

# Engaging with the Issue of Myanmar: A New Perspective

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## Executive Summary

Street protests and bloody suppressions are recurrent events in the history of Myanmar. Since the 1980s, when the military government crushed the democracy movement in Myanmar, these events have become the focus of friction and conflict between Myanmar and the international community. Notwithstanding nearly two decades of international sanctions, the military rulers have managed to cling to power. The street protests that took place in Yangon and other parts of Myanmar in August-September 2007 brought anew many painful memories and rekindled the undying desire for change. Unlike many other international issues, the international community seems reasonably united on the issue of Myanmar. Pressure for change is mounting, and a solution has to be found. The question is *how*?

In the light of the encouraging outcome of the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula crisis, we believe that coordinated international efforts can help turn the situation around in Myanmar, notwithstanding that the Korean Peninsula is an international conflict whereas Myanmar is primarily a domestic issue. With that aim in mind, this paper analyzes the need for CBMs, the role of different players and their potential contribution to the process of national reconciliation, and ultimately democratization, in Myanmar. It emphasizes competence and a balanced approach. In this process, the domestic players—the incumbent government and all opposition and interest groups that have a stake in the process of national reconciliation—naturally form the inner circle. The outer ring comprises two sets of players: regional and international, including those who have both influence on the Myanmar domestic players and a stake of their own in regional stability, and the body of the ultimate representative of the international community. Other facilitators include the EU, US, and countries with special CBM profiles, all having unique and important roles to play in different circumstances and at different times.



All in all, a solution to the issue of Myanmar is pressing, since unless one can be found, there may well be serious consequences detrimental to the stability of the country and the region around it. As much as it is the problem of the Myanmar government and its people, finding a solution to the issue of Myanmar is also the responsibility of the international community.

## **1. Introduction**

A fresh wave of public protests against the government of Myanmar erupted in mid-August 2007, prompted primarily by a sudden surge in fuel prices. The grievances vented on this particular occasion set the stage for further political turmoil to come. In the month that followed, the world saw a growing number of citizens, and notably Buddhist monks, taking to the streets in Yangon and other parts of the country, demanding the government reduce commodity prices, improve people's living conditions, and seek national reconciliation. Again, like so many times in the past, protesters braved a heavy government security force presence; eventually the crowd was dispersed and protests quelled following the imposition of a curfew, arrests numbering in the thousands, and a number of confirmed dead (the official body count was given as 10, one being a Japanese reporter, and 16 other civilians injured by shots fired by the security forces). The participation of monks (in the tens of thousands) wearing colored robes earned the demonstration, this time round, the name 'Saffron Revolution.'

This event enjoyed full international media coverage from the start. Pictures of protestors, slogans written in Burmese and English, and clashes with the authorities were broadcast around the world; meanwhile, Burmese in exile raised their profile by appearing on television calling for international intervention. Amid the transmission of flashing images and enraged demands, rumor and speculation about every conceivable type of incident (arrest, massacre, split in the inner circle of government, and so on) mounted, leaving audiences at large in suspense as to what might happen next, with some feeling optimistic (anticipating changes for the better) while others were more pessimistic (fearing that the worst was yet to come). Responding to the event, the US government issued a new round of sanctions against Myanmar including a trade embargo and denial of entry visas to over 30 Myanmar government officials and their relatives, in addition to freezing the personal assets of a dozen or more government

officials (more sanctions followed two weeks later as the streets of Myanmar calmed down). China came out urging all parties to restrain from escalating the conflict, and welcomed the mission of an UN envoy, calling it “a helpful step.”

Ibrahim Gambari, special envoy of the UN Secretary-General, arrived in Myanmar on September 29 for a four-day mission, during which he had separate meetings with senior government leaders and the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The contents of these meetings were not revealed to the media, but in the event, reports surfaced that Myanmar’s top leader Than Shwe had announced his willingness to open a dialogue with ASSK on conditions that she gave up her “confrontational attitude.” The military government further issued an unusual invitation to the U.S. *charge d'affaires* for a meeting in the new administrative capital. During the weekend that followed, condemnations of the government and support for the opposition in Myanmar resounded across European capitals, with EU leaders discussing a possible EU mission to Myanmar to back-up a similar initiative raised by the UN special envoy. Meanwhile, the Chinese PM was on the phone with the British PM and others exchanging views on the matter. A solution to the Myanmar issue seems to be more pressing than ever. While insisting that the current situation in Myanmar “does not pose any threat to internal or regional peace and security,” China’s ambassador to the UN stressed that the key to the solution of the issue of Myanmar lay in finding the “right approach.”

## 2. Merits of CBMs

The international community has very little trust in the government of Myanmar, but the major problem is not at the international level but at the domestic. There are very few sincere attempts to move beyond the current deadlock, and it seems to be harder by the day to create an effective domestic process. There are many reasons for this failure. First and foremost, there is a huge rift in trust between the military government and the opposition. No side believes the other to be legitimate or fit as a ruling party, and they suspect the other side of being insincere. The military looks back at the tumultuous time of the civilian government in the early 1950s and to the achievements of the military in uniting Burma, fighting for, and ultimately winning, independence from Britain. Accordingly, they claim that civilians have proven themselves incapable of governing the country.

The opposition groups, on the other hand, claim that the military is illegitimate, having ignored the outcome of the latest elections and placed the leader of the NLD (who won the elections in 1990), Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest. Furthermore, the opposition groups argue, rightfully, that the military has not been capable of employing the vast capacity of Myanmar in developing the country to the benefit of all people. Worth remembering is also the lack of coordination between the many opposition groups within and outside the country. This is another complicating factor in what is a very complicated conflict. The result of all of the above has been a disastrously performing economy, a dire health care situation, and the longest-lasting domestic armed conflict in the world.

With the latest protests, this rift in trust between the parties has widened significantly, possibly to the extent that a peaceful domestic process could prove impossible. Here, China and ASEAN have an important role to play as facilitators and in bringing the parties closer. Both actors have a significant role in the Myanmar issue and they both have a track record of being reluctant to interfere in domestic issues, a position that is needed here if it is

to be successful. Recently, Mr. Gambari, the Secretary-General's special envoy, met with the Senior-General Than Shwe, and also ASSK. Than Shwe committed to meeting with ASSK under certain conditions. Reportedly, ASSK decided to decline the invitation, believing the conditions to be too difficult. On October 5, the American *charge d'affaires*, the highest American diplomatic representative in Myanmar, was invited to talks with the government of Myanmar. This move by the government is considered extremely unusual. The outcome of the talks remains unknown, but the fact that talks did in fact take place is certainly interesting, but should nevertheless not be overemphasized. The government has appointed a liaison officer to handle communication with the NLD; his mandate is unclear, however, as is the effect of this appointment in bringing about any real change in attitude toward engaging the opposition in dialogue. Yet, all in all, these moves by the government are signaling that it is increasingly aware that communication between parties, domestic and international, is needed.

The UN has been a very active in this process and has a great deal of legitimacy in the eyes of the parties, even if the suggestions from the UN have been dismissed. The latest reports indicate that the government has rejected the UN's urge to initiate dialogue with the opposition in favor of sticking to its own roadmap to democracy. The roadmap laid out by the government is seen by the opposition as a way of stalling development, and a way of clinging on to power indefinitely without any real commitment to the democratization of the country—a view that is understandable since the opposition is excluded from the roadmap and is largely unaware of the process. There is a strong need for a process that includes all parties as well as international and regional checks and balances. Among the concerned parties included in the model for remedying Myanmar's ailments (below, see part 5), there are several with long experience of CBMs as a way of building initial trust between conflicting parties. One, or several, of these stakeholders could be engaged in aiding Myanmar through CBMs, helping the country toward its goal of national reconciliation. By introducing methods to achieve confidence in the other party, a foundation for much needed dialogue would be accomplished.

### 3. Consequences of Inaction

With tensions growing due to the lack of visible improvements for the people, a solution to the situation appears desperately needed. Should the status quo in the lack of communication and tangible improvement remain, the consequences could be grave and far-reaching, not only domestically and regionally but internationally, too. The military leadership's major concern is to keep unity within the rank and file. Their power base in Myanmar is almost entirely built upon military might and threat of use of force. This is a position that is problematic due to the inherent weakness in such a system, and also the possibility that the leadership will use military force if threatened. Myanmar is a clear example of a strong regime in a weak state; but should a split open up within the *Tatmadaw* (the military), the tensions within Myanmar would be likely to escalate rapidly into military violence. The opposition and the armed groups would see their chance in benefitting from the new power balance for furthering their own ambitions. The costs of this would be unimaginable and would threaten the very fabric of Myanmar as a state, with civil war and chaos as a consequence. This development would be natural as there is little or no trust between the different actors, and many would act upon their own limited interests.

Without easing the present tensions and creating a foundation for dialogue, it is only a question of time before a new set of protests will occur; the opposition and other interest groups are getting increasingly impatient and desperate, a desperation that, more often than not, seems to manifest itself in violent forms, from all sides. Events in the aftermath of the recent protests have been progressing relatively calmly; next time will likely not be equally peaceful as both the opposition and the government have "learned" that they cannot trust the other side. The different armed groups remained unengaged in the protests in September, but they are likely to respond with violence should they become involved, and this would jeopardize the existing cease-fires between most of the armed groups and the military. It is important to

remember that the Tatmadaw does not have full control over all of the territory in Myanmar. Its strongest areas are the central region of Myanmar. If a full-scale conflict was to break out between, on one side, the military and the government, and on the other side, the opposition and the armed groups, Myanmar would likely suffer a long-drawn out civil war that would destabilize the region and create suffering on an unprecedented level.

As history has seen, conflict knows no borders, thus there is a risk that any eventual large-scale conflict might spread. Furthermore, opium production is likely to increase should the conflict escalate, as the different groups would revert to organized crime to finance their military struggle. Hence, a *modus operandi* for communication is vital to identify and to apply in order to achieve a stabilization of the situation. But the question still remains *who* can engage the conflicting actors in Myanmar?

## 4. The Logic of Finding a Solution

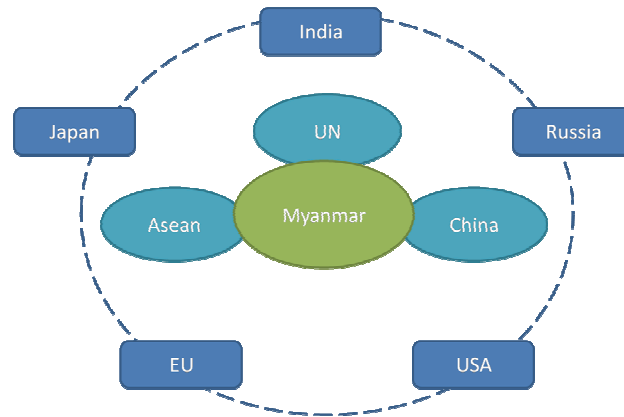
Two Silk Road Papers on the issue of Myanmar published by ISDP (formerly the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program) in March 2007 (Christopher Len and Johan Alvin, [\*Burma/Myanmar's Ailments: Searching for the Right Remedy\*](#); Xiaolin Guo, [\*Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue\*](#)) identified a variety of problems faced by the country and its leadership. These papers also analyzed in depth the difficulties in finding solutions due to a range of factors, domestic as well as international. Action and inaction both seemed to give pause for thought at the time. In view of the latest developments in Myanmar and the cyclical events of the past, it is our opinion that an *effective* solution must be found to end the impasse that has been stagnating the country's economy and devastating the living of tens of millions of its citizens for the past decades. A solution is sought ultimately to alter the pattern of political life in the country, which has been plagued for too long by insurgencies and crackdowns.

Crucial to such a solution is a sound political system that represents the interests of the majority population in the country, and a viable government that can hold the country together. This is no small matter, by all accounts. Given the deep level of misgiving that each party holds toward the other and that such a solution has implications not only in Myanmar itself but also in the region, the process of finding it requires a coordinated effort. The interested parties are many, particularly given the strategic location of Myanmar. But involving too great a number of international players would doubtlessly undermine the role of the domestic players. Here, one must not forget that the whole purpose of the proposed talks in search of a solution is national reconciliation. For a speedy and workable solution to the issue of Myanmar, we propose that participants in this coordinated effort include, in addition to Myanmar itself (the military rulers and oppositions), China, ASEAN, and the UN. The latter three players in this quartet, each in a



different capacity, carry certain weight in the maintenance of regional stability, and are acceptable to the actors involved like no other parties are.

## 5. Defining Player Roles



1. Model for engaging the Myanmar Issue

The government of Myanmar is obviously a central player, despite the question of its legitimacy. Ever since the fall of the last Burman dynasty in the nineteenth century, insurgencies have formed major challenges to consecutive governments (colonial, independent, and military), and come to shape the everyday lives of the great majority of the Burmese population. The government (regardless of differences in ideological persuasion) has, if anything, become extremely experienced in dealing with insurgencies across the country. Cracking down with military means is one commonplace practice; delaying political change is another. As much as it remains the main source of conflict, this pattern of interaction between the state and society has been the very reason for the persistence of political deadlock in the country. Yet, the prolonging of confrontation has only added more instability; and rather than lessening it, instability has hardened the government's determination to crack down. Confrontation has thus continued and violence spiraled. Amid all this, the government of Myanmar has become increasingly unpopular at home and isolated internationally.

For as long as four decades, the military government has done little to turn the situation around, despite changes of generals in the leadership. The recent development on the streets of Myanmar again demonstrates that rule by force is not the solution to political stability; nor does it sustain the government's powerbase. Widespread discontent in the country, if not

properly addressed, will not go away. The resistance to change on the part of the military government can only prolong conflict and instability, which has directly led to its failure to devise a process of handling the conflict in any effective way. The outcome of the Korean Peninsula crisis shows a possible way out of isolation; if the Myanmar government faces up to reality, a solution can be found through a process of sincere dialogue with those domestic parties that have been alienated in the long political process since the country's independence, and with the international parties crucial to maintaining the peace and stability on which the well-being of the country depend.

An important step toward national reconciliation is confidence building. In the days following the visit by the UN envoy, the Myanmar government released, in batches, the monks and civilians that had been detained earlier during the demonstrations. This prompt move—though undoubtedly calculated in response to the mediation by the UN envoy—ought to be recognized as an encouraging sign of some flexibility in the current leadership of the country (it was announced on October 13 that the curfew was to be shortened from 8 to 4 hours, and a week later the curfew was completely lifted). The less confrontational the approach to the crisis is, the more conducive it will be to finding a solution. Shortly before the unrest in September, Myanmar had completed its national convention, officially said to have “marked the end of the first part of a seven-step roadmap to democracy,” to be followed by “drawing up the new Constitution, holding a national referendum and general election, and eventually forming a new democratic government.” This may constitute a starting point to include the opposition and other interest groups that are to take part in the process of national reconciliation. A week after Than Shwe made the offer to open a dialogue with the opposition, the NLD led by AUNG MYE SWE responded with a special announcement vowing to solve the country's issues through dialogue, but insisted that talks must be “unconditional.” This is a situation in which mediation by regional-international players can be instrumental.

**Of all the parties involved in finding a solution to the issue of Myanmar, the role of the UN is decisive.** The UN has over the years been actively engaging with the leaders of the Myanmar government, and working for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (or improving her conditions under prolonged house

arrest). Amid renewed Western sanctions against Myanmar in recent years, the UN special envoy has remained literally the sole communicator (aside from other regional actors such as China and ASEAN) between the military government and the international community. During this latest crisis, the UN Secretary-General acted promptly by sending his envoy to Myanmar as conflict on the streets intensified. He talked directly to the military leaders and opposition while remaining in close touch with ASEAN leaders, China, and other concerned parties. The situation calmed down quickly after the visit by Gambari. His good offices were highly appraised by China and ASEAN. More visits by the UN envoy to Myanmar are underway. In finding a solution to the issue of Myanmar, the role of the UN as the representative of the international community will be essential for three main reasons. The first concerns the government of Myanmar that has been cooperating (however limited) with the UN over the long period of isolation, and this relationship can serve as a base for trust. Secondly, it concerns the People's Republic of China, which has since its entry to the UN always regarded the organization as the legitimate body through which international conflict should be resolved, and has worked closely with the UN on many international issues. Last but not least, the Myanmar opposition lobby has maintained a good relationship with the UN over the years. However, UN efforts alone are not enough. National reconciliation needs to incorporate effective regional players that not only have a stake in regional stability but that also can exert influence on the military government to accelerate the national conciliation process.

**As a regional player, China has indisputably a special role.** During the time of peaceful demonstrations in Myanmar, the Chinese official media Xinhua reported the event as it was unfolding on the ground, but generally remained low key in sharp contrast to major international media networks such as the BBC and CNN. After the imposition of the curfew by the Myanmar government, China urged restraint on all sides to prevent the conflict from escalating further, and called for an appropriate way to be found for handling the situation. At the same time, China appealed to the international media that their news reporting be fact-based and refrain from adding fuel to the flames. Outright, the Chinese MFA spokesperson refuted accusations made in the international media of China's role in the Myanmar issue. As the UN

met to discuss the event in Myanmar, China offered its support for UN mediation and pressured the Myanmar government to cooperate. After the UN special envoy's four-day mission in Myanmar had concluded, China highly appraised the mediation effort made by Gambari and welcomed the Myanmar government's cooperation with him.

The calming situation in the days that followed came as a relief to the Chinese government, which continued to express its hope for the situation in Myanmar to develop in a "positive direction" in accordance with the common aspiration and interests of the people in Myanmar and nations in the region. For that, the Chinese MFA spokesperson added, the Chinese government "will continuously work together with the international community to play an active and constructive role for the alleviation of the Myanmar situation." This latest development has been of great concern to China, sharing, as it does, a 2,000-kilometer long border with Myanmar. For its own national interest, China should have every reason to be keen to find a solution to the current situation in Myanmar. For its international image, China would be equally aspiring, perhaps more than ever, to play a role in world politics, proactive and accountable, as it has done in the Six-Party Talks. China's support for the UN Security Council's adoption of the presidential statement on October 11 "to provide constructive help to all concerned parties of Myanmar to realize national reconciliation and promote democracy and development in Myanmar through dialogue" is a demonstration of China's stance in this matter.

Yet, the nature of the Myanmar issue is very different from the North Korea crisis, and China is reluctant to interfere with domestic issues such as the one in Myanmar. Moreover, China's relations with Myanmar are not the same as its relations with North Korea and China has fewer pressure points in Myanmar. In this particular regional setting, China would seek to avoid playing a morally superior role that might invoke any past imperial image—a sensitive issue, albeit one irrelevant to countries outside the region. All the same, China can exert a decisive influence on Myanmar that others are not able to do. The role of China as an arbitrator in the issue of Myanmar ought to be recognized and encouraged as keeping an effective communicating channel open between the isolated military rulers and the international community. On other matters of practicalities (such as maintaining border

security, not to mention efforts to contain drug production and trafficking), China can be particularly instrumental. To discredit the role of China in this process for ideological reasons would be extremely shortsighted; similarly, exerting pressure on China by means of sanctions (political and economic) would highly likely prove counterproductive, with inadvertent consequences detrimental to the interest of the sanctioning party.

China will not engage in any attempt at regime change, nor accept any change imposed from the outside—such interference is duly regarded by the Chinese government as a violation of sovereignty and detrimental to peace, and this is consistent with China’s policy to “resolutely oppose” the UN sanctions against Myanmar. China’s opposition to regime change, however, cannot be interpreted simply as China shunning the opposition in Myanmar. On the contrary, working out a solution to the current Myanmar issue hinges much on engaging with the opposition, and China has all along encouraged the Myanmar government to talk to the opposition (there had been reports in the international media, prior to the demonstrations, that meetings between Chinese officials and Myanmar opposition were held in the Chinese city Kunming). On the whole, *pragmatism* is China’s approach, and *regional stability* remains its priority. This goal is, to a large extent, shared by neighboring Southeast Asian countries.

**Another important regional player is ASEAN.** As a regional organization (not just economic but also political, depending on the issues involved), ASEAN can influence the solution to the situation in Myanmar in a variety of ways. Like China, the ASEAN countries have in the past weeks observed events in Myanmar with great concern. Lee Hsien Loong, the Prime Minister of Singapore currently holding the rotating leadership of ASEAN, wrote to Myanmar’s top leader, Than Shwe, to express the ASEAN leadership’s support for the mission by the UN envoy. In the days after the imposition of the curfew, Singapore witnessed small gatherings outside the Myanmar Embassy, expressing solidarity with the demonstrators in Myanmar in their struggle against the government. This shows an unusual tolerance of the Singaporean government, given the Constitutional ban on any political gathering of five or more people. The tolerance also speaks for the dilemma of the Singaporean government in the issue of Myanmar, shared by other member states of ASEAN—on the one hand, they remain

interested in economic cooperation with Myanmar; on the other, they are under pressure from Western countries to get tougher on the military rulers in Myanmar. Many of them have been feeling more than frustrated by the lack of change in Myanmar and their tainted relationship with the country's military rule. Voices calling for the expulsion of Myanmar from ASEAN had been raised before. This time, some ASEAN members issued strong statements condemning Myanmar's military rulers' crackdown on demonstrators, and sought to adopt a hard stance against Myanmar. Others, however, insisted that Myanmar should remain in ASEAN, so that the organization could exert influence over Myanmar. Echoing this accommodating voice, the Cambodian PM called on ASEAN to play a more important role in helping find a peaceful solution to the current crisis in Myanmar. The difference between the ASEAN member states in their attitude toward Myanmar reflects, to a large extent, the geographic location of each country and the relationship of each with the West, all of which has understandably added intricacy to the Myanmar issue. That aside, the participation of ASEAN is imperative because of the existing cultural and economic ties between the member states, and shared interest in regional stability and development.

**Non-participant observers can play supporting roles of great importance.** India, Russia, and Japan all have strategic interest in Myanmar, and each can wield some influence on the country's military rulers; none wishes to see instability in the region. The inclusion of the Three Musketeers can add weight to the international coordinated efforts but can equally make negotiations more cumbersome than they need to be. Furthermore, as mediating players, these countries have less wielding power than China and ASEAN. The EU and the US make a further pair of players—both champions of democracy and human rights, embodying the core ideals of European traditions. Given that the values that EU and US cherish are enshrined in the UN Charter, there should be a consistent approach between the UN, EU, and US in as far as the solution to the issue of Myanmar is concerned. Were they to participate directly as separate entities, it would send a signal that they harbored different agendas, hence making it difficult to justify, in turn, the exclusion of India, Russia, and Japan from the negotiating process.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, too great a number of international players would undermine the central role of the domestic players. In contrast to these heavyweight blocs, there is a unique player—Sweden, a member of both the UN and EU, with a long established and well-recognized tradition of neutrality. This ‘soft power’ crafted by Sweden enables the country to play a role of facilitator in difficult circumstances. Its record of assisting the UN in Northeast Asia and Africa has been evident, and the mission in Myanmar should not be any different as far as the image of Sweden and the role the country can play.



## 6. The Need for a Balanced Approach

The role of mediation in search of a solution to the Myanmar issue, as this paper proposes, would be a significant departure from what has until now been the common practice of imposing sanctions and launching negative media campaigns against the regime. Apart from demonstrating moral, and often military, superiority of one over the other, there has been little evidence to suggest that economic sanctions have actually worked effectively to undercut the power of undesirable rulers (in this case, Myanmar's military government), as the New Zealand PM reminded the world amid the latest developments in Myanmar, whereas there has been ample evidence to show otherwise—prolonging impoverishment and devastating the lives of millions.

Similarly, international media campaigns may have played a successful role in holding out hope to demonstrators, but have so far contributed little to solving the political stalemate in Myanmar. Neither have such campaigns prevented China from vetoing UN Security Council resolutions (one more veto was cast in the event of the latest demonstration, October 9). International pressure has its merits in making a difference when administered properly. The impact of global media coverage of the conflict around the world today has been effective and yet ambiguous, in some cases misleading for ideological reasons while in others misleading as a consequence of ignorance. Sensationalizing 'colorful' brandings of revolutions (this time 'saffron') may be appealing to Western audiences, but they can be interpreted as public and highly visual signs of interference in domestic affairs by the regimes in question, and are likely to provoke responses in the form of even harsher policies. One great irony in all this is that Myanmar actually withstood one such revolution in the past—a 'red' one exported from China—shortly after Ne Win took power.

Attempts at regime change imposed from the outside are bound to be counterproductive and detrimental to the process of national reconciliation, and will have serious repercussions in the region and beyond, politically and

economically. Quiet diplomacy is the key to the solution, and requires coordinated efforts. A comprehensive understanding of a country's past and present is essential for facilitating communication and cooperation. Worth mentioning is that, international rallying for democratization in Myanmar has in the past focused squarely and exclusively on Aung San Suu Kyi and, by extension, the political party under her command. The fixation of such expresses a lack of understanding for the complexity of issues on the ground for one, and an overly simplistic approach driven by a rigid out-of-date Cold War ideology on the other. The process of national reconciliation and democratization in Myanmar should include all the opposition and interest groups in the country.

## 7. Practicalities

Finding an appropriate approach to the current stalemate is the key to peace and stability, which will not only benefit the people of Myanmar but also the Indo-China Peninsula as a whole. Crucial to the solution of the Myanmar issue is not *who* leads the country, but *how*. In view of the country's history, an *ideology-driven* approach to the Myanmar issue will prove far less effective than a *pragmatic* one. It is important for those who participate in the process of national reconciliation to acknowledge that when matters concern tens of millions of people's lives, world peace and global prosperity, measures should not be adopted lightly, and decisions should be based on a level-headed analysis of the situation on the ground, taking into account fully the ramifications of the decisions to be taken. Like in business negotiations, a cultural touch is desired, which is often ignored in international politics, owing to a pressing political agenda. The international coordinated effort is not to seek shortsighted political gains by focusing only on the government in Myanmar, but instead on long-term gains for Myanmar in the world at large.

In the issue of Myanmar, neither regime change nor secession (the crudest interventionist approach to state building, as we have seen in Iraq and may yet see in the Balkans) holds the solution, simply because the problems faced by the country (irrespective who is in power) are far too complex to be handled through a one-dimensional approach. At stake are the interests of *all* peoples living *within* the boundary of the Union of Myanmar, and that should equally remain the utmost concern of the international community. Political change in Myanmar has wide implications, and in this sense the issues at stake are not exclusively domestic; on the other hand, national reconciliation does have everything to do with the Burmese themselves. Talks without the participation of the country's current leaders and military elite will not be realistic. Likewise, negotiations excluding any other parties will not be right and would fail to create a long-term solution. An initial

stage of power sharing may be facilitated as a prerequisite for pushing ahead with democratization. As much as democracy remains a goal of choice, the national interest must come first and be respected by *all* parties (domestic and international) involved. We hereby reiterate and recommend the following:

1. The issue of Myanmar is foremost a domestic one and should be treated as such. Efforts therefore should be made to include *all* major actors in Myanmar in a political process that seeks to accommodate the interests of all actors. The issue of Myanmar is also a regional matter, and its solution will need to draw in regional players. The role of China and ASEAN, as regional players, is indispensable, given their relationships with the country's leaders and influence in the periphery. The UN assumes an overall supervisory role, as well as a mediator and chief communicator.
2. A regional overtone of the mission would make Kunming (the government seat of China's southwestern province Yunnan) an ideal venue, where numerous rounds of talks of bilateral relations and border issues between China and Myanmar in the 1950s were held, and where the Chinese leaders have frequently met with the head of the Southeast Asian states. Moreover, the province of Yunnan offers a cultural touch identified by not only China and Myanmar but also the rest of the ASEAN countries, and has the unique capacity of offering expertise in language and cultural communication.
3. An important step of nation building in Myanmar is national reconciliation, which requires power sharing in the initial stage in preparation for holding general elections. In this transitional period (long or short) of power sharing, there should be adequate UN backed supervision to ensure stability and normality of living in the country.
4. The international community, in different capacities, should encourage all parties (current government leaders and opposition leaders) to participate in the talks. Prolonging a standoff by *anyone* will hinder the process of national reconciliation, and such behavior must be discouraged.

5. Each party participating in the talks should be given sufficient space, so as to maximize the input. Negotiations are part of reaching agreements, and each party must be urged to respect the others and prepared to make compromises.
6. Mediation must be even-handed. Separate settings for back-to-back talks in the initial stage can reduce unwarranted tension. Meetings between the incumbent government and the international-regional mediators are held in one setting, whereas in other meetings involve the mediators and all opposition and interest groups. Finally, the mediators bring all parties together.
7. The EU and the US have an important role to play subsequent to the initial stage of national reconciliation, in both political and economic processes. So do India, Russia, and Japan.
8. Economic reform should be in progress as soon as political stability is secured. This is the time for the international community to provide assistance in concrete terms and help with the country's development.

## 8. Conclusion

Conditions, domestic and international, have never been as favorable as they are now for finding a way to solve the issue of Myanmar, and the volatility of international politics today makes a solution to the longstanding political stalemate more imperative than ever before. Mechanisms and measures essential for this international undertaking have been discussed in this paper, and it is up to the actors concerned to put it all into practice. Key to the issue of Myanmar is the wellbeing of the country and its entire population. The role that the internal community can play is to facilitate the achievement of that goal. The success of mediation rests on a balanced approach with focus on inclusion rather than exclusion. With all sincerity and pragmatism, national reconciliation in Myanmar is achievable, as is the future of a democratic and prosperous Myanmar, if only we give our full attention to, and put every effort in, the practicalities that will make a difference.

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