), acknowledged that this gesture alone would not be sufficient for the US to reconsider its aggressive policy. As a surprising move on February 19, the SPDC announced the release of 6,313 prisoners, including at least 19 political prisoners from the National League for Democracy (NLD), allowing them to participate in the upcoming general election in 2010. It was a move for the SPDC to unclench their fist.^d

This led to a call for a review of the Myanmar policy on February 18, and Secretary Clinton agreed to send a delegation led by senior diplomat Stephen Blake to visit Myanmar in March to test the seriousness of the junta to reengage with Washington (Clymer, 2015, p. 299). The delegation arrived in Naypyidaw on March 22 and met with Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win on March 24. The meeting did not immediately deliver significant results for US-Myanmar relations, but it can be viewed as the beginning of the US-Myanmar re-engagement. Hence, the junta viewed the meeting positively, calling it "cordial discussions on issues of mutual interests and promotion of bilateral relations", and there was speculation that the US was preparing to change its Myanmar policy ("Foreign Affairs Minister Meets Director of Mainland Southeast Asian Affairs of the United States," 2009).

In a leaked cable to the Department of State dated August 18, Webb, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, revealed that Aung San Suu Kyi expressed a desire to initiate dialogue with the regime and consider lifting sanctions that could harm Myanmar's economy ("Burma: Senator Webb's Meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi," 2009). Additionally, Secretary Clinton's concern about military ties between Myanmar and North Korea raised alarm in the administration (Mohammed & Raybould, 2009). This, coupled with the suspicion of

^d In the presidential inaugural speech of Barack Obama delivered on January 20, President Obama stressed the American will "extend a hand if you (those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent) are willing to unclench your fist", which provides Burmese junta an opportunity to rebuild the relationship with the US government.

Myanmar's nuclear arms build-up, prompted the Obama administration to adopt a moderate approach and initiate an official policy shift on September 28, aiming to promote accessibility and openness in Myanmar.

2010 Elections and the Myanmar's Political Reform

On January 4, 2010, Than Shwe announced Myanmar's military government's plan to hold an election in 2010. However, the enactment of election laws and the formation of the Union Election Commission (UEC) received criticism for excluding opposition leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi (Martin, 2010, p. 9). The Obama administration expressed disappointment initially but softened its stance after Thein Sein and his cabinet resigned from their military positions and formed the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to participate in the election (Clymer, 2015; "Daily Press Briefing," 2010).

The UEC announced the elections for November 7, and there was a reshuffling of military leadership with Than Shwe and Gen Maung Aye resigning ("Junta Chiefs Resign in Military Reshuffle," 2010). The election faced controversies, and the USDP, backed by the junta, won 875 out of 1,112 seats in various Hluttaw bodies. Despite a moderate share of the popular vote, they formed a stable government by combining elected members with reserved parliamentary seats for the *Tatmadaw*.

Although the Obama administration expressed disappointment with the election, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi on November 13 shifted the administration's focus away from the election controversies. Additionally, the installation of a civilian administration on March 30 resulted in the immediate dissolution of the SPDC and the retirement of Than Shwe. These political developments in Myanmar presented several opportunities for further dialogue. Thus, the Obama administration appointed Derek Mitchell, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs at the Department of Defence as a Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Myanmar on April 15 with the rank of ambassador to reinvigorate the US policy towards Myanmar ("US Appoints Burma Special Envoy Derek Mitchell," 2011).

At the moment that the US adjusted its policy, the events that occurred in the Middle East had attracted the attention of the Thein Sein government. The regional protests for changes that swept at least ten Arab countries since December created some fears among Myanmar leaders, and they pledged to ensure that the kind of unrest that happened in the Arab would not occur in Myanmar (Wilson, 2014, p. 188). Although the coverage of 'The Arab Spring' appeared to be censored in Myanmar media, pro-democracy communities in Myanmar still found the protests inspiring. They might have noticed that denying the widespread belief would be a high-risk strategy, and the Arab Spring became a reinforcing factor in pushing Naypyidaw to speed up its democratisation progress (Wilson, 2014, p. 187). The regime may anticipate that voluntarily relinquishing power would ensure their survival, as they might foresee that they would be unable to survive if the pro-democracy communities were to stage a large-scale armed protest resembling the Arab Spring.

Despite the occurrence of the Arab Spring, Thein Sein was also eager to host the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2014 – a rotation that Myanmar had missed in 2006 – as his government believed that the acceptance of Myanmar's bid by ASEAN would give them legitimacy. This led Thein Sein to officially propose the bid for the 2014 chairmanship during the 18th ASEAN Summit held in Jakarta on May 7. However, ASEAN failed to resolve the differences between the opinion of the member states on whether to accept Myanmar's bid and thus the issue was left unresolved for future discussion (Belford, 2011, p. A7). At the same time, the US reaffirmed the administration's position that it would reject Myanmar in taking any leadership roles in ASEAN unless Myanmar improved its poor human rights records and achieved genuine democracy ("Daily Press Briefing," 2011). These events and responses appeared to be another breaking point for Thein Sein in his efforts to remove Myanmar's previous pariah status. It would lead Thein Sein to adopt a more open-minded and conciliatory approach in his upcoming domestic policy, such as its first amnesty program on May 16 which involved the release of 14,600 prisoners (Wai, 2011a).

On August 17, Thein Sein made a speech inviting exiles who had left Myanmar for political reasons after 1988 to return. He announced that the government would become more lenient in considering their past offences and review policies to allow exiles who had not been involved in killing to serve Myanmar. Meanwhile, the government stopped publishing propaganda and xenophobic messages in state-run newspapers, which had been printed on the front or back pages for decades. Although some exiles remained sceptical due to the fact that not all political prisoners had been released, many saw this as a possible break from the past that could lead to political and economic reform (Ba, 2011).

The positive political development in Myanmar continued as Thein Sein held a constructive meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi on August 19, showcasing his commitment to Myanmar's democratic transition (Wai, 2011b). However, international concerns about human rights in Myanmar persisted. In response to international pressure, Naypyidaw established the National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) on September 5, addressing some of these concerns (Kipgen, 2016, p. 81).

The surprising political developments in Myanmar excited the Obama administration, leading to positive changes in their perception of the government. The release of prisoners of conscience and amendments to the Political Party Registration Law were seen as gestures of accommodation towards the NLD and an opportunity for democratic transition (Maung Than, 2013). Recognizing the potential, Posner and Mitchell engaged in productive dialogues during their visit to Myanmar in November, emphasizing the importance of regular contact with Naypyidaw ("Roundtable in Burma: Remarks of Michael Posner and Derek Mitchell," 2011). This positive engagement, along with internal progress, influenced ASEAN's decision to grant Myanmar the 2014 chairmanship. It also led President Obama to announce Secretary Clinton's upcoming visit in December, and the NLD's decision to re-register as a legal party further marked a significant turning point in US-Myanmar relations.

US's Policy Change in Response to Myanmar Reform

In late November, Secretary Clinton made a historic visit to Myanmar, recognizing the country's nascent political and economic opening. While acknowledging Myanmar's efforts towards democratic reform, the US administration remained cautious and emphasized the importance of sustainable reforms and the release of all prisoners of conscience. As a sign of goodwill, the US announced a US\$1.2 million aid package and relaxed certain restrictions, allowing assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (Background Briefing on Secretary Clinton's Meetings in Burma," 2011; Poling, 2011). The bilateral relationship further improved when President Thein Sein granted amnesty to 651 prisoners, including 302 political prisoners detained during the 1988 Uprising and Saffron Revolution (Martin, 2013a, p. 7). President Obama praised this step and directed an amendment to sections 110(d)(4) and 110(f) of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act about Myanmar. This amendment will enable the US to provide assistance to Myanmar. US Congress members, including Representative Joseph Crowley and Senators Mitch McConnell and John McCain, also visited Myanmar with cautious optimism, acknowledging the progress made under Thein Sein's leadership (Rogin, 2012).

On April 1, Myanmar held its by-election without any major untoward incidents. The election was observed by international observers and brought the first electoral victory for the NLD since 1990, with a startling result that swept 43 out of 45 available seats, including one seat for Aung San Suu Kyi. To safeguard this historic opening while encouraging the reformers in Naypyidaw, the US announced an immediate reward to Myanmar on April 4. On this day, the Department of State outlined five steps to support democracy. Firstly, the US would nominate an ambassador to Yangon. Secondly, the US would establish a USAID mission in Myanmar and support a regular country program for the UNDP. Thirdly, the US would relax restrictions on US NGOs to pursue their effort in supporting democracy building, health and education in Myanmar. Fourth, the US would facilitate US travel for pro-reform officials. Finally, the US would initiate a targeted easing of the ban on exporting US financial services and investment to Myanmar ("Clinton's Remark: Recognizing and Supporting Burma's Democratic Reforms," 2012; Cole et al., 2017). This marked a significant momentum in the development of the US's Myanmar policy as the normalisation of these two countries officially began.

Encouraged by Washington's 'action for action' policy, Naypyidaw made continuous efforts to improve its relationship with the US. Thein Sein promised to end the arms deal with North Korea during a meeting with South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak on May 15 in Naypyidaw. On May 17, Clinton officially announced the nomination of Mitchell as the US Ambassador to Myanmar. This appointment marked the first ambassadorship since President Bill Clinton downgraded the US-Myanmar diplomatic relations in 1994 (see Table 1). At the same time, Myanmar's Foreign Minister, Wunna Maung Lwin, nominated U Than Shwe as Ambassador to Washington. As a reward for Naypyidaw's fifth amnesty on July 3, the US formally declared a targeted easing of sanctions on Myanmar on July 11, allowing US companies to invest in Myanmar on a small scale (Lowrey, 2012, p. A8). This was also the day Mitchell arrived at his posting. On September 26, the White House announced another suspension of the US import bans on Myanmar's goods and services after Myanmar's sixth amnesty. On November 16, a day before his historic visit to Myanmar, Obama

issued a determination waiving the import bans on specific Myanmar products under BFDA 2003 (Martin, 2013b, p. 23).

Table 1: List of US Ambassadors and Chargé d'Affaires To Myanmar

Ambassadors	Chargé d'Affaires
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. J. Klahr Huddle (1947-1949) 2. David McKendree Key (1950-1951) 3. William Sebald (1952-1954) 4. Joseph Satterthwaite (1955-1957) 5. Walter McConaughy (1957-1959) 6. William P. Snow (1959-1961) 7. John Scott Everton (1961-1963) 8. Henry A. Byroade (1963-1968) 9. Arthur W. Hummel (1968-1971) 10. Edwin W. Martin (1971-1973) 11. David L. Osborn (1974-1977) 12. Maurice Darrow Bean (1977-1979) 13. Patricia Byrne (1979-1983) 14. Daniel A. O'Donohue (1983-1986) 15. Burton Levin (1987-1990) 16. Vacant (1991-1993) 17. <i>Relations downgraded</i> (1994-2011) 18. Derek Mitchell (2012-2016) 19. Scot Marciel (2016-2020) 20. Thomas L. Vajda (2020-2023) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Franklin P. Huddle (1990-1994) 2. Marilyn Meyers (1994-1996) 3. Kent Wiedemann (1996-1999) 4. Priscilla A. Clapp (1999-2002) 5. Carmen Maria Martinez (2002-2005) 6. Shari Villarosa (2005-2008) 7. Larry M. Dinger (2008-2011) 8. Michael Thurston (2011-2012)
	Uncompleted appointments
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Frederick Vreeland (1990) 2. Parker W. Borg (1990) 3. Michael Green (2008)

On May 19, 2013, Thein Sein made history as the first Myanmar president in 47 years to visit Washington, a pivotal moment for the country. Prior to the visit, Myanmar had released 116 prisoners, including 78 political prisoners, through two amnesties in April and May. Additionally, on May 2, the US ended Presidential Proclamation 6925, allowing Myanmar decision-makers to enter the US for the first time since 1996. Obama’s address during the visit was notable as he referred to the country as “Myanmar” instead of “Burma”, deviating from the previous US practice. This shift demonstrated recognition of the government’s reform efforts and tacitly acknowledged the regime’s legitimacy (Clymer, 2015, p. 317; Jung & Bassuener, 2013).

During his visit to Washington, Thein Sein was rewarded by the US Congress when Senator McConnell announced a bipartisan move to allow the BFDA 2003 to lapse for one year by not renewing it when it expired on July 28. This move led to the repeal of provisions of EO 13310 on August 14, which had implemented a broad import ban on products in Myanmar since 2003. Additionally, a bilateral Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) was signed between Washington and Naypyidaw on May 21 to formalise trade talks, including identifying initiatives supporting ongoing reform in Myanmar. Some senior officials in the Obama administration referred to the

May meeting as a “check-in” meeting between the US and Myanmar, and called it the beginning of an “initial euphoria” and “honeymoon period” (Gearan, 2013).

Due to positive developments in Myanmar's politics, the country successfully assumed its ASEAN chairmanship in 2014. Despite these advancements, the human rights situation in Myanmar did not see improvement. The political reform in Naypyidaw faced a significant slowdown, characterised by the detention and imprisonment of journalists, ongoing tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities, escalating abuses against the Rohingya population, and unresolved ethnic conflicts within the country (Roth, 2015). The setback of political reform raised suspicions that the upcoming general election, which had already been scheduled for the end of 2015, would not be free and fair. However, Obama remained committed to making Myanmar a model for democratic change (Gowen & Nakamura, 2014). In fact, during his commencement address at West Point's US Military Academy on May 28, Obama singled out Myanmar as a success of the US's foreign policy, emphasizing the importance of “American leadership” in Myanmar's political reforms (“Transcript of President Obama's Commencement Address at West Point,” 2014).

To ensure the progress of democratisation and to maintain pressure on Myanmar, several US senior diplomats, including Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration Anne Richard, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Frank Rose, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Catherine Russell, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel, began to visit Myanmar frequently from January to August in 2015. However, after Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) achieved a landslide victory in the parliamentary election held on November 8, the US government shifted its mission from pressuring the Thein Sein government to support Myanmar (Cole et al., 2017, p. 22). In this election, the NLD secured 887 of the 1150 contested seats in the parliament, securing 77 percent of the total seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw, Amyotha Hluttaw, and Region or State Hluttaw. The USDP, which was backed by the military, gained only 117 seats or 10 percent. The NLD had enough seats to select their president and establish an NLD-led government, even though the military was guaranteed 25 percent of the overall seats in the parliament. The Obama administration was relieved with the landmark election and claimed that it had the potential to be an important step towards greater peace, prosperity and democracy for Myanmar (“Burma's Parliamentary Election, 2015).

On March 7, 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi's attempt to negotiate with military leaders to become president failed, and the NLD-led Hluttaw nominated Htin Kyaw, who was a close aide of Aung San Suu Kyi, as the President on March 10 in the Pyithu Hluttaw. The parliament approved his nomination on March 15. When forming his cabinet, Htin Kyaw appointed Aung San Suu Kyi to hold four ministries. On March 30, Suu Kyi was sworn in as the Minister of the presidential office, foreign affairs, education and energy (Wai & Ramzy, 2016, p. A6). Meanwhile, the NLD also submitted a bill in the Amyotha Hluttaw on April 1 to create a new post, namely “state counsellor” for Aung San Suu Kyi to act above the president. The Pyithu Hluttaw approved the bill on April 5.

The US's Myanmar policy changed significantly after Aung San Suu Kyi visited the US for the very first time in her new capacity as Myanmar's *de facto* leader on September 13. Although the future of Myanmar's political reforms remained uncertain, the administration pledged to lift remaining sanctions and restore preferential tariffs for Myanmar under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) scheme during its meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi (Barron, 2016). Encountering severe criticism and scepticism from human rights groups for moving too quickly, Obama admitted that the reform was not complete but was on the right track, and the ease of sanctions at this juncture was the right thing to do to reward the people of Myanmar (Davis, 2016, p. A12). Obama's pledge to revoke the sanctions was fulfilled by the release of EO 13472 on October 7, which involved five executive orders numbered 13047, 13310, 13448, 13464, 13619 and 13651 (see Table 2). The effort to reinstate the benefits of Myanmar in GSP was implemented in November (McCarthy, 2017, p. 149). Moreover, Obama also issued Presidential Determination 2017-04 on December 2, which ended restrictions on US assistance to Myanmar as provided by Section 570(a) of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 1997, which was a month before Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th American president ("U.S. Restrictions on Relations with Burma," 2020, p. 4).

Table 2: List of Sanction Regime in Myanmar, 1988-2016

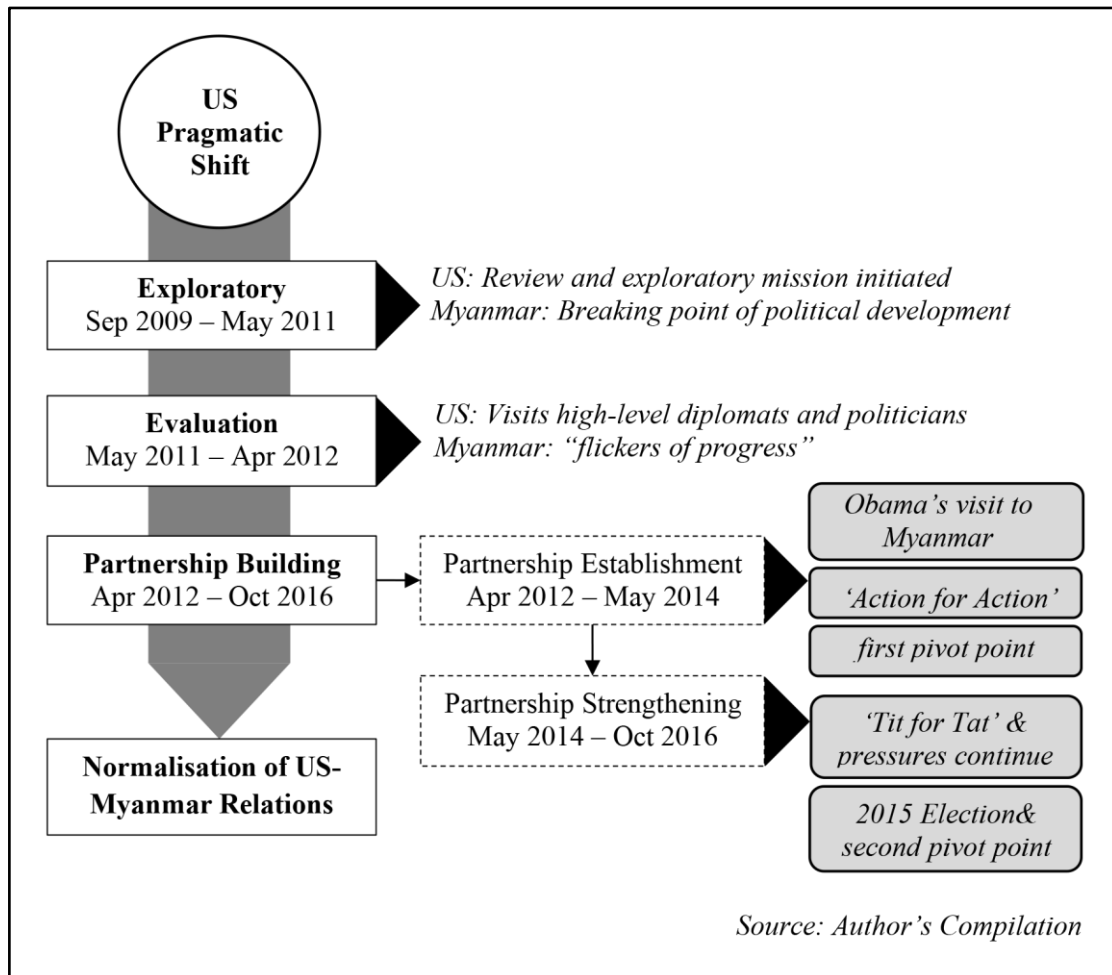
No.	Date Issued	Date Revoked	Sanction Regime
Executive Orders			
13047	20/05/1997	07/10/2016	Bans all new investments.
13310	28/07/2003	07/10/2016	Freezing of assets of certain Myanmar officials and prohibition of the provision of financial services to Myanmar.
13448	18/10/2007	07/10/2016	Expands the list of Myanmar officials and entities subject to the freezing of assets.
13464	30/04/2008	07/10/2016	Expands the list of Myanmar officials and entities subject to the freezing of assets.
13619	11/07/2012	07/10/2016	Expands the list of Myanmar nationals subject to visa bans, the freezing of assets, and other targeted sanctions.
13651	07/08/2013	07/10/2016	Ban on the import of jadeite and rubies from Myanmar
13742	07/10/2016	-	Revoked E.O.13047, 13310, 13448, 13619, and 13651.
Presidential Proclamation			
5955	13/04/1989	14/09/2016	Suspend Myanmar as a beneficiary of the US Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)

6925	03/10/1996	-	Denying entry into the US to persons who formulate, implement, or benefit from policies that impede Myanmar's transition to democracy
8294	26/09/2008	-	Modification of procedures on BFDA
9492	14/09/2016	-	Restored Myanmar's trade benefits under the GSP
Presidential Determination			
2009-11	15/01/2009	-	Limited waiver of some of the sanctions in Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE Act
2017-04	02/12/2016	-	Ending restrictions on US assistance to Myanmar and certified to Congress that "Myanmar has made measurable and substantial progress in improving human rights practices and implementing democratic government."

OBAMA'S MYANMAR POLICY: PRAGMATIC LIBERALISM AT PLAY

The effort of President Obama to waive most virtual sanctions before leaving office ushered in a new era for the US-Myanmar relations. It was noted that President Obama took two terms of his presidency to achieve the objective of the US-Myanmar rapprochement. The previous discussion in this thesis revealed that the US's Myanmar policy from 2009 to 2016 evolved in three phases after the pragmatic shift in 2009: exploratory, evaluation and partnership building as illustrated in Figure 2 in the study.

Figure 2: The Three Phases of US’s Myanmar Policy Evolvement under Obama Presidency



The first phase began in September 2009 as part of the US policy review on Myanmar. This ‘exploratory’ stage involved exploring new approaches to replace existing sanctions and establishing effective communication channels with Myanmar policymakers. The Obama administration’s policy of “pragmatic engagement” signalled a change from its predecessor by initiating direct talks with Naypyidaw and facilitating discussions with Aung San Suu Kyi. This approach allowed the administration to assess the regime’s willingness to engage with the US. In March 2009, a US delegation led by senior diplomat Stephen Blake visited Myanmar, marking the first contact since the Depayin Massacre. While the initial meeting with Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win did not yield significant results, the administration aimed to maintain dialogue by continuing to appoint diplomats. Senator Jim Webb and Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell played key roles in establishing a direct communication channel between the two countries (Song, 2010, pp. 32–33).

On the SPDC’s side, Nyan Win and Liaison Minister Aung Kyi were significant figures in maintaining connections with these diplomats from the Department of State. However, the progress of engagement at this phase was still slow and minimal, and there were two reasons. First, the extension of Aung San Suu Kyi’s house detention during the Yettaw trial in August 2009 provoked the Congress to renew all existing sanctions. The SPDC’s failure to conduct a free and fair election in November 2010

also disappointed the administration. Despite the United States' keenness to adjust its strategy due to Myanmar's strategic importance in rebalancing its regional interests in the Asia Pacific, aimed at mitigating Chinese influence in the region, the junta did not demonstrate any concrete moves or sincerity to engage with Washington (Boswell, 2016, p. 15). Secondly, the administration encountered intense criticism from the Congress when reviewing Myanmar policy due to the SPDC's human rights records. The White House had to remain cautious in handling the re-engagement effort to avoid any further provocation to the potentially hostile Congress. In a nutshell, there was no reason for the administration to execute any substantial changes instead of maintaining the re-engagement effort at the exploratory level.

The situation changed after the dissolution of the SPDC and the installation of the USDP's civilian government. In response to the US's exploratory effort, the USDP's new leader, Thein Sein, began to show his keen interest in re-opening the dialogue between Washington and Naypyidaw. The study highlighted two breaking points for the Thein Sein government to regain their interest in improving US-Myanmar relations. The first was the Arab Spring that swept authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, and the second was the urgency to gain the USDP's regime legitimacy through the bid to host ASEAN Chairmanship in 2014. These breaking points led to the second phase of the US-Myanmar rapprochement, which this study framed from May 2011 to April 2012.

In contrast to the exploratory phase, the military leaders attempted to show their sincerity by delivering some liberal policies during this period. These included releasing thousands of prisoners through several amnesty programs, inviting minority armed groups for peace talks, establishing a human rights commission, and re-opening dialogues with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi. By referring to these political developments in Myanmar as "flickers of progress", the Obama administration began to formalise dialogues with Myanmar by appointing Derek Mitchell as the special representative and policy coordinator to Myanmar with the rank of an ambassador. The US began to evaluate the political reform in Myanmar while senior diplomats frequently travelled to Yangon and Naypyidaw, including the remarkable visit of Secretary Clinton in November 2011. The result of the visits was exact and led to some rewards, including the renewal of diplomatic ties with Naypyidaw by exchanging ambassadors and some relief from certain restrictions on Myanmar. This development also attracted some of the fiercest critics of the Thein Sein government in the Congress to visit Myanmar in the first two months of 2012. The Congress surprisingly began to soften its tone towards Obama's policy after these prominent lawmakers visited Myanmar.

After Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD's victory in the April by-election, US-Myanmar relations continued to improve. The result of the by-election prompted the US administration to adopt 'action for action' and 'five steps to support and foster reform in Myanmar' as new approaches to Myanmar policy. This marked the start of the third phase of the US-Myanmar rapprochement, which was focused on building a partnership between the two nations. The US identified the 2012 and 2015 elections as pivot points for rebuilding its strategic partnership with Myanmar based on the breaking points that appeared in the second phase. As discussed in the previous section, the US developed its strategic partnership with Myanmar in two stages: partnership establishment and partnership strengthening. During the establishment stage, the US

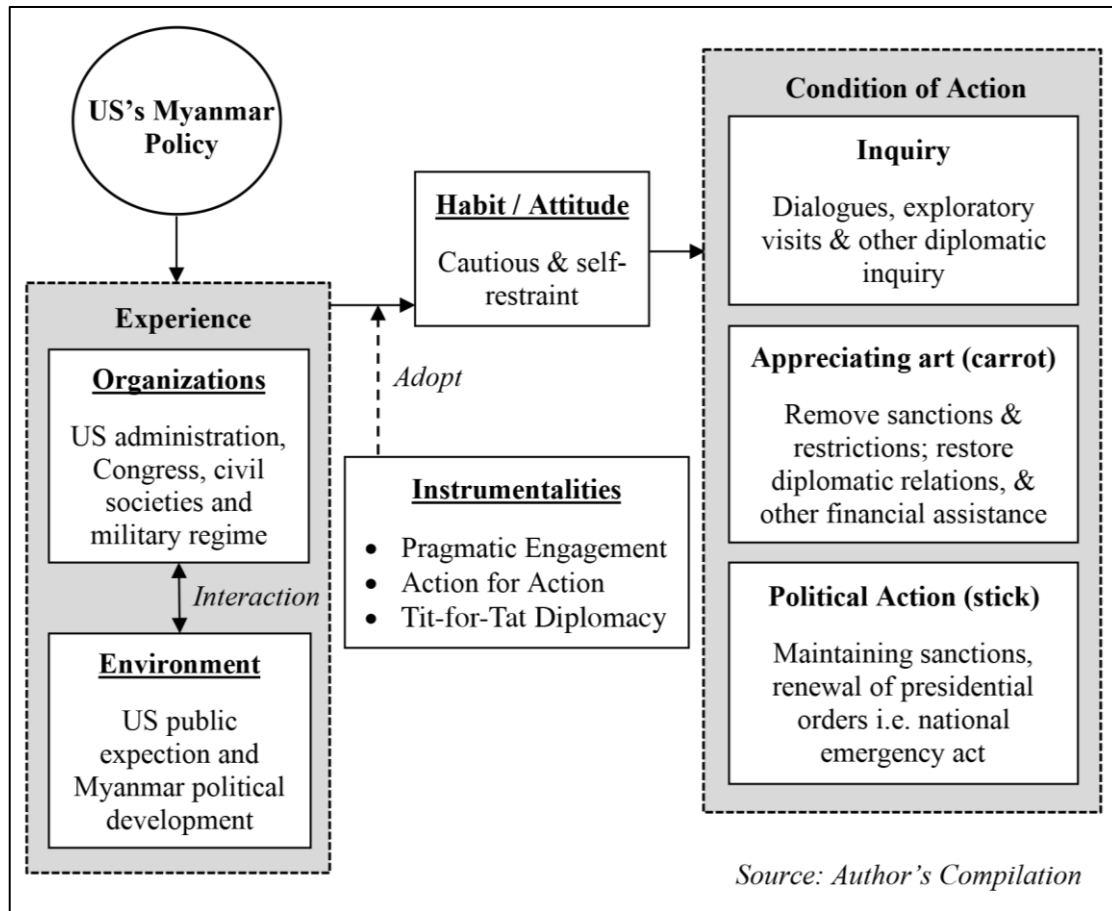
engaged with Myanmar through the “targeted easing” of sanctions. The first visit of President Obama to Myanmar and his use of the name “Myanmar” instead of “Burma” were significant events during this stage.

However, due to the slowdown in Thein Sein’s reform efforts in 2014, the US was not yet ready to fully normalise relations with Myanmar. This led to the deployment of ‘tit-for-tat’ diplomacy to strengthen the US-Myanmar strategic partnership based on universal values and interests (Cole et al., 2017, p. 31). During the partnership strengthening stage, the Obama administration followed the strategy of “rewarding cooperation with more cooperation and punishing defection with defection” (Kipgen, 2013, pp. 104–105). This was done by increasing pressure on the Thein Sein government in 2014, with the extension of some sanctions and the renewal of the National Emergency Act on Myanmar being the most significant practices in the ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy. The strategy continued after the 2015 election. As a reward for the smooth transition of power from Thein Sein to Aung San Suu Kyi, the administration lifted all remaining sanctions on Myanmar. This was a significant milestone in the normalisation of US-Myanmar relations.

Obama’s Pragmatic Shift and the US’s Condition of Action

The development of the US policy towards Myanmar from 2009 to 2016 could be seen as an implementation of a pragmatic liberalist approach. This approach is based on the theory of action of paleo-pragmatism, which suggests that policymakers make decisions based on facts, evidence, and structured, rational choices developed from their experiences. This approach involves developing attitudes of caution, self-restraint and a preference for practical solutions (Quinn, 2011, pp. 814–815). This theory of action explained the practicality and flexibility of Obama’s Myanmar policy. Figure 3 shows how the administration shaped and adjusted its policy based on the US’s public opinion and Myanmar’s political development (environment) since 2009 through the establishment of numerous dialogues, visits and consultations between Washington (the executive, legislative branch and civil societies) and Naypyidaw (military regime and oppositions) to pursue the goal of restoring Myanmar’s democracy. This approach was particularly evident during the exploratory and evaluation stage (as shown in Figure 3), when the administration attempted to establish and maintain contact with the military junta through negotiations from 2009 to 2011.

Figure: 3: The Pragmatic Theory of Action and the US's Myanmar Policy-Making Process



Within the time frame concerned in this study, the US administration was able to reconnect with opposition figures in Myanmar, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and engage in direct discussions with Naypyidaw regarding Washington's concerns about Myanmar's political development (interaction). Simultaneously, the previously hostile and conservative Congress also appeared to soften its stance towards Myanmar, with prominent conservatives in both the House and Senate, including Representative Joseph Crowley, Senator Mitch McConnell, John McCain, Joe Lieberman, Kelly Ayotte and Sheldon Whitehouse toning down their criticism against Myanmar after visiting Yangon in January 2012.

The re-establishment of connections between the US and Myanmar provided an opportunity to test a new approach that could access the public expectations generated by civil societies in Washington and opposition groups in Yangon (Derek Mitchell, January 15, 2021). These interactions between organisations and the environment constituted pragmatic experiences that were essential for policymakers to design approaches and instrumentalities to establish habits and conditions of action. It was this flexibility that explained Obama's Myanmar policy, which adopted a series of approaches and strategies based on the results of interactions to tackle post-2009 US-Myanmar relations. For instance, the administration adopted pragmatic engagement after the military regime demonstrated an interest in repairing relations with the US in January 2009, while outlining 'action for action' in April 2012 after Aung San Suu Kyi won a parliamentary seat in the by-election. This progress generated a cautious and self-

restraint policymaking process, leading the administration to consider three types of responses: inquiry (continuation of talks, negotiation, and reconciliation processes), appreciation (sanction relaxation, exchange of ambassadors, and financial assistance) or political action (maintaining and renewing bans or sanctions).

Obama's Myanmar policy and its Theoretical Implication

The cautious and pragmatic progress made during 2009-2016 enabled the US administration to develop a dynamic, stable and responsive Myanmar policy, which facilitated re-engagement with Naypyidaw by both the administration and Congress. Nevertheless, this progress raised questions regarding the rationale behind the US reengagement with Myanmar. It was evident that both the White House and Capitol Hill were predominantly inclined towards an anti-junta sentiment since the late 1990s as no one wanted to appear supportive of the Myanmar military (Larry Dohrs, December 24, 2020). Although it was not unprecedented for the US to initiate engagement with Myanmar, as the Bush administration attempted to establish communication with the SPDC in the early 2000s (but was unsuccessful due to pressure from Congress), the signals from Congress to review its hostile stances towards Myanmar were not present in the past" (Gwen Robison, April 3, 2021).

In the Myanmar policymaking process depicted in Figure 3, the Obama administration demonstrated a complex yet adaptable approach in its re-engagement efforts. This suggests that any significant shift in US policy towards Myanmar cannot be attributed to a single simplistic factor (Jurgen Haccke, December 18, 2020). Based on this context, the study aimed to explore various dimensions of the US's responses by comparing them to Shane Ralston's proposal of six critical features of pragmatic liberalism. The dimensions enabled the study to identify the primary driver for Obama's pragmatic shift in policy towards Myanmar.

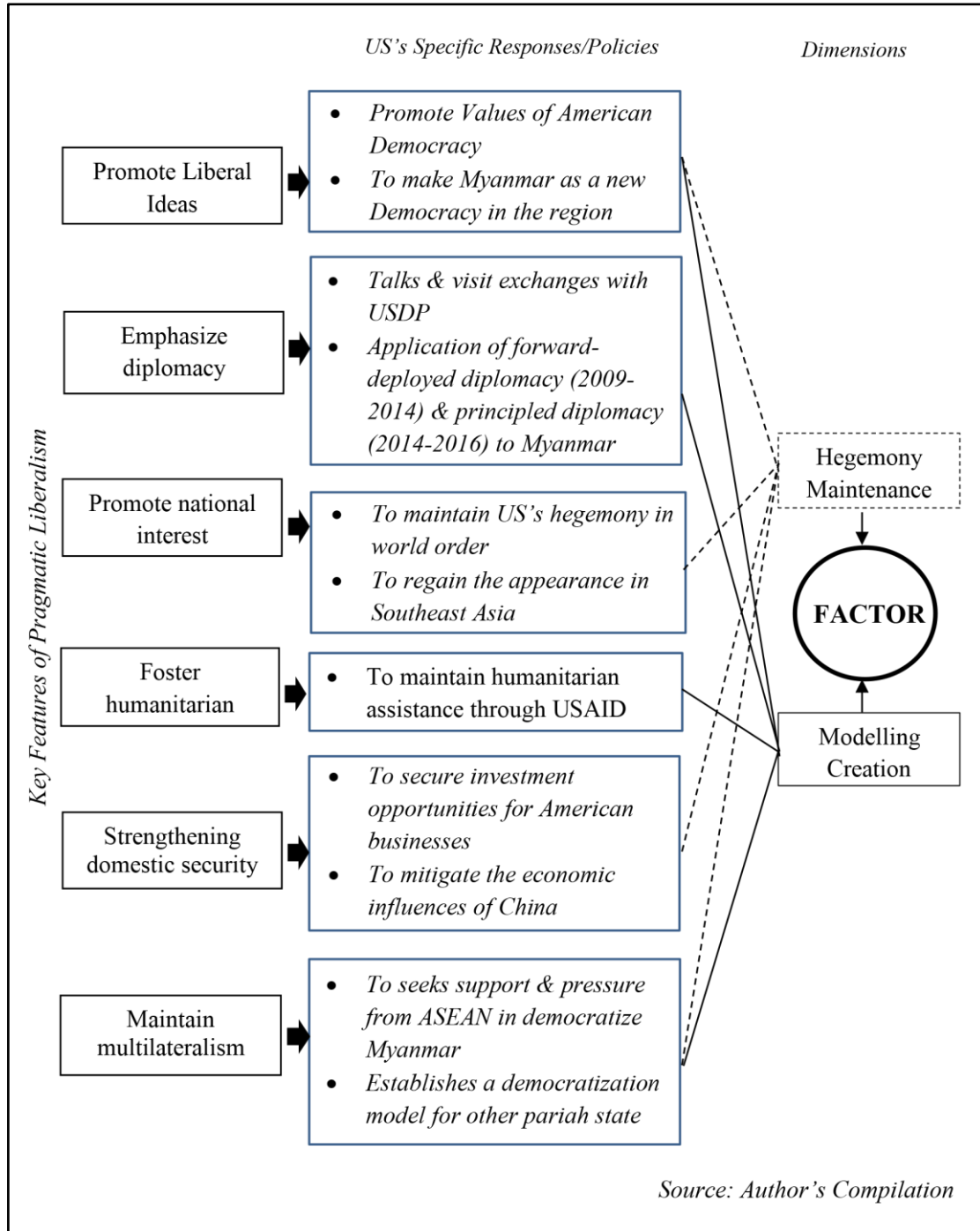
It should be noted that Ralston's proposal suggested that a pragmatic liberalist regime has six features: (1) promoting liberal ideas; (2) emphasising diplomacy in solving conflicts; (3) fostering humanitarian assistance; (4) maintaining alliances and multilateral agreements; (5) promoting the national interest; and (6) strengthening domestic security through economic welfare (Ralston, 2011, p. 88). These features, which are illustrated in Figure 4, included a series of actions and outcomes in Obama's pragmatic shift with two dimensions: hegemony maintenance and modelling creation.

Concerning hegemony maintenance, which was discussed earlier in Figure 4, Obama's Myanmar policy was shaped through the administration's experience gained from the interaction between Myanmar's political development and the stakeholders in the US's democratic institution. As discussed earlier in this article, the SPDC/USDP government was the party that initiated its interest in this engagement after Obama adopted a 'pragmatic turn' to the US's foreign policy in early 2009.

Externally, the US saw an opportunity to engage with Myanmar to facilitate its political opening while also promoting liberal values to transform the pariah regime into a responsible partner that posed no threat to the Myanmar people or regional stability. This new approach aimed to induce political and social change in Myanmar and demonstrate that American democracy was not harmful to third-world countries (Derek Mitchell, January 15; Anonymous Myanmar scholar abroad, January 14, 2021). Additionally, rumours of a possible nuclear link between Myanmar and North Korea

from 2007 to 2009 may have been a minor factor in the US's decision to promote liberal ideas to the regime. The junta's nuclear ambitions were likely driven by its desire for self-sustainability and independence from China's military influence, which pushed the isolated SPDC towards the nuclear option.

Figure 4: The Features of Pragmatic Liberalism and Two Dimensions of Obama's Policy Shift in Myanmar



Therefore, the US sought to establish direct communication with Myanmar's military leadership to address issues that could challenge regional stability and diversify Myanmar's foreign relations with the Western world (Scot Marciel, December 15,

2020). The outcome of promoting liberal values was clear: to help Myanmar cast off its economic and military dependency on China and reconnect with the US-led Western world, while also alleviating the regime's anxieties over survival. By maintaining multilateralism, the US could reinforce its values in Naypyidaw while also countering China's political and ideological influence in Myanmar.

Internally, the rise of liberal hawks (as opposed to neoconservatives in the Bush era) in Obama's cabinet lineup, including Hilary Clinton (Secretary of State, 2009-2013), Kurt Campbell (Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Affairs, 2009-2013), Michèle Flournoy (Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, 2009-2012), Philip Gordon (Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, 2009-2013), Michael McFaul (NSC's Special Assistant to the President, 2009-2012), Susan Rice (National Security Advisor, 2013-2017), and Samantha Power (US Ambassador to UN, 2013-2017), demonstrated Obama's effort to regain US dominance in Asia (Heilbrunn, 2013; "Neocons and Liberal Hawks in Biden's Team," 2021). Although some referred to Samantha Power, Michael McFaul and Anne-Marie M. Slaughter (Policy Planning Director in the Department of State) as liberal internationalists (the opponent of liberal hawks in the Democratic Party) who believed human rights and international law should be the foundation of international relations, these elites still tended to support the liberal hawk's policy of intervention and reject isolationism (Gaman-Golutvina, 2018, p. 146).

On the other hand, the mass exodus of neoconservatives from the Republicans due to the spark of the Never Trump Movement after the 2015-2016 Republican presidential primaries also resulted in some neoconservatives like the Republican think tank Max Boot endorsing the liberal hawks' agenda in maintaining the US's global dominance. Because of this, the administration was able to pursue its goal of maintaining the US's global leadership and rejecting the "widespread thesis of America's inevitable decline" (Franke & Weber, 2012, p. 670; Gaman-Golutvina, 2018). These external and internal perspectives were aimed at China, which had emerged as a regional power since the late 2000s and was responsible for the declination of US influence in Asia.

In the dimension of modelling creation, as previously discussed, the US has a tradition of promoting democracy through its foreign policy and prioritises democracy, human rights and freedom of speech as core values. In the case of US engagement in Myanmar, the US's effort to restore democracy in Myanmar was undoubtedly backed by these values. Thus, the administration viewed its efforts to democratise Naypyidaw as a strategy of sending a powerful message to "bellicose, struggling countries" about how human rights and democracy could create opportunities for them to be self-sustained and self-determined (Cole et al., 2017, p. 14). Meanwhile, in the international arena, Myanmar which accepted the US's values would also emerge as a new democracy that could serve as a model for other pariah states or leaders. This would show them that closer ties with Washington were possible and that improving relations could spur economic growth, international recognition and electoral success for bold leaders (Htet Aung Lin, January 14, 2021). Besides, the administration's pragmatic engagement with Myanmar would likely demonstrate the US's flexible and practical diplomacy to Asian countries by securing Obama's ambitions to build a close partnership with regional institutions such as ASEAN and EAS under its rebalancing strategy.

Some Myanmar scholars asserted that this dimension might not have an immediate connection with China. They pointed out that the Obama administration was also looking for ways to reassure South Korea, Japan and Taiwan of its commitment to their security (Anonymous Myanmar scholar abroad, January 17, 2021). However, it appeared that Obama's plan to create a model of democracy in Myanmar still had an indirect connection to China for two obvious reasons. Firstly, the increasing security commitment to South Korea, Japan and Taiwan was part of the Pivot to Asia Blue plan that attempted to rebalance Chinese influence in Asia. Meanwhile, Myanmar, which was the "backyard" of China, would strategically match Obama's strategies to "shape the contours of China's rise" by "supporting Asia's transitional states on their democratic journeys" (Campbell, 2016, pp. 197–200). The US viewed Beijing's Myanmar policy as a form of "neo-colonial" and sought to portray itself as a positive and respectful power in contrast (Derek Mitchell, January 15, 2021).

This suggested that Myanmar might have had limited utility in the context of Sino-US competition. Nonetheless, a closer relationship between Washington and Naypyidaw could demonstrate to China and ASEAN that Beijing's regional influence was not absolute (Francis Wade, March 29, 2021). Secondly, despite the US's strong commitment to democracy promotion, the number of democracies declined after Obama took office in 2009. At that time, there were only 76 democracies in the world (46 free and 30 partly free countries).^e However, it was noted that his predecessor, George W Bush, left the office with 78 democracies. Some regional experts also noticed that a few ASEAN countries such as Thailand and Indonesia showed a tendency to "pull away" from democracy (Anonymous Myanmar scholar abroad, January 17, 2021). Therefore, the Obama administration might have been committed to exporting liberal democracy while demonstrating that US democracy "could be benevolent" by creating a model or democratic icon that was seemingly opposed to Asia's "not free" camp under the leadership of China (Francis Wade, March 29, 2021). In this respect, approaching Myanmar with a reward that could diversify its external relations might be a good idea for Washington because the military leadership in Naypyidaw traditionally distrusted China (Fan Hongwei, January 12, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The discussion of these two dimensions highlights the complexity of the US's Myanmar policy change since 2009. Retired American diplomats who previously served in Yangon have indicated that the administration rarely discussed China with the military junta during face-to-face conversations. However, they agreed that this process might have helped the US gain a new partner to counter Chinese influence in Myanmar. This strategic consideration aligns with Obama's attempt to create a model and maintain US hegemony from a pragmatic liberalist perspective.

Although not immediately visible during Obama's presidency, it suggests that the China factor was an inseparable part of the US's objective in Myanmar after 2009. Therefore, it is undeniable that China may have been the primary factor in the

^e According to the Freedom House, the democracies referred to the "electoral democracies" that achieve above 40 at global democratic scores, and the figure cited in this study is retrieved and counted by author's effort from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.

administration's decision to adjust its Myanmar policy. The change in US policy towards Myanmar was based on two explicit reasons. Externally, the policy review aimed to create a model for promoting democracy that would counterbalance China's regional influence by presenting a benign, democratic image of the United States. This was meant to contrast with Beijing's "neo-colonial" external policy. Internally, the convergence of the agendas of both the Democrats and Republicans to rebalance Asia signalled a unified stance, both in the White House and Capitol Hill, towards competing with China in the region (Gwen Robison, April 3, 2021).

The consensus among liberal hawks and conservatives on China's influence in Myanmar and the failure of previous sanctions led to compromises and cooperation between Congress and the administration. The appointment of liberal hawks like Kurt Campbell, Derek Mitchell, and Jim Webb as negotiators facilitated the smooth implementation of the pragmatic policy shift.^f Both external and internal factors driven by Sino-US competition played a significant role in shaping the US's Myanmar policy shift after 2009, resulting in a rapid improvement in US-Myanmar relations since 2012. The absence of political obstacles from traditional opponents allowed the administration to expedite its agenda of pragmatic liberalism, reversing the sanction policy developed since Clinton's presidency in just five years.

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^f Although Jim Webb had not officially announced himself as a Left-Democrat, he was claimed to be a liberal ally for the leader of liberal internationalists in Democratic Party, Elizabeth Warren. Details see Anthony Zurcher, "US Election: How Left-Wing is the Democratic Field?" *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51470131>.

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