

Myanmar/Burma

Challenges and Perspectives

Edited by
Xiaolin Guo

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Myanmar/Burma, democracy, domestic development, regional politics, China, ASEAN, international intervention

Preface

Nearly two decades have elapsed since the general election in Myanmar/Burma that gave a landslide victory to the National League of Democracy (NLD), only to be followed by a political standoff as the military government refused to hand over power. In dealing with such a government widely perceived as illegitimate and repressive, the West has over the years pursued policies of economic sanctions and political isolation, while pushing for political change in Myanmar/Burma by offering moral and financial support to the pro-democracy movement. As its relations with the West deteriorated, the military government opened a frontier of economic cooperation with its Asian neighbors. What has changed in the country since the last election is no doubt controversial—whereas some may view that change as positive, others do not. The public protests that erupted on the streets of Yangon and other cities in August-September 2007 and their fallout once again demonstrated the unwillingness of the military government to relinquish power.

From a different angle, the crackdown by the military government on the public protests this time round needs to be scrutinized in the light of international intervention vis-à-vis the long-drawn-out impasse in Myanmar/Burma. With that aim in mind, the Institute for Security and Development Policy organized a workshop “Security and Development in Southeast Asia: Views up Close and from Afar” in Stockholm on January 28-29, 2008 (as it turned out, less than two weeks before the military government announced that it would hold a national referendum on the new Constitution and a general election). The workshop brought together, from Asia and Europe, university researchers, members of government think tanks and NGOs, as well as diplomats and those with experience in foreign affairs. Looking back and forward, the participants at the workshop engaged in frank exchanges of views and constructive discussions. Frustrated yet optimistic, they recognized the urgency of exploring alternative approaches in order to

break the political deadlock. Despite uncertainties about the outlook for the democratic movement in the country, the workshop was concluded on a positive note, with hopes for peace and prosperity in Myanmar/Burma.*

This collection of papers reflects the themes discussed at the workshop. While not seeking or arriving at a consensus as such, it nonetheless aims to illustrate and hopefully shrink the gap between international objectives and domestic realities. The book is divided into two parts: in “The Country in Focus” it deals with mainly internal problems, including ethnic politics in relation to nation building and sustainable peace, the current state of the pro-democracy movement, and political developments in the wake of the recent crackdown on public protests in Myanmar/Burma; in “Regional and Global Perspectives” it addresses dilemmas of international intervention, and explores wider implications for the management of international affairs in the global context. Not seeking to politicize the name of the country, this book opts in its title for the name Myanmar/Burma, in order to optimize overall search engine visibility.

The edited volume appears in print on the eve of a much anticipated national referendum on the new Constitution in Myanmar/Burma. From the editor’s point of view, this publication serves, as the Chinese saying goes, for “casting a brick to attract jade,” in the hope of invigorating the debate and diversifying the discourse on Myanmar/Burma. As the editor, I am extremely appreciative of the efforts made by the individual contributors to meet the pressing deadline. On behalf of all contributors, I want to thank David Fouquet and Peter Christian Hauswedell for being such conscientious discussants and for their invaluable contributions to the workshop. Equally, I am grateful to my colleagues Johan Alvin, Alec Forss, Klas Marklund, Robert Nilsson, and Niklas Swanström, for their initiatives and support to make the workshop a success. Without the dedicated and vigorous editorial assistance provided by Bert Edström and Alec Forss, this publication would not have been possible.

Xiaolin Guo, Editor

* See Conference Report compiled by Alec Forss, *Myanmar/Burma in Focus: Moving Beyond Intractability* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2008).

Abbreviations

ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Front
AES	East Asia Summit
AFTA	ASEAN Free Trade Area
AMFSU	All Myanmar Federation of Student Unions
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BSPP	Burma Socialist Program Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNF	Chin National Front
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
EU	European Union
GMS	Greater Mekong Sub-region
IMET	International Military Education and Training
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KMT	Nationalist Party (Kuomintang)
KNU	Karen National Union
LDC	Least Developed Country
NC	National Convention

NCUB	National Council of the Union of Burma
NCGUB	National Coalition Government Union of Burma
NDF	National Democratic Front
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
PDP	Parliamentary Democracy Party
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SNLD	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
TNI	Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Armed Forces of Indonesia)
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNA	United Nationalities Alliance
US	United States of America
UWSA	United Wa State Army

I. The Myanmar/Burma Impasse and Practice of Intervention

Xiaolin Guo

On February 9, 2008, the international community—still absorbing the aftermath of the recent crackdown on public protests in Yangon—was taken by surprise when the military government announced its plans to hold a national referendum in May 2008 and a general election in 2010. The move was immediately dismissed by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) as “worthless” in the light of the continuing house arrest of its leader Aung San Suu Kyi imposed by the government. Echoing such domestic dissent, some Western powers rejected this very first concrete timetable for a seven-step roadmap to democracy in Myanmar as “little more than a sham to allow the junta to retain power.”¹ China, while refraining from putting any spin on the news, recognized the development as a significant step toward a transition of state power from military to civil government.² While ASEAN as a collective body cautiously welcomed the announcement, each member government worded its support differently, with the most critical voice from Indonesia openly attacking Myanmar’s draft constitution.³ After a few days of silence, the UN envoy offered a measured response urging the Myanmar military government to reconsider barring Aung San Suu Kyi from the elections, adding that a constitution excluding the interests of the opposition and minority groups prior to being

¹ “Myanmar junta to hold elections in 2010,” *Financial Times*, February 10, 2008, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/7de93582-d73a-11dc-b09c-0000779fd2ac.html>> accessed 2008-02-10.

² “Myanmar to hold national referendum in May and general election in 2010,” *People’s Daily*, February 10, 2008, <<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90777/90851/6352588.html>>

³ “Jakarta attacks Burma’s draft of constitution,” *Financial Times*, February 21, 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/fcf464fo-e0a9-11dc-bod7-0000779fd2ac,dwp_uuid=6a365390-7032-11dc-a6d1-0000779fd2ac.html>

put to a referendum would have no credibility.⁴ The reaction in different quarters thus repeated the all too familiar play of symbolic politics vis-à-vis realpolitik in the arena of international relations, with the West typically on one side of the spectrum and China on the other, while ASEAN swaying in between.

Each one of the political actors involved holds its own view—from afar or up close—about the situation in Myanmar, and proposed solutions to the existing issues are underpinned by very different concerns. Divergences, as it were, are rooted in both geography and ideology. One might indeed argue that what constitutes the Myanmar “issue” has less to do with the actual problems that the country continues to grapple with, than with the volatility of current international relations. The recent clash over the independence of Kosovo is another example of the same phenomenon, in that the status of Kosovo ultimately reflects the existing and changing order of power relations in a global context. In both cases—the Myanmar issue and the Kosovo issue—the politics played by the Western powers is by and large symbolic and ideological, in contrast to the pragmatism pursued (albeit not in an apparently concerted fashion) by regional actors. In the case of Myanmar, the symbolic politics is all about the values identified by (and with) the West, whereas regional actors are preoccupied with concerns of a different nature, most importantly, national security and regional development. This divide underwrites markedly different interpretations of the situation in Myanmar and consequently impacts on policy-making toward Myanmar. The outcome, however unintended, has been the systematic hampering and at times derailing of international aid and efforts to find solutions to the Myanmar issue. This situation calls for re-examination of the factors that have clearly obstructed desirable change from occurring, and re-assessment of the policies that have so far failed to achieve the goals of the international community. In doing that, this introductory chapter draws attention specifically to the realities of the conflict in the country and tactics of intervention on the part of the international community.

⁴ “Suu Kyi tops UN envoy’ agenda,” *Financial Times*, February 23, 2008, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/a9cadb2a-e19d-11dc-a302-0000779fd2ac.html>>

Recurring Themes: E & E

As viewed from the outside through the prism of the international media, what constitutes the problem of Myanmar is the standoff between the state (*Tatmadaw* or military rule) and society (pro-democracy movement). Meanwhile, an in-depth analysis of what underlies this standoff often seems to escape public attention, and if it is presented at all, easily becomes overshadowed by flashy media headlines buzzing with the latest pet phrases of international politics. While the country's problems are complex and endemic, two simple words with the same initial letter may well suffice to sum them up—*economic* and *ethnic*, or *ethnic* and *economic*—their order is not necessarily telling, but the combination of the two (E & E) is crucial and contours all the problems deserving of scrutiny.

Like many of its Asian neighbors, Myanmar is a country of great ethnic diversity. The people falling outside the category of the ethnic Bamar or Burman that gave the country the name Burma constitute one third of the country's total population; such diverse ethnic minorities speaking over 100 languages occupy about half of the country's expanse, shielding "Burma Proper" on both the eastern and western sides. These contrasting figures alone present a daunting challenge to post-colonial political integration. Independence in 1948 saw the adoption of a democratic system of the British model, and the leaders of the Union of Burma tackled one particular colonial legacy by granting special administrative status to some, but not all, peripheral states. Ethnic strife and the perceived threat of secession remained a major challenge to nation building and a disruptive force in the post-independence political system. The military coup in 1962, that ousted the democratically elected government headed by U Nu, was staged in the name of saving the Union of Burma from disintegrating. This transformation of the political system was followed by a more than two decade-long civil war between the government and a variety of opposition groups: communists (CPB) of several factions and diverse ethnic minorities.

While the military government was engaged in an all out war with the ethnic anti-government armed forces on the periphery as well as with the opposition CPB, the country's economy worsened steadily as a result of not just the prolonged warfare but also the closed-door policy pursued by Ne Win under the name of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." Economic

stagnation and inflation, compounded by mounting foreign debt, led the country onto the UN's list of Least Developed Countries (1987), thus permitting some relief from existing financial pressures. A spiraling economic crisis finally caused Ne Win's downfall from power in 1988 and triggered widespread unrest in the country. The general election that followed appeared to change the political landscape of Myanmar, but the military retained control over the country, in the name of maintaining law and order during processes of political transition.

The SLORC, and its successor SPDC, while resolutely barring the opposition NLD from entering office, turned its attention to claimed national reconciliation and sought to overcome economic stagnation in the country. The shift in government policy highlights the core problems, *economic* and *ethnic*; by tackling them, the military consolidated its power and managed to stabilize the country, a goal that had eluded Ne Win in previous decades. The 1990s saw the country opening up to economic cooperation with China and ASEAN countries. During the same period, the military government initiated and has so far reached cease-fire agreements with some two-dozen ethnic minority armed forces. The border development in the east and northeast has contributed to some stability; along with that development, ethnic strife has subsided in these areas and what used to be ravaging opium production has been partially contained. This achievement of stability, however tenuous, created the necessary preconditions for the military government's so-called seven-point roadmap to democracy in Myanmar.

In the wake of the government's relocation of its administrative capital to the inland Nay Pyi Taw, the National Convention resumed to draft a constitution (due to be voted on by referendum in May 2008). Seclusion provided only a short respite for the iron-fisted regime before public dissidence surfaced again. In mid-August 2007, a new wave of public protests erupted in Yangon; after a brief intermission it resumed in September and escalated. This time around, notably, a large proportion of the protesters were monks, and the color of their outfits won the protests the name "Saffron Revolution" in the international media. Whether a revolution or not, the protests were initially triggered by a sudden rise in fuel prices. A public protest on such a scale, at a time when the military government had

appeared to exert a firm control over the country, pointed at a recurring theme: economic stagnation brewing frustration. As observed, the growth of the national economy in the past decade has boosted central revenue and increased government investment in the military and administrative apparatus, but has done little to improve the living conditions of ordinary people; the sudden fuel price hike by the government provided an increasingly disgruntled public with an opportunity to vent its anger.⁵ The unrest once again demonstrated the incapability of the military government to manage the country's economy; understandably, the solution to the undesirable conditions is political change.

In stark contrast to the flare-up in central Myanmar, the areas populated by ethnic minorities remained largely calm. Amid the imposition of a 60-day curfew by the government, a mass rally, reported in the official *New Light of Myanmar*, drawing an estimated 100,000 participants, was held in the Kachin State in support of the constitutional national convention.⁶ Propaganda aside, the contrast, to some extent, may indeed reflect a transformation of the periphery in the past decade as a result of somewhat improved living conditions, border development, and cease-fire agreements with the government. At the same time, the contrast hints at something of a more disconcerting nature—the divided interests of the opposition NLD and ethnic minorities. The discord underlies a significant aspect of the democratic movement in Myanmar. A lack of understanding of the magnitude and nature of ethnic issues in the process of democratization has been recognized as a major failure in Western politics vis-à-vis the issue of Myanmar.⁷

One of the first formidable challenges to democratic rule in post-colonial Myanmar came from ethnic minorities: it was their urge to demand greater autonomy or, in some cases, secession that gave the military grounds to step

⁵ Li Chenyang, "Miandian baofa jiasha geming de yuanyin yu Miandian zhengju zouxiang," [Analysis of the "Saffron Revolution" in Myanmar and the country's political development], paper delivered at Conference ASEAN 40th Anniversary: Review and Prospects, Beijing University, November 15-16, 2007.

⁶ "Myanmar holds mass rally in support of constitutional national convention," *People's Daily*, September 30, 2007

<<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/6275071.html>>

⁷ See, for example, Martin Smith, *State of strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (Washington D.C.: East-West Center and Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2007).

in and seize power. The civil war that followed witnessed cycles of violence, relentless effort to militarize on all sides, acceleration of opium production, competition for control over resources, and more violence. “Greed and grievance,” in short, have been at the core of all political strife, the cycle of which constitutes what has been called Myanmar’s “conflict trap.”⁸ Because of near constant warfare across the country and persistent instability, military intervention became the default solution sought by the state. Since independence, the country has been locked in armed conflict, either simultaneously or sporadically, with the government fighting against opposition parties based among the Burman-majority (e.g. the CPB, U Nu’s Parliamentary Democracy Party) and a variety of ethnic armed forces in the borderlands. Each entity is fighting for its own interests, and constant violence reinforces the tradition of militarization with no “real winners and losers in these unending wars” (Smith, this volume).

Post-independence Myanmar is a classic case of *strong society vis-à-vis weak state*, where—in the jargon of guerrilla warfare—the gun commands the party, rather than the other way round. As the state actor, the *Tatmadaw* has proved to be an effective “conflict manager,”⁹ but not much of a nation builder. Consequently, military intervention and armed conflict have been the primary means to solve the country’s problems; while dealing with existing problems, more troubles have emerged. The way political power is structured and shifts, and the way the country’s problems have been dealt with in past decades pose great challenges to international intervention. While the neighboring countries act with full appreciation of the gravity that the development in Myanmar entails, the West (thanks to its distance) seems to be largely focused on ideals rather than realities on the ground. This difference is duly reflected in the attitudes of the Asian countries and the international community outside the region toward intervention. Although the military rule is to no one’s taste, strategies of how to approach the standoff are divided.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 3-25.

⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

Culture of Intervention and Political Constraints

International intervention (often conducted in the name of *conflict management*) is today a stock component of global politics. There is little doubt that the role of international intervention in world politics is becoming increasingly important; for this reason alone, the eyes of the international community are unlikely to turn away from Myanmar as long as the country remains “disputable” in terms of political change. The international media coverage in the past decade has stimulated growing interest in the issues of Myanmar. To the events of August-September 2007, the regional actors (China and ASEAN) and the Western powers (U.S. and EU) reacted very differently, as revealed in their official statements. The U.S. and the EU may differ in their choice of words, but were concerted in principle by reiterating condemnation and calling for the imposition of further sanctions (albeit what was in the package of sanctions differed between the two). Constantly shifting between Western and Asian values, ASEAN displayed a notable ambivalence and inconsistency in its policies. China spoke out urging the international community to find what its government called “the right approach,” while resolutely opposing any sanctions on Myanmar.¹⁰

While there is discord among the regional actors as far as intervention is concerned, the contrast between the West and Asian countries is far starker. The difference has a cultural aspect. Generally speaking, there is the European tradition of *pro-intervention*—rooted perhaps in the missionary practice that believes in doing “good deeds” in distant lands—aspiring to hold the moral high ground in international affairs. In contrast to this European political conviction and pattern of behavior, Asian countries appear to be *intervention-averse*; their policies are, by comparison, more regionally focused, and their leaders tend to concern themselves primarily with problems close to home.

After China vetoed the UN resolution on Myanmar in January 2007, the U.S. government voiced its expectation that China would push for reforms in Myanmar; henceforth the role of China came under the spotlight of the international media. NGOs of various sorts reacted by lobbying for sanctions

¹⁰ See Xiaolin Guo and Johan Alvin, *Engaging with the Issue of Myanmar: A New Perspective* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, Policy Paper, October 2007).

against China and a boycott of the Beijing 2008 Olympics. The pressure, however, did little to rush China into action. Many Chinese may indeed wonder why Myanmar should listen to what China has to say, and question how much leverage the Chinese government actually has over its Myanmar counterpart. The constraints that prevent China from playing an effective role seem to be located in four general areas: the troubled history between the two countries, China's on-going domestic development that relies on natural resources from its neighbor in the southwest, the status quo of border security, and last but not least, the impact of democratization in Myanmar on China itself; all are taken to mean that "Beijing must tread very carefully in pursuing to advise the Burmese generals on how to manage their internal affairs."¹¹

The Chinese government has repeatedly stated its position in the Myanmar issue that China does not interfere in the country's domestic affairs, and that whatever problems Myanmar has must be solved between the Myanmar people and their government through dialogue. At the same time, China hopes that the international community will play a constructive role in Myanmar that reflects respect for the country's sovereignty. In the months following the events in September 2007, China affirmed that the situation in Myanmar improved and showed some signs of progress; in that light, the Chinese government urged the international community to make efforts to facilitate peaceful development, a democratic process, and harmony in Myanmar.¹²

China's position in the issue of Myanmar is largely in tune with its existing framework for the management of foreign relations. On a very general level, China opposes hegemony and aligns itself with the Third World; in dealing with its neighbors, China—with its priority on border security—adheres to the Five Principles of Co-existence formulated in the 1950s and reaffirmed in the 1980s; in the global context of economic development, China advocates a win-win principle formulated in the late 1990s, with special reference to its

¹¹ "China faces a tricky balancing act in Burma," *FT.com*, October 17, 2007, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9ef6773a-7cb8-11dc-ae2-0000779fd2ac,dwp_uuid=6a365390-7032-11dc-a6d1-0000779fd2ac.html?nlick_check=1>.

¹² "Foreign Ministry press conference on issues of Kosovo independence, Myanmar and Darfur," *Xinhua*, February, 19, 2008, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-02/19/content_7632603.htm>.

neighboring countries (i.e. ASEAN) and other Third World countries (e.g. in Africa). All these principles are interlocking with China's domestic development priorities, and they underscore the pragmatism that has been a dominant state practice since the beginning of economic reform at the end of the 1970s. In the current situation, China's relationship with Myanmar is primarily tied to the needs of domestic development and border security.

This foreign relations framework, however, does not mean that China wishes to see no change in Myanmar. On the contrary, the Chinese government has over the years urged the military generals to adopt Chinese style economic reform, as Vietnam has done, and there are signs that the Myanmar government has made some progress in that respect. Political reform is, apparently, a very different matter. Chinese leaders from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao are said to have advised their Myanmar counterparts to implement political changes suitable to the country, but the response has been rather muted (Li, this volume). The willingness on the part of the military government to pursue economic cooperation while dismissing advice on political change, speaks for the nature of China–Myanmar relations. Both countries are naturally interested in maintaining good neighborly relations; the *paukphaw* relations, however, do not constitute a base for a patron–client relationship. As some have put it, China aspires to become rich and strong but has no intention of turning Myanmar into a satellite state or a strategic pawn in the event of a potential confrontation with other great powers (Li, this volume). Equally, Myanmar is unlikely to become China's client state, given the history of bilateral relations.

In light of the above, China's capacity to push for political change in Myanmar is limited. By the same token, there is little that China can do to prevent political change from taking place in Myanmar. While a pro-Western government in Myanmar might well change the current state of cross-border development in a direction perceived by many as detrimental to the interest of China, any government in Myanmar, democratically elected or not, is unlikely to get too close to any foreign powers within or beyond the region. Bearing in mind strong nationalism, characteristic of Myanmar's modern history, the country, like many in Asia, tends to pursue a balanced foreign policy by *not* relying on one power thereby alienating another. Likewise, China, in its own interest, has no choice but to maintain good

relations with its neighbor in the southwest, whoever runs the future government and regardless of whatever ideological differences may emerge.¹³ Based on that logic, political change in Myanmar cannot be expected to have a significant impact on existing China–Myanmar relations (Li, this volume). What really concerns China is not democracy *per se*, but rather what *kind* of democracy Myanmar adopts, and what repercussions it may have on regional security and cross-border development.

Compared to China, ASEAN, as a regional organization, has been far less consistent in its policies toward Myanmar. This inconsistency helps explain the generally ineffective role that ASEAN has played in the Myanmar issue. Two contributors in this volume, Jürgen Haacke and Jianwen Qu, trace the development of ASEAN policy vis-à-vis Myanmar over the past two decades. The dilemma faced by ASEAN is rooted in pressures from Western powers constantly calling for a tougher stance and political change in Myanmar on the one hand, and the obligation of ASEAN to honor the membership of Myanmar on the other. ASEAN's tolerance shown in dealing with Myanmar does, to some extent, reflect the organization's concern about the role and influence of other actors in the region, namely, China and India. For Myanmar, its ASEAN membership allows the country's leaders to get tough on powerful neighbors; for the same reason, ASEAN is interested in keeping Myanmar close to itself. With the backing of ASEAN, Myanmar's relations with China have changed over the years. The Myanmar issue furthermore allows ASEAN to play a more influential role vis-à-vis China in regional development.

Thus, ASEAN and Myanmar are interdependent in international politics and economic development. Their symbiotic relationship underscores the ASEAN dilemma. As a regional organization, it adheres to a non-interference principle; yet in the global context (especially in its alignment with Western powers), the military government constitutes an embarr-

¹³ The Union of Burma was among the first non-socialist countries that recognized the People's Republic of China, and most of the outstanding border disputes with China were settled in the 1950s when the two countries enjoyed the best period of their relationship. Ne Win, on the other hand, was not democratically elected, and during a long part of his rule China-Myanmar relations hit the bottom. See Xiaolin Guo, *Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue* (Uppsala: Central Asian-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Paper, March 2007).

assessment undermining ASEAN's international standing. To balance its role and maintain its influence, ASEAN has over the years pursued a policy characterized as "constructive engagement/intervention" and "enhanced engagement/intervention." The policy permits certain leverage for member states to deal with Myanmar in accordance with each country's own interest (Qu, this volume). The leverage accounts for the difference between member states in their policies toward Myanmar. In a broader context, a policy of ambivalence enables ASEAN to deflect criticism from the Western powers while at the same time pursuing ongoing economic cooperation with Myanmar, especially in the case of Thailand and Singapore (Haacke, this volume).

Because of the interdependence of ASEAN and Myanmar, politically and economically, ASEAN can have some sway over the issue of Myanmar; equally, the very relationship subjects ASEAN as a collective body to constraints in its dealings with the military government. The fallout over the East Asia Summit briefing is a case in point (see Haacke, this volume). The rhetoric surrounding the signing of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007 indicated a widening rift within the organization on the Myanmar issue.¹⁴ The celebration of ASEAN's 40th anniversary marking the birth of the ASEAN Charter thus presents new challenges to the regional organization as it struggles to balance interference and non-interference in bilateral relations between member states (Qu, this volume). All signs suggest that ASEAN is in for a bumpy ride ahead.

ASEAN, as a collective body of economic cooperation, is fraught with intramural division and indecision, mirroring in a sense the cultural diversity of member states. What limits the effectiveness of ASEAN as an actor in the Myanmar issue is its dual stand vis-à-vis the West and the region itself. Under the circumstances, ASEAN sometimes acts as a shield, and at other times as a transmitter. The effectiveness of one particular role is often swayed by external factors. While sharing many Western values, the

¹⁴ "Asean charter falls foul of Burma divisions," *Financial Times*, November 21, 2007, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/da7fd3d4-97be-11dc-9e08-0000779fd2ac,dwp_uuid=6a365390-7032-11dc-a6d1-0000779fd2ac.html>; "Suu Kyi freedom 'is test for Asean'" *Financial Times*, December 2, 2007, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/cd4fecoc-a417-11dc-a28d-0000779fd2ac,dwp_uuid=6a365390-7032-11dc-a6d1-0000779fd2ac.html>

ASEAN countries are, like China, concerned mostly with stability in Myanmar. On the whole, the action of Asian countries in general is more constrained by border security and economic cooperation. Between China and ASEAN, however, there is a difference. Whether or not China takes action in international affairs, apart from its own national interests, the country's main concern nowadays is its international image,¹⁵ whereas the ASEAN countries are more constrained by their relations with the Western powers and the domestic development implications of those relations. These variables may impact on international intervention in unpredictable ways.

The U.S. and EU policies are, in contrast, straightforward and their joint message is rarely ambiguous. Each in its own style, the two powers wish to see *regime change* and with this aim in mind promote democracy worldwide, notwithstanding that the EU is hesitant to resort to military means. The name *Saffron Revolution*, hailed in the international media, is a reminder of a series of so-called color revolutions witnessed in the former Soviet Bloc. In the case of Myanmar, however, very few seemed to ponder the relevance of socio-political conditions in the country to the kind of changes that Eastern Europe had embraced. All too often, wishful thinking has driven Western calls for change in Myanmar.

The issue of Myanmar unfolding is a play of *power politics* in the region. In the 1990s, the focus of international media was by and large about the country and its political system. With China entering the WTO and winning the Beijing Olympics, the same issue appeared to have taken a different spin. In view of the international media headlines and initiatives favored by some Western politicians to impose sanctions on China, it is hardly surprising that the Chinese government has been driven to believe that international intervention in Myanmar (in this case, in the name of democracy) constitutes part of a strategy to contain China. That China—rather than India, Thailand, Singapore, or even Japan, countries that all have good relations with the military government in Myanmar—was singled out to pressure the Myanmar government for change may indeed be seen as reflecting the same “ulterior motives” that, in the words of a Chinese

¹⁵ See Xiaolin Guo, *Repackaging Confucius: PRC Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Soft Power* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper, January 2008).

government spokesperson, drove the international rallying cry for China to play a bigger role in Darfur.¹⁶

Altruism is rarely, if ever, a part of international intervention, and the short- and long-term interests of different players have promoted, but also complicated, development and security in the region. ASEAN and China can work together *only* in areas where their common interests align. After the crackdown on the public protests in Myanmar, ASEAN and China acted in concert to let the UN play a role and hailed the good offices of the UN special envoy. This amounted to a pressure-relief strategy, and served the dual purpose of deflecting criticism from the international community on the one hand and repelling interference from outside the region on the other.

While there seems to be little point in arguing that there is an “Asian way” as far as international intervention is concerned, in view of the lack of unity within ASEAN and often the discord between ASEAN and China, one may perhaps argue that an “Asian way” exists only in contrast to the “Western way.” The contrast is manifested in terms of how things are named and perceived, on what basis analysis is structured, and what the impact is on policies and approaches to the problems to be solved. In this respect, there is a huge difference between the Asian and Western styles, and the difference, needless to say, is very much constrained by the culture of intervention. The naming (terminology) and approach (methodology), in particular, have decisive influence on the way in which problems are handled (strategy).

Terminology, Methodology, and Strategy

When referring to the name of the country—Burma, Burma/Myanmar, or Myanmar—one’s choice is nowadays in and by itself equal to a political statement. The EU chooses to add a slash between the British name Burma and the new name Myanmar chosen by the country’s post-1988 military government. This preference on the part of the EU does in a way reflect differences in the Myanmar issue among member states; it at the same time represents a compromise between the (Burma) use preferred by the U.S. and the (Myanmar) endorsement by the UN. For those who are passionate about

¹⁶ *The Independent*, February 14, 2008, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-says-ulterior-motives-behind-darfur-criticism-782145.html>>

democracy in Myanmar, sticking to the old name Burma seems to serve the purpose of expressing defiance toward an illegitimate military government, despite the colonial tint which the name itself carries. In view of the fact that the name change by the military government from Burma to Myanmar was meant to represent all nationalities in the country—a gesture to include the ethnic minorities on the periphery in the process of nation building,¹⁷ one may indeed suggest that insistence on the name Burma actually excludes the ethnic minorities on the periphery, thus failing to recognize an important step in the process of national reconciliation.

Symbolic politics is a mirror of political correctness that shapes the way we conceptualize and the way we talk about international affairs, including political change in Myanmar. By adhering to political correctness, we too often let self-imposed limitations stand in the way of finding workable solutions to complex problems, like the ones faced by Myanmar. If, by comparison to the West, the Asian countries appear to have more leverage on the Myanmar government, it is because whatever they do, they do not put political correctness up front as a precondition. If there is such a thing called “the Asian way,” it can be taken to mean that ideology is not always an immediate concern. The dominance of political correctness in the West, on the other hand, often constrains intellectual debate. One lesson that the international community (now seemingly united in the issue of Myanmar) ought to have learned from the practice of “political correctness” is the failure of public debate to prevent the Iraq War.

Political correctness simplifies issues by framing them in tune with a particular ideological inclination. One example is the methodological fallacy that perceives things in terms of static world-views of the binary kind. The Soviet Union collapsed a long time ago, much of the Eastern Bloc is now part of the EU, and China has been practicing a market economy for over a quarter of a century. Yet, the legacy of the Cold War lingers, and continues to subject the world to thinking in binaries, in that the world is viewed in terms of “us” contrasted against “them.” Analyses of international relations,

¹⁷ Li Chenyang, “Miandian dulihou lijie zhengfu minzu zhengce de yanbian” [Development of ethnic minority policies in post-independence Myanmar] in *Yazhou minzu luntan* (Asian Ethnic Forum), edited by Fang Tie and Xiao Xian (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2003).

meanwhile, are lacking in historical perspective and, to an equal extent, self-reflection. Binary thinking, furthermore, is predisposed to rigid responses to events in international relations. With the fixation of the Western media and politics on the Myanmar opposition NLD and the person of Aung San Suu Kyi (literally seen as the embodiment of democracy in Myanmar),¹⁸ problems of ethnic minority rights and economic development—a core of all problems in Myanmar—tend to become secondary to talk of democracy, and about the opposition and elections.

A less political and more academic approach is seen to have lifted the profile of social science models.¹⁹ The problem is that the often seemingly coherent models are rarely useful in actuality, especially when concerning grave matters such as nation building. One of the objectives of the Iraq War (in addition to the removal of the dictator Saddam Hussein and alleged weapons of mass destruction) was to plant democracy, citing the successful precedents of Germany and Japan following WWII. But, Iraq turned out to be a very different experience. India and Myanmar, on the other hand, have certain common features in terms of diverse ethnic populations, multi-faith societies, and colonial history; but that democracy holds in India whereas civil war has dominated much of the political scene in Myanmar in the past half century shows very different paths of development between the two countries. Similarly, Mao's revolution that put the Chinese Communist Party in power failed catastrophically in Myanmar. All this suggests that country specificities explain a lot more about political developments than static models do. Bearing in mind that none of the existing political science models had predicted the fall of the Soviet Union, the credibility of general modeling of this kind designed to provide workable solutions to Myanmar nation building, is rather doubtful. The social, economic, ethnic, religious, and political factors that are unique to Myanmar have no parallel in the

¹⁸ For U.S. policy on Myanmar/Burma, see *Burma/Myanmar: After the Crackdown*, Asia Report No. 144 (Yangon/Jakarta/Brussels: International Crisis Group, January 31, 2008), pp. 13-14. See also, Jürgen Haacke, *Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Domestic Influences and International Implications*, Adelphi Paper 381 (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge for IISS, 2006), p. 21.

¹⁹ See discussion in Martin Smith (2007), and also Timo Kivimäki, "European Policies vis-à-vis the 'Burma/Myanmar Issue': An analysis of Arguments for Two Main Strategy Alternatives," Unpublished paper (2007).

European experience; solutions to the existing problems in the country therefore have to be tailored to the indigenous conditions.

That aside, formulas that may appear to be hypothetically problematic are not necessarily devoid of all practical value. The logic of political science, for instance, would question and identify “an inherent contradiction” in the Myanmar draft constitution that prescribes “self-administered divisions” and “self-administered districts” for ethnic minorities in the highly centralized unitary state.²⁰ Yet a similar system that is seemingly tension generating has been a major device permitting the political integration of China’s ethnic diverse southwestern periphery (including the province of Yunnan, bordering on Myanmar). A dual rule—highly centralized state in combination with local-level autonomous administration—was implemented ensuing the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century, and has since been reformed by a succession of governments, most significantly the Qing reforms to the local chiefdoms in the eighteenth century and PRC nation building after 1949. It is this dual system that has given rise to a preferential policy (as currently implemented in China), addressing directly the very problem of “greed and grievances.”²¹ As much as the southwestern periphery differs from other regions in China populated by ethnic minorities, the reality in Myanmar is unique, and in its own way remains a major challenge to integration under any form of political rule. To this accommodationist approach an alternative in conventional international practice would be secession, constituting—the same as *regime change*—a simplistic approach to nation building. In the case of Myanmar, it merely resolves one problem by creating a rupture which, in turn, is likely to lead to more troubles, not just for the country itself, but for the region as well.

A gap between realities and concepts accounts for the ineffectiveness of European strategies toward Myanmar. Over the years, the support for the opposition NLD and all the promises to deliver political change have prolonged the political standoff in Myanmar and contributed little to

²⁰ Tin Maung Maung Than, cited in Smith, *State of Strife*, p. 51.

²¹ For a brief analysis of PRC policy implementation in multi-ethnic areas, see, for example, Xiaolin Guo, “Warming to Socialism in the Cold Mountains.” In *Cadres and Discourse in the People’s Republic of China*, Michael Schoenhals and Xiaolin Guo (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, Asia Paper, August 2007), pp. 36-60.

national reconciliation. In this sense, the CBMs that normally stand for “confidence building measures” have in effect evolved into something akin to “conflict building measures”—opposites sharing the same acronym. Symbolic politics of the West underpinned by self-assured moral power has condensed everything into one slogan “Democracy first!” echoing directly the Myanmar opposition’s demands to “hand over power!” Such a rigid approach leaves little room for maneuvering (as Alvin elaborates in this volume). As a result, every time there is a review of policy toward Myanmar in the EU, the imposition of sanctions becomes the only choice, reiterated as if “on autopilot,” irrespective of the fact that sanctions over the years have succeeded in driving the military government deeper and deeper into isolation, instead of weakening its hold on power. On the contrary, evidence has shown that the military has consolidated its power and its rule has become entrenched in society.

While international pressure (media attention and government sanctions) has exposed the military government’s mismanagement of the country and conveyed to it the world’s rejection of its authoritarian rule, political isolation has contributed to the military leaders’ hard stance and refusal to pursue dialogue with the NLD in real earnest (Kyaw, this volume). Equally, disengaging with the incumbent government in Myanmar has made European policy-making itself irrelevant in solutions to the Myanmar issue (Alvin, this volume). The upcoming referendum on the Constitution in Myanmar will pose new challenges to the West in terms of strategies for dealing with the military government that is mostly likely to remain part of the political transition, however much to the dislike of the West. An effective role as a mediator and a facilitator requires not only an understanding of what democratization in Myanmar entails, but also knowledge of the problems on the ground and elements of change.

Over the past ten years, the cease-fires that the Myanmar government has reached with various ethnic armed forces and the economic development on the periphery have, in one way or another, helped stabilize the country. There has been a consensus between different forces (government, ethnic minorities, and society at large) that the achievement of national recon-

ciliation and sustainable peace is imperative.²² These changes are positive for things to move forward; the circumstances also require the international community to adapt to these changes. The recent draft of the Constitution confirms the dominant role of the military in the government to the dissatisfaction of the international community; it also specifies the rights of different interest groups however limited (Li, this volume). In that respect, the Constitution is one step that achieves what had not been achieved for decades, by setting the stage for further changes in political transition. *Objectively*, it is preferable to no Constitution at all (as many participants in the workshop agreed). Taking this as a point of departure, a coordinated effort internationally can make a breakthrough in the current political stalemate inside and outside the country.

Challenges of Thinking “Outside the Box”

A general lack of knowledge about the country (geography, history, and society) and a failure to appreciate the gravity of the issues involved (nationhood, ethnicity, and development) help explain an insatiable public appetite for reports that are laden with moral values resonating with “us” from afar. Consistent with these moral values, the strategy of political isolation persists as a major response on the part of the international community. The outcome of this overly simplistic concept-driven approach to democracy in Myanmar has been a political impasse within the country and a diplomatic falling out in international relations. In the light of what has not been achieved and what can actually be achieved, there is an urgency to—in the words of the workshop participants—to think “outside the box.”

Democracy and development are different approaches pursued by the Western powers and various regional actors, respectively, to the same Myanmar “issue.” The contrast underscores differences in experience as well as ideology. One experience that modern Europe lacks is the trauma of an extended period of colonization by foreign powers, and this stands in sharp contrast to Myanmar and many other Third World countries currently experiencing difficulties in achieving democracy. The neo-missionary attitude of wanting to “make others live the way we do” today pushes for

²² Smith, *State of Strife*.

change in the name of democracy; yet all too often forgotten is the fact that democracy in Europe did not just fall from the sky, and its formation was not without foundations from the start. Surely, democracy today is the lodestar for Western countries whose governments control the larger share of the world's wealth and whose citizens are generally protected by some variant of a welfare system that, in some countries, has been in place for the better part of a century. Realities are, however, very different in Myanmar, where a sudden hike in the oil price tests the population's tolerance to the limit. Currently, as the UN has estimated, "one in ten Burmese goes to bed hungry" and millions have not enough food.²³ As noted, the increasing pressure on making ends meet has been in part responsible for the dwindling daily—although not aspirational—support among ordinary citizens for the democratic movement (Kyaw, this volume).

Hand-in-hand with the West's apathy toward the difficulties involved in nation building against the backdrop of a colonial experience is the disinclination of Western powers to let change take its own course. Regime change has been embraced by some enthusiastic governments as a way to control global resources and maintain the desired order of international politics. It has been tried in Afghanistan and Iraq, and contemplated elsewhere. Such intervention constitutes the crudest possible approach to state building in a foreign country, and its credibility has been tested in the disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The consequences of attempted nation building in those two countries have shown that in pursuit of change, the West has ignored at its own peril the relevance of continuity, irrespective of its own experience of development.

Continuity is part of transformation. The most successful dynasties in Chinese history were those able to carry the past to the present, despite changes in the name of the reign, the best example being the longest ruling Qing dynasty (1644-1911). In modern times, the success of the Hong Kong transition lies in a continuity that allows the former colony to retain part of its British legacy in its style of governance. A comparison between modern India and Myanmar again underscores more or less the same point. The

²³ "Five million Burmese are going hungry, warns UN," *The Independent*, October 19, 2007, < <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/five-million-burmese-are-going-hungry-warns-un-395019.html> >.

answer to the question why democracy has taken root in India but not in Myanmar may be found in that post-independence India retained much of the colonial legacy, whereas nation building in Myanmar has been dominated by a strong element of nationalism, creating problems for political integration.²⁴ In the latter case, British institutions and Western democracy only received “a lukewarm response,” and elections, if not deliberately boycotted, sometimes met with apathy.²⁵ Strong nationalism compatible with an anti-foreign stance is directly responsible for the *Tatmadaw*'s consistent pursuit of a closed-door policy. The political isolation and economic sanctions imposed by the West have only heightened the nationalistic rhetoric, and given the current military leaders grounds to exclude Aung San Suu Kyi from the democratic process, in reference to her marriage “to a man from the race whose people masterminded the assassination of her father” (Kyaw, this volume). The power of nationalism that fueled the independence movement in Myanmar cannot be underestimated, as it continues to have a role in the ongoing democratic movement.

Political change is not the same as restructuring an enterprise, wherein one can simply tear it apart or declare bankruptcy. Analogies of political change and business management are flawed, because reform of the state bureaucracy takes more than just removing the managerial body, or changing a logo, as in business operations. Political transition in Myanmar without the current military government taking a part would be unrealistic, given that the military has since Independence been very much ingrained in the state bureaucracy and has kept the political system functional more than any other alternatives present. An abrupt removal of the establishment would cause a collapse of the state and create disorder in society, with wider repercussions in the region. The Iraq War and the post-invasion reconstruction that dissolved the Bath party together with all civil servants is a stark lesson to be drawn for the international community. From a binary view, state and society seem to be opposed to each other; at the same time, however, the two

²⁴ For a summary of Myanmar nationalism and its root, see Robert H. Tylor, “Pathways to the Present.” In *Myanmar: Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives*, edited by Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Robert H. Tylor and Tin Maung Maung Than (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), pp. 10-12.

²⁵ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 2nd edition (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 48.

both constrain and empower each other. From the perspective of change, one can hardly say that the *Tatmadaw* today is the same as under Ne Win's rule. In any case, it is only realistic for the international community to be prepared for dealing with the scenario, as some scholars have predicted, that the military is unlikely to retreat from national politics in the near future.²⁶

Any political change in a country cannot be separated from the conditions specific to that country. History, society, and culture in each country differ and, in turn, shape the political system and the structure in which the state interacts with society. Today, Christianity is preached on all continents in different languages. To a large extent, the spread of Christian missions may indeed be attributable to their adaptation to local conditions. Democracy, by the same token, does not have to be experienced in one single mode. The democratic system in Europe differs from that in the U.S., and practices of democracy in Asia are not identical to those in South America. Globalization has spread the idea of democracy faster and wider than ever before. Against this backdrop, existing authoritarian rule in some parts of the world should be no more than transitional, for a shorter or longer period, depending on how stable the social conditions for change are in these countries. Promoting democracy without taking into consideration the realities on the ground will be counter-productive.

Problems faced by Myanmar are multi-dimensional, involving not just the relations of the military with the opposition, but also the relations of the military with ethnic minorities, the military's relations with the religious establishment, and last but not least, relations of "Burma Proper" with the periphery. Problems of an *economic* and *ethnic* (E & E) nature have repeatedly fueled cycles of violence, and contributed to instability in post-colonial Myanmar. The E & E combination has been the real challenge to the political integration of the country, and will remain challenging to the central government and the Union of Myanmar for some time to come. A political solution to these problems in Myanmar and sustainable stability in the country depends ultimately on a *system* and *mechanisms* able to deal with E &

²⁶ Li Chenyang, "Jiasha geming hou kan Miandian junren zhengti" [Analysis of Myanmar military government in the aftermath of 'Saffron Revolution'], *Shijie zhishi* (2007, No. 1), pp. 28-29.

E simultaneously and effectively. Such a task makes economic development and nation building central to all solutions to the problems in Myanmar.

If the domestic economy is high on the agenda in national elections in the presently democratic countries of the world, there is no reason to assume that economic problems in Myanmar warrant less attention. The development of post-Independence Myanmar has shown that poverty feeds unrest, and instability prompts intervention by force as demonstrated by the military take-over in 1962, again in 1988, and again in 2007. Without significant development in the national and local economy and substantial improvement of living conditions for the people in Myanmar at large, opium production on the periphery is bound to thrive again, and competition for control over resources among different interest groups will continue to threaten political stability. As indeed forewarned by ethnic minority leaders in the wake of cease-fire agreements, “Without real evidence of economic progress and socio-political reforms, it will be difficult to maintain support for peaceful advocacy in the long term.”²⁷

Ethnic politics has a large part to play in nation building. As some have observed, “Any attempt by any political forces to dominate the political scene in Myanmar cannot succeed without the support of the ethnic minorities.”²⁸ In the light of this understanding, democracy as a preferred form of rule does not necessarily provide an effective solution to the long-standing ethnic conflict. The issue of ethnic politics does indeed put the viability of the opposition NLD to the test. As some have argued, even if the opposition dominated by the Bamar (Burmese) majority comes to power through a democratic process, ethnic problems will continue to challenge the political system and peace (Li, this volume).²⁹ As it stands now, the NLD does not enjoy the complete support and trust of the ethnic minorities, and as far as the ethnic minority leaders are concerned, the NLD does not guarantee their rights (Kyaw, this volume).

²⁷ Smith, *State of Strife*, p. 52.

²⁸ Li Chenyang, “Miandian baofa jiasha geming de yuanyin yu Miandian zhengju zouxiang,” p. 8.

²⁹ U Nu’s policies of integration that seriously alienated ethnic minorities are said to be directly responsible for the secession sought by the peripheral states, eventually leading to Ne Win’s seizure of power in the 1960s. See Li Chenyang, “Miandian dulihou lijie zhengfu minzu zhengce de yanbian” (2003).

For ideological reasons, the Western strategies are underpinned by support for the opposition NLD, notwithstanding that over the years the organization has been significantly marginalized in the political process, for reasons not just limited to government suppression. As an alternative political force, first of all, the NLD has focused its strategy squarely on a demand to hand over power, with Aung San Suu Kyi unyielding in her position on international sanctions. Personal politics, meanwhile, has taken its toll—for the NLD, everything is about Aung San Suu Kyi (Kyaw, in this volume), leaving nation building and the welfare of the Myanmar people hanging in the balance. Another equally grave situation is that, as an opposition, the NLD has over the past two decades sought to win support from the West, and that support has become the sole base of NLD influence; yet this patron-clientship has done little to boost the influence of the NLD within the country (Li, this volume). The situation, furthermore, has been aggravated by what are identified as “internal problems of social movement organizations and the mistakes of movement activists” (Kyaw, this volume).

The proposed Constitution will be controversial, especially the expected difficulties in adopting future amendments to diminish *Tatmadaw* dominance. But the referendum is likely to adopt it for the following reasons: one, there is a general fatigue among the public for recurring conflict and a strong wish for change, and in that light, time has come for all interest groups to seek national reconciliation and sustainable peace; two, despite the dominance of the military, the Constitution is likely to provide the compromises that different groups with divided interests can expect under the circumstances. When internal peace takes precedence, the influence of external forces can diminish. With the referendum on the new Constitution and a firm timetable for general elections, there is no question that political change is in the making (however slow it may appear to outsiders). The question remains what role the international community can play in this process in order to be counted as part of the change. At the moment, the dwindling influence of the West in Myanmar’s political process ought to be a cause of some concern.³⁰

³⁰ The rebuff by the military government to the UN reform plans is an example. “Burma generals reject UN’s reform plans,” *Financial Times*, March 10, 2008, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9b4349f4-eebb-11dc-97ec-0000779fd2ac.html>>.

Given that the Asian countries “do not have the luxury of distance” (Smith, this volume), constructive engagement/intervention seems to be a workable approach, in spite of the controversy over the merits of economic cooperation by Myanmar’s neighbors (Kyaw, this volume). Rather than exerting political pressure, the West’s cooperation with ASEAN can effectuate ASEAN’s dealings with Myanmar. If the West wishes to maintain its influence in the process of democratic change in Myanmar, it has to adapt to the changing circumstances and cooperate, not just with the regional actors but also with the incumbent government in Myanmar. International cooperation requires an alignment of interests as well as methods.

All issues have more than one side, and effective solutions rely on a balanced approach. “Taking a different view from the other’s position” is a Chinese style conflict-averse approach. As far as the West is concerned, values “we” identify are deemed important for things to change “out there;” but “out there” what matters is lasting peace and national survival. To the West, the current military government constitutes a problem because it is not democratically elected and represses free society; for the people in Myanmar, the military government is a problem because the living conditions for the majority under its rule twenty years on have steadily worsened. Obviously, neither the Constitution, nor the general election, offers a quick solution to the longstanding ethnic conflict, but can pave the way for nation-building, which may take more than one generation’s effort to realize. Political cultures of conflict can change as socio-economic conditions improve; at the same time, change of any importance can be a drawn-out process. To aim for a *long-term solution* rather than short-term change is decidedly more realistic and helpful. Economic development is meanwhile an important step for achieving political stability.

Myanmar has for the past two decades been a focal point of international attention. Dialogue and exchanges have had less of an influence on the country’s internal affairs than on bilateral relations between the parties involved. Not all countries seek to play a role, perhaps; rather they have in one way or another been forced by the circumstances to make that choice. As efforts, the *imposition of sanctions* on the Myanmar government by the West and *economic cooperation* with the Myanmar government by its Asian neighbors may not seriously undermine each other as such; nevertheless,

discord does make things difficult for each party involved. The rift between the East and West over political progress in Myanmar needs to be closed for the sake of achieving sustainable peace and democracy in the country, and ultimately an international order of harmony.

Part One

The Country in Focus

II. Ethnic Challenges and Border Politics in Myanmar/Burma

Martin Smith

Overview

The achievement of inclusive peace and reform in Myanmar's ethnic nationality borderlands remains one of the most central challenges facing the country. Since independence from Great Britain in 1948, Myanmar¹ has been beset by near continuous political and ethnic conflict that has seen the country decline from one of the most potentially prosperous in Asia to one of the world's poorest. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Myanmar's political landscape continues to reflect a legacy of instability and state failure that have long been of deep concern to all its neighbors. Armed conflict, poverty, refugee outflow, illicit narcotics and the spread of HIV-AIDS and other disease in Myanmar's borderlands have long under-pinned social and humanitarian crises in one of the least-developed frontier regions in Asia.

In an increasingly globalized world, such political stasis and economic malaise are becoming ever more unsustainable and outdated. Standing between the modern international power-houses of China, India and ASEAN, in the coming decade political and economic developments between Myanmar and all its Asian neighbors will become increasingly dependent and inter-connected.

For the present, Myanmar remains one of the most isolated countries in Asia. But its post-colonial reputation as the "hermit nation of Asia" is something of an anomaly. One of the most ethnically diverse countries in Asia, Myanmar's history is inextricably interlinked with those of its

¹ In 1989, Burma was renamed Myanmar by the military government. In the Burmese language, the terms can be considered alternatives. In the English language, Burma is still widely retained, including for historical writings. Myanmar is used by the United Nations and mostly preferred by Asian countries. This chapter will use Myanmar for book consistency. In general, "Burman" is used to describe the majority ethnic group and "Burmese" for citizenship.

neighbors. Located on a strategic crossroads between south and east Asia, its peoples and cultures reflect a deep heritage of human flow and inter-action with the territories that constitute modern-day China, Thailand, India, Bangladesh and Laos.² All of Myanmar's borderlands reflect such diversity today, with many of the same ethnic groups inhabiting both sides of international frontiers. This diversity is represented in the autonomous prefectures and counties of China's Yunnan Province, the ethnic states of northeast India, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.

However it is in Myanmar that ethnic discontent has remained most integral to the failures of the post-colonial state. Here ethnic minority (i.e. non-Burman) peoples constitute an estimated third of the country's 56 million population, and they predominate in the seven ethnic nationality states that surround the 3,650-mile international borderline: the Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan (Tai).

In summary, in the twenty-first century Myanmar's ethnic challenges stand in the front-line of regional prospects and development.

Myanmar Politics in the Post-Colonial Era

The difficulties in achieving internal peace and stable international relations have remained closely interlinked in Myanmar since independence. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) took up arms against the parliamentary government of prime minister U Nu within three months of the British departure, while armed insurrection spread to such ethnic groups as the Karen, Karenni, Mon, Pao and Rakhine by early 1949. All were dissatisfied with the rights and territories granted under the 1947 constitution. From the late 1950s, further political agitation developed in the Kachin and Shan states where resentment grew against perceived governmental neglect and ethnic discrimination by the country's Burman-majority leaders. In response, in 1962 Gen. Ne Win seized power in a military coup to prevent what he described as the threat of "federalism" which, he claimed, would break up the Union.³ But his idiosyncratic solution – the monolithic "Burmese Way to

² For a recent examination of the country's history on the "highways of Asia", see, Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

³ *The Times* (UK), March 3, 1962.

Socialism” – only brought further political and economic failures to the country, causing armed opposition to spread.

For a quarter of a century, Myanmar retreated into governmental and economic isolation under Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In 1979, Ne Win even withdrew the country from the Non-Aligned Movement. Such seclusion, however, was not reflected in the country’s rugged borderlands which came under the control of a diversity of insurgent groups and alliances: one organized by the CPB from the China border, and the other by the ethnic National Democratic Front (NDF) from the Thai border. In many respects, the BSPP’s failures underpinned armed opposition strength. As conflict became entrenched and the black market boomed, insurgency became a way of life, with armed opposition groups very often the *de facto* administrations dealing with neighboring authorities. Unofficial trades flourished in everything from cattle, jade, teak and opium leaving Myanmar to medicines, engines and luxury goods passing the other way. But with the human toll ever mounting, there were no real winners and losers in these unending wars.⁴

All the time, Myanmar was declining to the point of socio-economic collapse. This was highlighted in December 1987 by its accession to Least Developed Country status at the United Nations. The following year Gen. Ne Win resigned and his BSPP government was swiftly brought down by popular protests that swept urban areas and refocused world attention on the country for the first time in decades.

Myanmar’s political crisis was by no means over, however. In September 1988, the contemporary State Peace and Development Council (SPDC: at first State Law and Order Restoration Council [SLORC]) assumed power in another military take-over, suspending the BSPP’s 1974 constitution and ending the country’s second era of post-colonial government. In the following years, tens of thousands of refugees and political exiles continued crossing Myanmar’s borders into neighboring countries. Two decades later, a new constitution and civilian-elected government have yet to be introduced,

⁴ E.g., for a history of these conflicts by this author, see, Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991 and 1999).

and many of the underlying conditions of political and ethnic impasse still remain. Both military government and armed opposition have endured.

Borderlands and International Politics in the Post-Colonial Era

During the past six decades, it has remained a perennial challenge for Asian neighbors to keep pace with internal conflicts in Myanmar and international geo-politics that have affected every border region. On the eve of independence, many of these difficulties had been compounded by upheavals during anti-colonial struggles and the Second World War. From these experiences, each country had particular legacies that were to impact on cross-border relations during the post-colonial age. Along each frontier there remained elements of what can be described as “regional conflict complexes” in which non-intrastate actors have played critical roles.⁵

In India’s case, Myanmar’s politicians were keen to emphasize national separation at independence and consign colonial connections to history. Somewhat uniquely, Myanmar did not join the British Commonwealth of Nations and, subsequently, the South East Asia Treaty Organisation was also declined. To the resentment of many independence nationalists, until 1937 “Burma” had been administered as a province of the British Indian Empire, precipitating large-scale immigration from India. This became the source of communal tensions and sometime violence that saw an estimated 500,000 ethnic Indians flee during the Second World War and another 300,000 in the 1960s after Gen. Ne Win seized power. In 1951 a Treaty of Friendship was concluded between the two countries, and prime ministers Pandit Nehru and U Nu became personally close. But relations between the two capitals of New Delhi and Yangon were always distant. Subsequently, from the 1960s ethnic unrest also broke out in India’s volatile northeast, leading to insurgencies on both sides of the little-policed frontier, including the Naga and Chin (Mizo-Zomi). During the Ne Win era, however, diplomatic relations were minimal between the two governments, and, until the present day, the Indo–Myanmar frontier is one of the few borderland

⁵ The term was coined by Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg in, “Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989–97,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (1998), pp. 621–34.

regions where ethnic conflict has sometimes continued in two countries at the same time.⁶

A similar pattern of post-colonial fall-out and conflict affected relations with Pakistan and, from 1971, the new state of Bangladesh. In particular, a Muslim insurgency for the separation of northern Arakan broke out in 1947–48 – either for independence or conjunction with East Pakistan. During the following decade, ethnic and communist-based insurgencies also took root among the Buddhist Rakhine majority. A Rakhine state was eventually demarcated in the 1974 constitution under the BSPP. But instability continued along the 152-mile border where a diversity of insurgent organizations and factions remained. Against this backdrop, major exoduses of over 200,000 Muslim refugees took place into Bangladesh on two different occasions: in 1978 and, again, during 1991–92. Faced with such crises, Bangladesh authorities mostly turned a blind eye to the activities of dissident groups who continued to criss-cross the remote border. Indeed some officials regarded them as a southern buffer against the expansion of the insurgent Shanti Bahini (formed 1972) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Even greater turbulence has prevailed since independence along Myanmar's southeast border with Thailand. The structures of conflict have transformed and been sustained through every era of government in both countries. Until the present day, armed opposition groups among such ethnic nationality peoples as the Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan have continued to control territory in many areas along the 1,304-mile border. Here they have mostly maintained workable – and sometimes close – relations with Thai authorities on the other side of the frontier. In particular, the Shan (Tai) are relatives of Thailand's majority population, and there has long been a general sympathy for their nationality cause.

In Thailand's case, however, the security stakes were raised very much higher from the late 1940s by international geo-politics, when Thailand

⁶ The National Socialist Council of Nagaland, for example, is currently split between the Isaac-Muivah faction on the India side of the border and the Khaplang faction in Myanmar. For a recent history of ethnic struggles on the India side, see, Subir Bhaumik, *Insurgencies in India's Northeast: Conflict, Co-optation and Change*. East-West Center Washington Working Papers, No.10 (Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

became a US-backed bulwark against the spread of communist insurgencies during the Cold War era. This “domino theory” fear saw Thailand allow the settlement of armed Guomindang (KMT) remnants from China along its northern border during the 1950s and, subsequently, the acceptance of the Karen National Union (KNU), New Mon State Party (NMSP), Shan State Army (SSA) and other ethnic forces in a “buffer state” policy that continued throughout the Ne Win era. Indeed in the late 1960s, with quasi-CIA backing, the deposed prime minister U Nu was even allowed to establish the Parliamentary Democracy Party (PDP) from Thailand in alliance with the KNU, NMSP and other ethnic forces to begin armed struggle against the Ne Win government and prevent the insurgent CPB linking up with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). From the early 1980s, with the CPT’s decline, Thailand’s geo-political priorities began to change. But the legacy of these conflicts remains prevalent in most border areas today, where as many as a dozen armed opposition groups from Myanmar remain active and a huge refugee and migrant population has continued to grow.

Cross-border relations with China also went through major shifts-and-turns after Myanmar’s independence. Often forgotten today, the 1949–50 invasion of several thousand US-backed KMT remnants into the Shan and Kachin states following the communist victory in China had the severest consequences in Myanmar’s internal politics. For a brief time, they also threatened international escalation. Only through United Nations (UN) interventions in 1953 and 1961 was the international crisis defused. Many KMT units, however, did not evacuate to Taiwan but simply transformed themselves into the Shan state’s insurgent mosaic. Here they played a crucial role during the following decades in elevating the Golden Triangle’s opium trade to its lucrative international dimensions.⁷

After this difficult start, relations between the Myanmar government and the new People’s Republic of China gradually improved, and in 1960 a ten-year Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression was signed in Beijing, along with a Boundary Agreement to demarcate the 1,357 mile border. But in 1968, following anti-Chinese riots in Yangon, relations between the Beijing and BSPP governments completely collapsed. This led to

⁷ Many of these events were described in Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972.)

a decade of full-scale military backing for the CPB from the Communist Party of China. With this “party to party” support, the CPB was able to seize control of large territories along the Yunnan Province border inhabited by such nationality peoples as the Kachin, Kokang, Lahu, Palaung, Shan and Wa. Despite the CPB’s 1989 demise, the legacy of these years still lives on today. Chinese remains a commonly-spoken language in many trans-Salween districts and the CPB’s former “liberated zones” are administered by breakaway ethnic ceasefire forces, whose leaders continue to maintain cross-border relations with Yunnan Province.⁸

Finally it should be mentioned that even Laos, with its border of just 156 miles, was also affected by Myanmar’s political and ethnic chaos after independence. Most notably, in 1967 Laos was the scene of one of the most notorious drug battles in Golden Triangle history when the KMT forces of Gens. Li and Tuan crossed the Mekong River to fight with the Shan United Army of Khun Sa for control of trafficking routes. Over 150 combatants were killed in fighting that ended with the bombardment of both sides by the Laotian air-force.⁹

As such events testify, the borderlands of all Myanmar’s neighbors were enveloped by the consequences of conflict after independence. As a result, intra-government relations remained weak and cross-border relationships were often better with ethnic and political opposition groups than they were with the central government in Yangon, both during the parliamentary era of the 1950s and the military socialist era after 1962. No neighboring government had intended such a paradigm. Indeed, as today, the neutral policies of Myanmar governments were appreciated. This helped keep the country out of the Cold War and spreading conflicts in Indo-China during the 1950s and 1960s. But such a pervasive imbalance in relations with Asian neighbors had only been entrenched by the failures of Ne Win’s isolationist BSPP. Stakeholders on many different sides hoped that, one day, Myanmar’s political relationships would change, both inside and outside the country.

⁸ For a history of China–Myanmar relations, see, Xiaolin Guo, *Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper (March 2007).

⁹ McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin*, pp. 322–8.

Thus, as the 1988 unrest loomed, all Myanmar's neighbors were deeply aware of the scale of emergency in one of the most strife-torn countries in Asia. For Asian neighbors, Myanmar's political crisis did not begin in 1988. Rather, the BSPP's collapse that year represented the first opportunity in decades to try and address the urgent challenges of improving international relations, supporting peace and building regional cooperation anew.

This was not the only wind of change about to blow. In 1989 the Cold War ended, heralding the greatest shake-up in international politics since the start of the post-colonial era and only adding to the imperatives for socio-political change. No country was to be immune.

Ceasefires and Changing Geo-Politics in the SPDC Era

Since the assumption of power by the SLORC-SPDC in 1988, international discourse about Myanmar has mostly focused on the issues of human rights and democratic reforms. These priorities in political transition have been especially significant among governments in the West and through the different mechanisms of the United Nations. It must also be stressed that these pro-democracy aspirations were very clearly reflected by the result of the 1990 general election, Myanmar's first in three decades, in which the majority of seats were won by the newly-formed National League for Democracy (NLD) and 19 ethnic nationality parties. Certainly, two decades after the BSPP's collapse, the need for democratic transition remains paramount, and the country has not transformed from military-based government.

Less analyzed, however, during this uncertain time of transition have been changes in the patterns of ethnic politics and inter-Asian relations with Myanmar. These dual changes have ensured that the landscape of the SPDC's Myanmar in 2008 is importantly different to that of Ne Win's Burma in 1988. Given the complexities of Myanmar's present impasse, the verdict must be out on what the eventual consequences of these developments will be: i.e. whether they will lead to solutions or to further state failures. But whatever the outcome, history may well judge that these twin changes in the borderlands have been the key to the military government's survival. The two themes have remained closely connected.

During the Ne Win era, the country's political equations represented a three-sided struggle between the BSPP government, the CPB and ethnic nationality NDF. By 1990, however, these had been transformed into a new three-cornered struggle between the military government of the SLORC-SPDC, the newly-elected NLD, and the different nationality groups in the borderlands. Here many ethnic forces had been joined by democracy activists fleeing Yangon and other towns following the 1988 crackdown. The result was a new series of alliances formed around the frontiers in the following years, notably the National Council Union of Burma (NCUB: formed 1992) which brought together such veteran ethnic forces as the KNU with the National Coalition Government Union of Burma (NCGUB) of exile MPs-elect. A new cycle of insurgencies appeared underway.

However, while international attention mostly focused on the NLD in central Myanmar and the new anti-government alliances in the borderlands, perhaps the most determining event in national politics was a new ethnic ceasefire policy unveiled by the Military Intelligence chief Gen. Khin Nyunt during the turbulence of 1989. It soon appeared an epoch-shaping decision.

The backdrop to this unexpected turn-around in conflict dynamics was the collapse, due to ethnic mutinies, of the CPB in early 1989. With around 15,000 troops under arms, it was the country's largest insurgent force at that time. But with China's aid halted, the CPB's post-colonial dogmas appeared – like those of the BSPP – out of tune with the peoples and times. As the breakaway leaders formed new forces among the Kokang, Wa and other ethnic groups along China's border, a race quickly started to gain their support. Against many expectations, this race was won by the military government which offered ceasefires to armed ethnic organizations for the country's first peace process of any consequence since the 1963–64 "Peace Parley" under Gen. Ne Win. The peace terms were straightforward: the ceasefire groups would be allowed to maintain their arms and territory until a new constitution is introduced. On this basis, the ethnic ceasefires spread from a slow beginning to include 17 ethnic forces by the mid-1990s (see Appendix). These included the newly-formed United Wa State Army (UWSA) and such important NDF members as the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), NMSP and SSA (North). For the first time in decades, fighting halted in many war-torn areas.

Equally important, the ethnic ceasefires and the prospect of peace came to be welcomed by all Myanmar's watching neighbors. From the late 1980s, this was signified by a steady improvement in government-to-government relations and also by border policies that affirmed national priorities and international geo-politics had changed. A return to the frontier "laissez-faire" of the Ne Win days was deemed impossible. Realpolitik in the post-Cold War era now meant engagement with Yangon.

The subsequent course of events has never been smooth, and it needs to be stressed that there are border areas where armed conflict has continued. Such a diversity of domestic and international issues cannot be reduced to a simple narrative from selective events. But in general, all Myanmar's neighbors have changed as the years have passed by from policies of caution or even disapproval of the military government in 1988 (in the cases of India, Thailand and Bangladesh) to those of support for Asian "constructive engagement" to try and bring about political reform. These changing realities were mostly clearly signaled by Myanmar's 1997 membership of ASEAN. In the meantime, neighboring authorities have consistently sent signals to ethnic and dissident forces along their borders that they should work towards the ending of armed struggle.

Another dynamic, however, has also entered the international equations during the past two decades, and in the twenty-first century it is likely to become the key locomotive of change: that of the political economy. With the 1988 announcement of "open-door" economic policies by the SLORC-SPDC, trade and business relationships sprang into new life across the borderlands. There has been no grand economic plan and, in the view of critics, many business deals have been opportunistic rather than bringing tangible benefits to the local peoples. But from *ad hoc* beginnings, their momentum has gathered pace to become increasingly formalized and ground-breaking in scope. Benchmark moments include logging and fishing deals agreed by Thailand's commander-in-chief Chavalit Yongchaiyut in late 1988; China's reported US\$ 1.4 billion contract to begin arms sales to the military government in 1990¹⁰; the building of gas pipelines by Western and

¹⁰ Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk: Eastbridge, 2002), p. 137. See also Andrew Selth, *Chinese Military Bases in Burma: The Explosion of a Myth*, Griffith Asia Institute, Regional Outlook Paper, No.10 (2007).

Asian consortia from the Andaman Sea to Thailand in the mid-1990s; and a plethora of new natural gas, hydro-electric and natural resource deals involving all neighboring countries that accelerated from the turn of the twenty-first century.

Such international cooperation has been cautious rather than precipitous, and there have been many controversies along the way. In the face of refugee outflows, for example, local authorities in both Bangladesh and Thailand continued to show sympathy for opposition groups from Myanmar. In 1991–92, for example, a border war briefly seemed possible with Bangladesh during the exodus of over 200,000 Muslim refugees into the country. A decade later, local Thai officials tacitly supported the insurgent SSA (South) during 2001–2 in fighting that broke out against SPDC and ceasefire UWSA forces along Thailand's northern frontier.¹¹ In particular, the continuing outflow from the Shan state of illicit opium and heroin – and a rampant new trade in methamphetamines – has remained a constant source of cross-border concern.¹² And yet, by 2007 a Thai company was reportedly moving ahead with a massive US\$ 6 billion project for the construction of the Tasang dam in the heart of the strife-torn state.¹³

Similarly, India initially remained supportive of refugees and Myanmar's democracy movement until economic relationships were prioritized under the government's "Look East" policy (first announced in 1992). From the turn of the century, Indian companies became prime investors (along with South Korea's Daewoo International) in the new Shwe gas-fields off the Rakhine state coast. The US\$ 120 million Sittwe port expansion was also agreed as part of a major infrastructure project to open up the Kaladan valley frontier. Against this backdrop, joint counter-insurgency operations were started for the first time along the long-lawless common frontier. Clearly, political and business leaders in India decided that, in a fast-changing region, they must be primarily engaged on the ground with Myanmar's government if they want

¹¹ For an overview of complexities, see Don Pathan, "Thailand's War on Drugs," in Martin Jelsma, Tom Kramer, and Pietje Vervest, eds., *Trouble in the Triangle: Opium and Conflict in Burma* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2005), pp. 101–24.

¹² For an analysis of the UWSA, see Tom Kramer, *The United Wa State Party: Narco-Army or Ethnic Nationalist Party?* East-West Center Policy Studies, No. 38 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, and Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

¹³ *The Nation* (Thailand), November 21, 2007.

to have influence and impact. In the coming century, India's economic growth is considered imperative.

However, undoubtedly the greatest influence in the changing borderland relationships has been China. Despite Myanmar's colonial connection with India and contemporary membership in ASEAN, the country's international relations have generally been most closely defined in history with China with which it is considered to enjoy "Paukphaw" (fraternal) friendship. Since 1989, the governments in both countries have worked on restoring this relationship, with economic cooperation increasing at accelerating speed.¹⁴ This has coincided with a time of extraordinary modernization and expansion in China's own economy. Over recent years, China has become the primary destination for timber, jade and other natural resource products from Myanmar, and massive investments from China in Myanmar are planned to be completed during the coming decade. Official China-Myanmar bilateral trade increased by 37.7 per cent during the first three quarters of 2006-7 alone.¹⁵ Whatever the political relationships (and providing that they go ahead), the completion of such projects as oil and gas pipelines from the Rakhine coast to Yunnan Province, the re-opening of the old Ledo road between India-Myanmar-China, and the Trans-Asian Railway linking Myanmar with China and other Asian neighbors will change the region's political geography forever.

Inevitably, these policy changes in neighboring countries are having increasing impact on different ethnic groups along Myanmar's borders. Insurgent resistance to the SPDC government has continued in some areas. But, in general, those armed opposition parties that have shown the greatest abilities in self-survival during the past two decades are those that have adjusted their strategies to the realities of the changing geo-political world around them.

¹⁴ See, e.g., the visit of prime minister Gen. Soe Win to China: "China and Myanmar have set up fine tradition of Paukphaw relations for many years; Myanmar has been taking steps for economic development practicing market-oriented economic system," *The New Light of Myanmar*, October 23, 2005.

¹⁵ "China-Myanmar economic ties make new progress," *Xinhua*, December 9, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007/12/09/content_7219994.htm

In particular, with the final cut-off in aid to the CPB, Chinese officials made it clear to ethnic forces in the northeast borderlands that, while they would not be coerced by China to give up their political struggles, they could not expect support for insurgent action – nor would a refugee influx into Yunnan Province be accepted except in real emergency.¹⁶ At the same time, China continued the opening of the frontier to trade and travel from the ceasefire areas, delineating “provincial” border-posts for the ceasefire groups as opposed to “national” border-posts for the SPDC. Health and other cross-border projects were also allowed, and this policy has generally remained constant since 1989. This Chinese support helps account for the relative stability and confidence in the ceasefires by such groups as the KIO and UWSA. In these ceasefire areas, modern towns have been growing at such locations as Laiza, Laukkai and Mongla along the Yunnan border.

In contrast along Myanmar’s southeast frontier, where government policies have been less consistent, there has been markedly less support for the ceasefires. Since 1988 the Thai borderlands have remained a main centre for anti-SPDC resistance. In the meantime, official refugee numbers in Thailand have grown from around 20,000 in 1988 to over 150,000 today (mostly Karen and Karenni) in the largest refugee program in southeast Asia.¹⁷ Significant refugee populations also remain in Bangladesh and India where, although on a lesser scale, there has also been continuing fighting and instability along the frontiers during the past two decades.

After nearly two decades of SPDC rule, the contemporary landscape therefore presents many paradoxes. Certainly, the ethnic ceasefires and changing Asian policies have contributed to significant differences from the isolationist Ne Win era that preceded. Indeed the SPDC chairman Senior-General Than Shwe has called the regime’s ceasefire policies of “national reconsolidation” the most defining characteristic of SPDC rule, bringing

¹⁶ China has never given direct military support to ethnic opposition forces from Myanmar. During the BSPP era, aid was only given by China to the CPB as “party to party” support for a fraternal organization. It was thus through the CPB, with which some insurgent groups allied, that ethnic parties sometimes received Chinese military supplies prior to 1988.

¹⁷ Thailand Burma Border Consortium, *TBBC Programme Report: January to June 2007* (Bangkok: TBBC), p. 64.

about only the fifth “unified era” in national politics during over a thousand years of history.¹⁸

And yet, as the UN and many international voices criticize, economic and political reforms in the country remain at a very uncertain stage.¹⁹ In particular, a new general election is awaited to introduce the new constitution, and the NLD which won the previous election in 1990 is marginalized from taking part in political discussions. Nor have the ceasefires been transformed by sustainable agreements and actions. Despite the advent of ceasefires, the number of armed opposition groups in Myanmar has, in fact, continued to increase to around 30 forces or factions with ceasefires by 2007 and another dozen that are still in armed conflict with the SPDC (see Appendix). Without doubt, the scale of fighting is much reduced from 20 years ago. But the country is yet to move away from military rule and the legacies of armed politics that have dominated the country for so long.²⁰ Indeed, as Mary Callahan has argued, war and state-building have remained so inter-related in Myanmar as to produce the “most durable incarnation of military rule in history”.²¹

Against this backdrop, humanitarian conditions in many parts of the country have continued to worsen. By 2007, Myanmar was estimated to have fallen to 14th place in the “Failed States Index” and per capita GDP to less than half that of neighboring Bangladesh and Cambodia.²² It was also ranked bottom, along with Somalia, in the 2007 corruption index of Transparency International.²³ Such stagnation and poverty were reflected by rising political and economic discontent around the country, including in ceasefire areas.

¹⁸ *The New Light of Myanmar*, February 27, 1998.

¹⁹ Most recently, the UN Security Council “regretted the slow rate of progress” in January 2008, see United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Press Statement on Myanmar,” SC/9228,

January 17, 2008, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sc9228.doc.htm>.

²⁰ For a recent analysis of armed politics by this author, see, Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma*, East-West Center Policy Studies, No. 36 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, and Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

²¹ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 3, 174.

²² United Nations Country Team in Myanmar, “Statement of the United Nations Country Team in Myanmar on the Occasion of UN Day,” October 24, 2007, <http://www2.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/KHII-78W7DR?OpenDocument>.

²³ *Associated Press*, September 27, 2007.

Thus while Asian neighbors continue to hope for a brighter future through their policies of “constructive” engagement, many of Myanmar’s peoples questioned why the country was still not moving forward more quickly to achieving substantive reforms. As the events of the “Saffron Revolution” warned, in the final analysis it must be Myanmar’s peoples who determine their political future. And once again, as in other political eras, developments in the ethnic borderlands are likely to be key. However, as one ethnic leader privately commented: “We have ceasefires, but we do not have peace.”

The Contemporary Ethnic Landscape

Despite the continuing impasse in national politics, life has never been static on the ground during the SLORC–SPDC era. Over the past two decades, a restructuring of political, social and ethnic organizations has been taking place through which the military government contends that Myanmar’s transition will take place to a “multi-party” state that practices “disciplined” democracy. But for the moment, any definitive form has yet to be introduced.

Having side-stepped any swift transfer of power after the 1990 general election, the SLORC–SPDC leaders instead initiated three main processes to lead the way to political change: a hand-picked National Convention, first started in 1993, to draw up the principles for a new constitution; the ethnic ceasefires to promote national reconciliation in the country; and the creation of the mass Union Solidarity and Development Association (founded 1993) as a civilian organization to support military-led government around the country. Parallel with these initiatives, “market-oriented” economic policies were announced to end the military socialist era. In addition, faced with growing trade sanctions by Western nations, the improvement of economic and political ties was prioritized with Asian neighbors, leading to Myanmar’s 1997 membership of ASEAN. In 2004, a seven-stage political roadmap was also proclaimed to lead from the constitution-drafting process of the National Convention to a nationwide referendum and, ultimately, general election to restore multi-party democracy to the country.

Progress, however, has been slow. Repression and dissidence continued, and reconciliation has never taken place with the NLD, which withdrew from the National Convention in 1995 and whose leader Aung San Suu Kyi

remained under frequent house arrest. In 2004 the prime minister Gen. Khin Nyunt, who had been instrumental in the ethnic ceasefires, was also arrested and his Military Intelligence Service purged. In 2005, the national capital was also moved from Yangon to an undeveloped site at Nay Pyi Taw in the heart of the country. With such issues dominating the headlines, it took until 2007 for the National Convention to complete a constitutional draft, and in early 2008 it was announced that a referendum to approve the constitution would be held in May and then a general election to introduce the new political era in 2010. But many doubts remained over the political roadmap, including who would be involved or excluded from its future path.

Against this backdrop, ethnic politics in Myanmar have continued to reflect discord and conflict. As yet, there is no political or disarmament agreement that has spread to every part of the country and allowed post-conflict building to fully take root across long-torn societies. In the interim, ethnic-based organizations have largely become divided into four main groupings: electoral parties, ceasefire groups, non-ceasefire groups and community-based organizations (see Appendix).

In private, there are often linkages between many of these groups and, in general, all support democratic reforms and the establishment of local systems of self-government in which the political, cultural and economic rights of all nationality peoples are guaranteed. In every borderland, a war-weariness is widespread as well as the belief that it is very often the non-Burman peoples who pay the greatest humanitarian price for the instabilities in the country at large. However, as in other political eras in Myanmar's history, the structures in ethnic politics and society remain complex and, very often, separated by conflict. There is no unanimous voice representing the ethnic cause.

The first grouping in ethnic politics – the electoral parties – reflect these divisions. Nineteen newly-formed nationality parties won seats in the 1990 general election, forming the second largest block of victorious candidates after the NLD. Of these, only six continued attendance at the National Convention, while the rest were variously disbanded, banned or ceased to attend. Of the excluded parties, most are allied with the NLD. But in 2002 the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) was also formed to support the

creation of a federal union. UNA parties, however, faced many political restrictions and in 2005 their main spokesperson, Hkun Htun Oo of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), was sentenced to a 93-year jail term for alleged “defamation of the state”.

Divisions also exist among the ceasefire groups which, following various splits and defections, had grown from 17 forces in the mid-1990s to around 30 by the time the National Convention ended in 2007. Some of the ceasefire groups represent little more than local militia but others, such as the KIO and UWSA, maintain sizeable armies and administer large areas of borderland territory, especially in the Kachin and Shan states. In general, a distinction can be made between ceasefire groups that prioritize political goals and those that are essentially business-focused organizations, which, in turn, has led to allegations of “warlordism”.²⁴ In particular, illicit trafficking in narcotics initially escalated dramatically in the China and Thailand borderlands during the first years of the ceasefires in both opium and a new trade in methamphetamines. Eventually, with UN humanitarian support, “drug-free” areas were declared in the Kokang and Wa hills. But a number of UWSA leaders remain under 2005 indictment by US law enforcement authorities for alleged drug-trafficking, which, to the disappointment of many ethnic parties who hope for more engaged policies, is one of the few issues that has maintained Western governmental interest in the ceasefires.²⁵

Business priorities aside, most ceasefire groups can be separated in political terms into two main camps: the first, a 13-party alliance led by ex-NDF members that seek a federal union, and the second, a four-party alliance of former CPB members – sometimes referred to as the Peace and Democratic Front – which advocate an autonomous region system similar to that practiced in Yunnan Province. Importantly, whatever their political goals, all the ceasefire groups have largely stayed allied to their ceasefire agreements

²⁴ For recent analyses of the ceasefires, see Mary P. Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation, and Coexistence*. East-West Center Policy Studies, No. 31 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, and Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007); and Zaw Oo and Win Min, *Assessing Burma's Ceasefire Accords*. East-West Center Policy Studies, No. 39 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, and Washington, D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

²⁵ See footnotes 11 and 12.

and the roadmap process.²⁶ In private, many dissatisfactions exist over the slow pace of reform and such issues as the government's monopolization of resources, continuing military pressures and the poor humanitarian situation in many communities. But ceasefire leaders have generally remained agreed that, in the light of community sufferings since independence, armed struggle alone will never bring about peace and reform. New ways have to be sought to bring Myanmar's state of strife to an end. They have thus continued to promote a notion of "peace through development" with the military government, which they want to spread to include every ethnic group and political party in the country.

A very different view has been expressed by the non-ceasefire groups. Since 1988, a plethora of insurgent groups have remained active in Myanmar's borderlands, especially with Thailand, Bangladesh and India, including new opposition groups among the Burman-majority. These post-1988 relationships saw the formation of a number of new "united front" alliances between armed ethnic forces and Burman pro-democracy groups, principally the NCUB which includes the exile NCGUB headed by Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin, Dr Sein Win. However, echoing former disillusion with the Burman-led CPB and U Nu's PDP, there was also disappointment among many ethnic groups about their "united front" performance.

During the 1990s, this disillusion led to several ethnic forces agreeing ceasefires with the SPDC. As ceasefire leaders argued, it is a more realistic strategy to deal with Burman-majority groups who actually have power – not those who are in opposition. In consequence, the departure of such ethnic forces as the KIO and NMSP from the NCUB and other anti-government alliances led to a steady fall in insurgent activity in the borderlands. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, only four insurgent groups remained of any real strength, and they were also further weakened by internal splits and defections.²⁷ All represent non-Burman peoples: the Karenni National Progressive Party, KNU and SSA (South) which are based on the Thai

²⁶ The situation, however, has not remained stable during the different ceasefires. There have been defector groups from such organizations as the KIO and NMSP, some of which subsequently made their own ceasefires with the SPDC, and others, principally from the Shan State National Army, that returned to armed struggle.

²⁷ For instance, the 1994–95 breakaway from the KNU of the newly-formed Democratic Karen Buddhist Army which agreed a ceasefire with the SPDC.

border and the Chin National Front (CNF) which is active on the India border.

Among these groups, too, there have been ceasefire talks with the military government during the past 15 years.²⁸ But, in general, insurgent veterans in their leaderships have maintained a long-held belief (which is shared by the NLD and most electoral parties) of the need for “political reforms first” to bring about real political change in the country. On this basis, the KNU and other veteran ethnic forces have not accepted ceasefires, and they remained, like the NLD and UNA parties, outside the SPDC’s roadmap process. Moreover with government offensives continuing and many forces concerned about international investments in their territories, there has been increased discussion about how to face these challenges – whether through increased militancy or through lobbying actions. In particular, the Ethnic Nationalities Council (founded 2001) has tried to strengthen inter-ethnic dialogue and international diplomacy for better understanding about ethnic sufferings and goals. Their representatives have been frequent visitors in Asian countries and the West. But as yet, they have not achieved any decisive momentum of support from the international community.

Finally, this leads to the fourth ethnic grouping: the community-based and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They are often the most overlooked in discussions of Myanmar affairs, but in some respects they have been the most locally dynamic. The roots of these organizations are generally in the cultural and religious areas of society. But as part of the post-1988 changes in the country, many expanded the energy and spread of work. Representatives of such organizations as the Myanmar Council of Churches and Kachin Baptist Convention have been active as go-betweens in ethnic ceasefire talks (many Chins, Kachins and Karens are Christians), while the Buddhist sangha have been important elements in education and social welfare among such communities as the Mon, Palaung and Pao. In their efforts some analysts have seen hopes for the re-emergence of a previously dormant civil society without which peace and democracy are unlikely to

²⁸ See Appendix. The CNF most recently had talks in 2007. The SSA-S is a breakaway group from the ceasefire Mong Tai Army.

become sustainable.²⁹ Indeed research by one international aid agency calculated that the 1990s witnessed the fastest decade in NGO growth in Myanmar's history.³⁰ Many of the community-based groups have also developed linkages with international NGO agencies, including Asian and within ASEAN. Outside of Myanmar, such new relationships have been especially important in the refugee and diaspora border worlds in Thailand, India and Bangladesh.

This dynamism, however, of community-based activity in Myanmar has not spread into the economic field, and, along with political disquiet, this is where evidence of discontent mounted during the SLORC-SPDC era. Despite nearly two decades of ceasefires, the ethnic borderlands remain among the poorest and least developed in Myanmar and the sub-Asian region. Myanmar is currently estimated to have over 500,000 internally-displaced persons, which is the highest figure in any South East Asian country.³¹ In addition, despite recent settlement programs in third countries abroad, there are still over 150,000 refugees in official camps along Thailand's border, where up to two million legal and illegal migrants have also arrived since 1988. Several hundred thousand more refugees and migrants – both official and unofficial – are estimated to remain in Bangladesh, India and Malaysia, where they continue to present humanitarian challenges for all these countries. Clearly, the legacies and fall-out from Myanmar's conflicts still continue.

Inside the country itself, the most serious humanitarian indicators remain in the ceasefire and conflict-zones. Especial regions of vulnerability include the Rakhine state (where 200,000 minority Muslims were resettled after fleeing into Bangladesh during 1991-92), as well as the Chin, Karen, Karenni, Naga and Shan borderlands. Poverty and instability are, in turn, reflected in national health statistics. Myanmar has the second-worst infant mortality

²⁹ See, e.g., Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Burma: Civil Society Skirting Regime Rules," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

³⁰ Brian Heidel, *The Growth of Civil Society in Myanmar* (Bangalore: Books for Change, 2006).

³¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council, *Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2005* (Châtelaine: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Norwegian Refugee Council, 2006), pp. 6, 10, 79.

rate in Asia (after Afghanistan), with malnutrition rates of more than 30 per cent among children under five.³² Such treatable or preventable diseases as HIV-AIDS, malaria and TB are endemic. In addition, the ending of illicit narcotic production is proving extremely difficult in an impoverished environment where around 500,000 households were involved in opium cultivation at the turn of the century.³³ These are serious humanitarian challenges of concern not just for Myanmar but for the international community, and in 2008 the World Food Programme announced it intended increasing food assistance to vulnerable peoples in the borderlands from 500,000 to 1.6 million people over the next three years.³⁴

Furthering local discontent are inequalities in opportunities and wealth. Not only are there individuals within the ceasefire networks who have profited from business deals during the past two decades³⁵, but in many communities it is widely perceived that the greatest profits have been made by natural resource sales and trading companies, such as Htoo Trading and Yuzana, that are backed by government officials.³⁶

Equally pertinent, the military government has also decided and negotiated all major investments in Myanmar and its borderlands with Asian and other international companies. These include the pipe-lines from the Rakhine state coast to Yunnan, the hydro-electric plants at Tasang and Hatgyi on the Salween river, and the continued export of gold and other natural resources

³² The placing came in UNICEF's latest annual report, *The State of the World's Children*. Reported in, e.g., "400 children a day' die in Burma," *The Press Association*, January 23, 2008, http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=paChildren_wed13_Burma_children&show_article=1.

³³ United Nations, Office on Drugs and Crime, *Myanmar: Opium Survey 2005*, p. 29, available online: http://www.unodc.org/pdf/Myanmar_opium-survey-2005.pdf.

³⁴ UN News Centre, "More vulnerable people in Myanmar to benefit from UN food aid in 2008," January 9, 2008. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=25244&Cr=Myanmar&Cr1=>

³⁵ For example, one of Myanmar's largest companies, Asia World, is connected to the former Kokang leader Lo Hsing-han.

³⁶ See e.g., Kachin News Group, "Yuzana Company pollutes river in the world's largest tiger reserve," *Kachinnews.com*, January 16, 2008, http://www.kachinnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=11; Global Witness, *A Conflict of Interest: The uncertain future of Burma's forests* (London: Global Witness, 2003).

into neighboring countries.³⁷ But it remains uncertain how the local communities will benefit. Already, there is considerable resentment at the logging trade – both licit and illicit – that caused massive deforestation on the Thai border in the early 1990s before moving up to the China border where this pattern was repeated from the late 1990s.³⁸ Similarly, the Yadana pipeline that crosses southern Myanmar to Thailand through territory once controlled by the KNU remains controversial and was the subject of litigation for alleged human rights abuses during its construction.³⁹

Clearly, considerable profits are being made through these new international trades. But opposition groups complain that the revenues are not going into the socio-economic progress of the local people nor, in many cases, have these investments been accompanied by greater transparency and accountability. For example, forest products were estimated to constitute Myanmar's second largest source of "legal" foreign exchange during 2004–5, but about 98 per cent of China's recorded import of timber from Myanmar in 2003 was "illegal".⁴⁰ It becomes impossible to correlate figures.

Against this backdrop, tensions have been rising, especially in the Kachin state and Thailand borders. The rights to consultation and control over local development was a key area of concern for ethnic parties at the National Convention to draft a new constitution. But these issues were not substantively resolved. In the meantime, a particular focus of confrontation has become the projected Hatgyi hydroelectric dam in the Karen state in an

³⁷ See, e.g., EarthRights International, *China in Burma: The increasing investment of Chinese multinational corporations in Burma's hydropower, oil & gas, and mining sectors* (2007), <http://www.earthrights.org/files/Reports/BACKGROUND%20China%20in%20Burma.pdf>; EarthRights International, "Another Yadana: The Shwe Natural Gas Pipeline Project (Burma-Bangladesh-India)," August 27, 2004, http://www.earthrights.org/burmareports/another_yadana_the_shwe_natural_gas_pipeline_project_burma-bangladesh-india.html; *At What Price?: Gold Mining in the Kachin State, Burma*. A report by Images Asia & Pan Kachin Development Society (Chiang Mai: Images Asia Environment Desk [E-Desk], in collaboration with the Pan Kachin Development Society [PKDS], 2004).

³⁸ Global Witness, *A Conflict of Interest*.

³⁹ See, e.g., "Total Denial Continues", *EarthRights International*, December 1, 2000, http://www.earthrights.org/burmareports/total_denial_continues.html.

⁴⁰ Global Witness, *A Choice for China: Ending the destruction of Burma's northern frontier forests* (October 2005), p. 9, <http://www.globalwitness.org/reports/index.php?section=burma>.

area where the number of internally-displaced villagers has been rising in recent years in the face of continuing government offensives and KNU attacks. Eventually, work was suspended in September 2007 after a second Thai engineer was killed – allegedly by KNU guerrillas.⁴¹ But until there are real community agreements and sustainable development policies, it is difficult to see how the project can be continued without massive security – and hence more resentment – in the area.

With a host of other mega-projects set to get underway in the next few years, such events are stark warning of the country's long-standing need for peace. All sides in the country's complex political environment agree that development is needed to bring stability and democratic transition to Myanmar. But for the moment, much more dialogue, inclusion and reconciliation are clearly needed on the ground. As the Reverend Mar Gay Gyi, a Karen peace go-between and president of the Myanmar Council of Churches, once told an audience of SPDC ministers, ceasefire leaders and international aid officials: "Only if there is justice will there be peace. No peace without justice, no justice without peace."⁴²

An Outlook to the Future

Myanmar today continues to reflect many contradictory images of state transition and the legacies of conflict in its borderlands. In such frontier areas as Laiza, Panghsang and Mongla on the China border, modern towns are growing in areas that were formally war-zones. And yet in the hills nearby, there are illiteracy levels of up to 90 per cent, poverty is rife, and there are among the highest infant mortality rates in Asia. Similarly, at Myawaddy adjoining the Thai border, a busy flow of trucks, traders and migrants daily cross the Moei River over the Thai-Burmese Friendship Bridge that was opened just a decade ago; their destination is the fast-developing Thai provincial town of Mae Sot. But just a few miles north and south, SPDC military operations are continuing against the insurgent KNU,

⁴¹ "Thai dam project in Burma suspended," *Bangkok Post*, September 5, 2007.

⁴² Speech at opening of Shalom (Peace) Foundation Center, December 3, 2001.

with allegations of the destruction of villages, forced labor and other human rights abuses still being reported.⁴³

Out of such contrasting developments, it is difficult to make ultimate judgments about the long-term direction of Myanmar – other than to reiterate the desire of Myanmar’s peoples for peace, reconciliation and democratic reforms that engages every community and region of the country. Certainly, veteran leaders among stakeholder groups in Myanmar believe that there has never been greater potential and recognition – both internally and internationally – of the overwhelming need for change. However, after another two decades of military rule, the political environment remains fractured, with both military government and armed opposition continuing.

For the SPDC and ceasefire groups, much will come to depend on the new constitution when it is finally introduced. In the final draft, 25 per cent of seats in the future parliament will be reserved for military candidates, and the president must have military experience. In return, certain rights will be returned to the local constituencies, divisions and states, with new “self-administered” territories also established for the Danu, Kokang, Lahu, Palaung, Pao and Wa populations in the Shan state and for the Naga in the Sagaing division. This is a political recognition for some smaller ethnic minorities that did not exist in the two previous constitutions of 1947 and 1974. But to the concern of many ethnic parties, in the new constitution there will be no acknowledgment of federalism; the new system will be unitary – not union. Despite this, most ceasefire parties remain likely to go along with the new constitution on the basis that, to end military government and guarantee the rule of law for all citizens, a new constitution is first essential. After this, they say that they will continue their lobbying for greater ethnic rights and political freedoms through democratic means.

However whether such a process and constitution will be sufficient to resolve Myanmar’s deep problems and establish a new and sustainable political era remains open to question. Many difficulties are looming. Firstly, following the referendum, a future general election and the challenge of disarmament for all the ceasefire groups lies ahead. Secondly, the military

⁴³ For instance, six UN special rapporteurs issued a joint statement of concern after over 20,000 villagers were reportedly displaced along the Thai border in early 2006. See *UN Daily News*, May 16, 2006.

government must reorganize and its leadership transform according to the new constitution and state structures. And thirdly, the NLD, SNLD and other electoral parties – as well as the KNU, SSA-S and non-ceasefire groups – still remain outside the political process. Without the inclusion of these groups, it is difficult to see how the military government's present roadmap will lead to long-term peace and inclusive solutions. One way or another, Myanmar's impasse and chronic under-achievement are likely to continue.

Equally important, Myanmar will also remain a major source of disagreement in the international community. Over the past year, as Asian investments have grown and Myanmar's political crisis has deepened, every day brings new media stories outlining the dilemmas and questioning what the international response should be – with a continuing focus on the role of the UN.⁴⁴ Within the international community, there are inevitably many nuances of opinion, including among ASEAN, European Union (EU) and UN members. For example, during 2007 the USA continued to toughen economic sanctions, while the EU and several member states increased humanitarian aid, both to the borderlands and through the new Three Diseases Fund to combat malaria, tuberculosis and HIV-AIDS. But in general, the divisions between Asian “constructive engagement” and Western “isolation” have remained. As the new ASEAN general-secretary Surin Pitsuwan has often said, unlike Western countries that advocate exclusion and pressure, Thailand does not have the “luxury of distance” but is faced with the “burden of proximity”.⁴⁵

Such ideological outlooks in the West and realpolitik in Asia produce unhelpfully divergent conclusions from very similar concerns about Myanmar's challenges. For while in January 2007 the USA sought to condemn the political and humanitarian situation in Myanmar at the UN

⁴⁴ For example, in two January days, Gillian Wong, “ASEAN won't let Burma troubles slow regional integration,” *Associated Press*, January 21, 2008; Meidyatama Suryodiningrat, “Initiatives for Burma must include China, India,” *The Jakarta Post*, January 21, 2008; Wai Moe, “India's pro-junta stand unlikely to change, say analysts,” *The Irrawaddy*, January 21, 2008; “Myanmar going ‘downhill on all fronts,’ says US,” *Agence-France Press*, January 21, 2008; “China says no to pressure on Myanmar,” *Associated Press*, January 22, 2008; “China urges Myanmar to set date for UN envoy visit,” *Christian Today*, January 22, 2008.

⁴⁵ Sukhumbhand Paribatra, “Burma, ASEAN, Democracy, Dreams and Realities,” *The Nation*, July 16, 1999.

Security Council as a “threat” to international stability⁴⁶, officials in front-line states in Asia – especially in China which vetoed the resolution – generally regard the present landscape as demonstrably better than any that existed pre-1988.

Seen from this neighboring perspective, there have been advances. There is the first peace in many borderland areas in decades; Myanmar is not a source of real controversy between Asian states; the Myanmar government supports the principles of “non-interference”; it has become an ASEAN member; it is becoming a major economic partner; and, while Asian states also express concerns about political failures, it has brought the appearance of stability to a long-divided and volatile country. The days of the Ne Win “time-warp” and border insurgency paradigms have slowly been retreating.⁴⁷ According to Asian officials, therefore, it is essential not to pursue policies that are likely to increase turbulence within Myanmar but to encourage reforms by engagement to support durable peace. Indeed, based on experiences in their own countries, many Asian leaders advocate that democratic change will never be sustainable without prior stability and economic progress.

In the historical context, the neighboring priorities can be understood. But for the moment, many opposition leaders still believe that the “Asian” solution – to concentrate on the economic dimensions of change first – does not sufficiently reflect understanding about the nature of the crisis in Myanmar. Many opposition figures in Myanmar do not support Western strategies of isolation. But they also feel that Asian neighbors need to provide more sensitive and sustained actions in support of socio-political reforms if they are to avoid the creation of a new generation of grievances. As in all fragile states, the law of “unintended consequences” is pervasive in Myanmar. Just as Western sanctions hold back the country and prevent international mechanisms of development assistance reaching the people, so can unconsidered Asian investment lead to commercial exploitation that will ensure continuing poverty. As one ethnic ceasefire leader privately commen-

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *Threat to the Peace: A Call for the UN Security Council to Act in Burma*, report commissioned by Vaclav Havel and Desmond Tutu, September 20, 2005 (Washington: DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, 2005).

⁴⁷ See e.g., Ashley South, “Border-based insurgency: time for a reality check,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 11, 2006.

ted: “China, India and other Asian countries still hope that political development will follow economic development. But the mentality of leaders and politics in Myanmar are very complicated. Asian governments need to understand that there are many urgent issues that first need to be resolved.”⁴⁸

The challenge, therefore, is for the international community to achieve coherent policies that truly support processes for peaceful and inclusive change in Myanmar. The growing urgency of international dilemmas should not become the source of new divisions but the opportunity to seek solutions. Such change cannot be prescriptive. As in other states in transition, it must come from a broad-based approach that addresses political, social, economic, humanitarian and human rights’ issues together. And in Myanmar’s case, the country’s troubled history since independence has long indicated the especial need for focus on ethnic reconciliation and peace-building as a central part of any reform process. In reality, Myanmar’s rugged borderlands have always been gateways rather than mountain barriers, and it is vital that in the coming decade this geo-political status is restored for the benefit of all peoples.

⁴⁸ Interview, January 18, 2007.

Appendix: Status of Ethnic Parties, 2007

1. Main ceasefire groups at National Convention

<i>Name in state media</i>	<i>Usual name/other details</i>
Burma Communist Party (Rakhine State Group)	Communist Party of Burma (Arakan)*
Kachin State Special Region-1 Kachin State Special Region-2	New Democratic Army-Kachin* Kachin Independence Organization**
Kayah State Special Region-1 Kayah State Special Region-2 Kayah State Special Region-3	Kayan National Guard (splinter group from KNLP) Karenni Nationalities Peoples Liberation Front* Kayah New Land Party* **
New Mon State Party	New Mon State Party**
Shan State (North) Special Region-1 Shan State (North) Special Region-2 Shan State (North) Special Region-3 Shan State (East) Special Region-4 Shan State (North) Special Region-5 Shan State (South) Special Region-6 Shan State (North) Special Region-7 Shan State National Army Shan State Nationalities People's Liberation Organization	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (Kokang)* United Wa State Army* Shan State Army (ex-Shan State Progress Party)** National Democratic Alliance Army (east Shan state)* Kachin Defense Army (1991 split from KIO 4th brigade) Pao National Organization** Palaung State Liberation Party**: “disarmed” 2005 1995 split from MTA: 2005 split, some units to SSA-S 2005 local Pao split; 2007 split, some units underground

* Former ally or breakaway group from Communist Party of Burma

** Former National Democratic Front member

2. Splinter ceasefire groups at National Convention from larger ethnic forces

(a) From the Karen National Union (non-ceasefire)

Democratic Kayin Buddhist Association (DKBA) Haungthayaw Special Region Group Nyeinchanyay Myothit (Phayagon) Group	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army: 1994 breakaway Karen Peace Force; ex-KNU 16 battalion; 1997 break 1998 breakaway from KNU in Paan district
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(b) From the Karenni National Progressive Party (non-ceasefire)

Kayinni National Democratic Party Dragon (Naga) Group Kayinni National Progressive Party (KNPP, Hoya) Kayinni National Solidarity Organization (Mawchi region)	1996 breakaway from KNPP 1999 breakaway from KNPP in Hoya district 2002 breakaway from KNPP
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(c) From the defunct Mong Tai Army (1996 “surrender” ceasefire)

Homein Region Development and Welfare Group Shwepyi Aye (MTA) Group Manpan People's Militia Group	Homong, in southern Shan state in Pekhon township, southern Shan state in Tangyan district, northern Shan state
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(d) From the National United Party of Arakan (non-ceasefire)

Arakan Army (AA)	Ex-armed wing in NUPA: 2002 break from NUPA
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(e) From the New Mon State Party (1995 ceasefire)

Mon Peace Group (Chaungchi Region) Mon Nai Seik Chan Peace Group	Mon Army Mergui District: 1996 break from NMSP 1997 break from NMSP
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3. Ethnic parties from 1990 General Election at National Convention

Lahu National Development Party
 Mro-Khami National Solidarity Organization
 Shan State Kokang Democratic Party
 Union Kayin (Karen) League
 Union Pao National Organization
 Wa National Development Party

4. Ethnic parties from 1990 election in 2002 United Nationalities Alliance (not at National Convention)

Arakan League for Democracy
 Chin National League for Democracy
 Kachin State National Congress for Democracy
 Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy
 Kayin (Karen) National Congress for Democracy
 Mara People's Party
 Mon National Democratic Front
 Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
 Zomi National Congress

5. Main non-ceasefire groups (not at National Convention)***

Arakan Liberation Party**	
Arakan Rohingya National Organization	
Chin National Front**	2007 peace talks
Hongsawatoei Restoration Party	2001 break from NMSP
Karen National Union**	1995–6 peace talks broke down: resumed 2003–4; 2007 KNU/KNLA Peace Council breakaway-ceasefire
Karenni National Progressive Party**	1995 ceasefire broke down
Lahu Democratic Front**	
Mergui-Tavoy United Front*	
National Socialist Council Nagaland (Khaplang faction)	
National United Party of Arakan	
Rohingya Solidarity Organization	
Shan State Army-South	ex-MTA; 2005 reinforced by SSNA split
Wa National Organization**	1997 talks broke down

* Former ally or breakaway group from Communist Party of Burma

** Present or former National Democratic Front member

*** Parties are included in this list because of their histories. However only the CNF, KNU, KNPP, NSCN and SSA-S maintain forces of significant size. In addition, a number of other small armed groups exist in name around the borders. Most are affiliated to the National Council Union of Burma and/or Ethnic Nationalities Council. But they do not generally have broad or active organization inside the country.

Source: Martin Smith, "Ethnic Politics and Regional Development in Myanmar: The Need for New Approaches," in Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Robert Taylor and Tin Maung Maung Than, eds., *Myanmar: Beyond Politics to Societal Imperatives* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), pp. 78–80.

III. The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Authoritarian Myanmar/Burma^{*}

Yin-Hlaing Kyaw

The purpose of this paper is to explain why the pro-democracy movement has yet to be able to bring about a democratic transition in Myanmar. The paper examines the success and failure of the activities undertaken by various pro-democracy groups and explains why the pro-democracy groups have failed to topple the military government. In so doing, the paper will argue that Myanmar's long isolation from the international community, the support of the military regime by China, India and ASEAN countries, and the rich natural endowment of the country have enabled the government to resist all the pressures and challenges generated by the activities of pro-democracy groups. The paper will also explain why the pro-democracy movement has weakened over time. In so doing, it will probe the political opportunities and constraints social movement entrepreneurs have been subjected to. Going beyond the argument of pro-democracy activists and their sympathizers, this paper will demonstrate that focusing only on government repression of pro-democracy groups will not be sufficient to understand the current state of pro-democracy groups. One will need to take into account the constraints inflicted on pro-democracy groups by the long tenure of the movement, the limited availability of financial resources, (in the case of exile pro-democracy groups) host areas, and internal problems of the movement such as factional struggles, low trust and the prevalence of cronyism within and between various pro-democracy groups and a lack of strategic planning on the part of these groups. Furthermore, going beyond merely illustrating the presence and absence of opportunities or constraints,

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this study will examine how pro-democracy groups have handled the opportunities and constraints. In so doing, it will show that it was not merely because of the presence or absence of opportunities and constraints, but because of pro-democracy groups' failure to exploit political opportunities and find a way to overcome the constraints they were subjected to that Myanmar pro-democracy groups have failed to keep the pro-democracy movement vibrant.¹

The State of the Movement: the Junta vs. Pro-Democracy Groups

At the time the military took control of the country, its foreign exchange reserve was less than US \$30 million and the national economy was in disarray. The government had to sell part of the property of the Myanmar embassy in Tokyo to earn some foreign exchange. While the entire bureaucracy, with the exception of the armed forces, was not functioning properly, it had to try to reassert control over the country by cracking down on the pro-democracy movement that was supported by a large majority of the population. As they had to take over the country without any proper plan, the generals appeared concerned about their ability to reassert control over the country. They had to work through trial and error. A retired government officer recalled that some senior military officers were initially not confident about their ability to deal with the problems they encountered.²

While the pro-democracy groups, especially the National League for Democracy (NLD), managed to win a landslide victory in the 1990 election, they also managed to undermine the legitimacy of the government both domestically and externally. In a survey of 500 people conducted between 2004 and 2006, 75 per cent of the people said that they disliked the military government more than they disliked the Socialist government. Of the people who did not like the military government, 73 per cent said they had consistently disliked the government since it took control of the country. When asked if they preferred a democratic government to the military government, 87 per cent answered "yes," three percent said "no," and the rest

¹ Due to the unfavorable political situation in Myanmar, the survey results cited in the paper are by no mean representative. They are quoted to show the trend rather than the absolute measure of the issues. Furthermore, at the request of most of the interviewees, their names have been withheld.

² Interview, March 12, 1999.

answered “don’t know.” When asked if they were economically better off under the military government, 76 per cent said they were better off during the Socialist period, 20 per cent said they were better off during the SLORC/SPDC period and the rest said “don’t know.” 67 per cent of the people also said their lives had gotten worse over time since the military took control of the country.³

As noted above, the activities of the pro-democracy groups seriously undermined the junta. In addition, the withdrawal of several international enterprises, western economic sanctions and the unavailability of technical and financial assistance from developed countries and international financial institutions made it impossible for the junta to undertake fundamental economic reforms. Since it took control of the country, the government has tried to legitimize itself by undertaking infrastructural development programs in various parts of the country, by renovating and rebuilding historical and religious monuments, and by organizing very grand cultural and sports festivals. As Western economic sanctions and the withdrawal of multi-national and regional enterprises from the country have seriously weakened the government’s fiscal capacity, the government has had to cut down its legitimating activities. Nonetheless, such activities are given prominent coverage in the government-controlled mass media.

In spite of the aforesaid unfavorable conditions for the military government and the achievements of exile pro-democracy groups, the military junta does not look like a regime that is on the verge of collapse. In fact, the military government remains stronger than the entire pro-democracy groups. While the size of the government-controlled area in the country has become larger than ever, the areas where pro-democracy groups could keep their camps has shrunk significantly. In the early 1990s, exile groups had more than 8 camps inside Myanmar. Now, most exile groups operate either in Thailand or some other foreign countries. Only the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), the Shan State Army, and the Karen National Union have small camps inside the country. At the same time, the pro-democracy groups have been very fragmented. As a matter of fact, the movement has been riddled with splits since its inception. In the meantime, the size of the junta’s armed

³ Cf. fn. 1.

forces increased from about 180,000 in the 1990s to more than 300,000 in the 2000s. It now has US \$763 million worth of foreign exchange reserves and gold. Regardless of harsh international pressure, the government remains very defiant and looks prepared to continue to implement its seven-point road map as planned. On September 3, 2007, Myanmar's ruling junta concluded the fourteen-year-long National Convention after adopting the 104 principles for the new constitution.

Although they rejected the government's National Convention and its 104 principles, most opposition groups have been unable to come up with any concrete strategy to cope with the situation. A leading political activist even said, "We are running out of ideas. We tried to do whatever we could but we don't know exactly what we should do now. May be, we should seriously think about doing something within the framework of the junta's road map."⁴ However, the junta's decision to raise fuel prices on August 14, 2007 gave some opposition groups, especially the 88 generation group – the group led by former student leaders of the Four-Eights Democracy Movement (August 8, 1988) – a new agenda to work on and an opportunity to revive their movement. Immediately after the fuel price hike, the 88 generation group organized a series of protests, denouncing the government for not paying sufficient attention to the difficulties the rising fuel prices could inflict on ordinary citizens. However, the government forcefully cracked down on the protests and arrested most of the leaders of the 88 generation group.

To the surprise of the entire world, Buddhist monks also organized large protests in many parts of the country. The junta, underestimating the ability of the monks to mobilize the public, initially did not take any actions against the monk-led protests. However, when protests grew larger day by day and many laymen started to join the protests, the junta ordered all protesters to stop their activities. When they refused to obey the order, the government forcefully cracked down on them. After the killing of 15 (according to the government), 35 (according to the UN human rights envoy), or a few hundred protesters (according to opposition groups), the monk-led protests

⁴ Interview, September 14, 2007.

came to an end.⁵ Although many exile activists tried to take credit for the monk-led protests, all available evidence showed that they played very little role. Monks and lay protestors engaged in the protests out of their frustration with the economic and political situation of the country.

Many believe that the government has only itself to blame for the September 2007 protests. If the junta had publicly explained the reasons for its raising of fuel prices, many people, monks included, would have understood and accepted the decision. After learning more about the cost to the government of subsidizing fuel, 50 young people, many of whom had joined the protests, raised the question: Why did the government choose not to explain its reason for the price hike to the general public? They agreed that given the rising gas prices in the world, it would be difficult for the government to keep subsidizing gas. However, they were unhappy with the government's hiking of fuel prices without prior notice.

The NLD has been seriously weakened over the last ten years. At the same time, although the September 2007 protests have given birth to a new generation of protestors, the government has so far managed to keep both students and monks under control. To be sure, students and monks have the potential to mobilize protests. However, the government seems quite prepared to deal with student or monk-led protests. As will be noted in some detail later, due to a split in its leadership, the ABSDF has declined dramatically. As a result, it is no longer a credible student army. Despite its initial ability in attracting more than ten thousand members, it is clear that the number of ABSDF members has been in steady decline over time. In the beginning of 2004, it had only a few hundred members. A social worker working closely with ABSDF members wrote that they "are now reduced in size [and] wracked by division, one might be forgiven for thinking they are a spent force."⁶ They have not been able to fight against the government forces since the early 2000s. Over the last ten years, many ABSDF members have left the organization. Some returned to Myanmar and many others took

⁵ For detail, see, Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Challenging the Authoritarian State: Buddhist Monks and Peaceful protests in Burma, Fletcher Forum of International Studies (forthcoming).

⁶ David O'Hanlon, "Whatever happened to the ABSDF?" *The Irrawaddy*, www.irrawaddy.org/art/2002-1/01arto3.html (October 9, 2006).

political asylum in the Scandinavian countries, America, Britain, and Australia. According to a prominent activist, the number of activists who devoted all their time and energy to the movement has decreased from a few thousand people in the early 1990s to less than a hundred in the middle of the 2000s.

Even the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), an exile government led by Aung San Suu Kyi's cousin Dr. Sein Win, appeared to be in bad shape. When Dr. Sein Win first arrived in Thailand, pro-democracy activists treated him like a real prime minister. Because he was a close cousin of Daw Suu, leading pro-democracy activists and ethnic minority leaders came together to help him and the exile government out. Many Myanmar watchers referred to the activities jointly organized by the NCGUB, other pro-democracy groups, and ethnic minority organizations as some of the indicators that Burman and ethnic minorities were genuinely working together for the democratization of the country. However, this informal alliance collapsed in the late 1990s. Since the early 2000s, Dr. Sein Win has been treated as a laughing-stock. Many people from inside the country and many members of overseas groups were not impressed with the performance of the members of the NCGUB, especially that of the exile prime minister, Dr. Sein Win. More than fifteen members of the pro-democracy movement said that Dr. Sein Win, though nice, did not have the ability to lead the movement. Political satires written by some political activists even portrayed Dr. Sein Win and his members as ineffective and indecisive activists who were totally oblivious of the situation most of the time.⁷ Another activist even suggested that the NCGUB is dead.⁸ Frustrated with the indecisiveness of the leadership of the NCGUB, many of the smartest members of the Burma Fund, a think-tank affiliated to the exile government, left the organization and formed a neutral think-tank that called for pro-democracy groups to find a way to work with the military government by acknowledging the role of the military in Myanmar politics.

Exile activists understood the importance of establishing unity among themselves. It is discernible in that they have established umbrella

⁷ Interviews, 2003–2006.

⁸ Htun Aung Gyaw, "U Turn by NCGUB or it is only a Stunt made by Bo Hla Tint?" a short essay circulated via the Democracy for Burma mailing list.

organizations like DAB and NCUB. However, exile groups have yet to manage establishing long lasting unity. Although DAB and NCUB were made up of the people elected by its member groups, they and their member groups functioned separately once the elections were over. While most member groups of the DAB and the NCUB did not treat the chairmen of the two umbrella organizations as their leaders, some activists, probably out of jealousy, tried to undermine the legitimacy of their fellow activists who were elected to the executive committees of the NCUB.

Pro-democracy organizations' ability to mobilize protests in the country also has declined since 1996. Although they kept saying that tangible political change could only be brought about by the activists inside the country, exile activists did not manage to find a way to revive the movement inside the country. It was not that pro-democracy organizations suddenly stopped investing their resources in instigating protests inside the country. In 1999, several overseas pro-democracy organizations tried to recreate the Four-Eights Movement under the rubric of the Four-Nines Movement on September (the ninth month of the year) 9, 1999. Through the Myanmar language programming of the BBC and VOA, the call for a nation-wide movement was made. Many activists who were based in Thailand were prepared to go into the country once the movement started. Although many overseas activists predicted a massive movement, no major protest took place on September 9, 1999, or later.⁹ A prominent pro-democracy activist disappointingly noted:

We still think that we must do more work inside the country. We are still in touch with our comrades there. We talk to many of them regularly. To tell you the truth, communicating with people from inside the country has gotten much easier. We can communicate with them via internet. However, it is getting more and more difficult to organize protests inside the

⁹ In 2005, however, there were some massive explosions in Yangon, killing and wounding a large number of people. The government readily accused some overseas pro-democracy organizations of masterminding the incidents. Although many activists suspected former members of outgoing Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's intelligence corps, some activists quietly thought that a overseas pro-democracy organization might have something to do with it. However, since there was insufficient evidence to support the rumors, the incidents were deemed mainly as terrorist acts in response to the mismanagement of the government.

country. We tried to do that in 1999. Although we don't try to mobilize protests inside the country as much as we used to, we still continue to try to do it. However, whatever we have tried to do do not seem to be working. We haven't been able to mobilize any major protests in the last ten years or so.¹⁰

In sum, pro-democracy organizations have managed to undermine the legitimacy of the military. However, while they have yet to manage to pressure the junta into dialogue, pro-democracy groups have declined both in terms of their own organizational strength and their ability to mobilize protests inside the country.

Why Have Activities Undertaken by Pro-Democracy Groups not Brought down the Military Government?

As noted above, the tremendous international pressure the pro-democracy movement has helped generate has not made the military government have meaningful dialogues with the NLD and other opposition groups, let alone bring it down. This might have something to do with Myanmar's long isolation from the international community. Unlike the Philippines, Myanmar had never relied on a major power. No Western government therefore has wielded sufficient power to change the mind of the Myanmar military leaders. At the same time, unlike most East European countries, Myanmar was never a part of any major political bloc. Therefore, while harsh criticism of Western countries did not usually force the military government to comply with the demands of pro-democracy groups, the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the end of Cold War also did not make the military government more lenient to the political activists or undertake political reforms swiftly.

However, western economic sanctions did affect the military government negatively. As noted above, with the decline of its revenue, the government could not undertake infrastructural projects and other legitimating activities to the extent it did in the past. In addition, it could no longer take credit for the country's economic growth the way it used to be able to in the early 1990s. Sources close to various government agencies noted that due to a

¹⁰ Interview, November 21, 2006.

shortage of foreign exchange, state-owned factories were not functioning properly. A businessman who did business with government agencies noted:

Government agencies were short of budget. In the early 1990s when the economy was doing fine, our government agencies were functioning like their counterparts in Thailand or Malaysia. We could sell the government a large number of computers and new machines. In the past, the government made the payment for the merchandise it bought from us very quickly. Nowadays, it takes a long time to receive payment from government agencies whenever we sell something to them.¹¹

If the entire world had isolated Myanmar the way it did South Africa during the apartheid period, the military regime might have collapsed within a decade. However, the Chinese government recognized the military government as soon as the latter took control of the country. Regardless of the Western arms embargo on Myanmar, the military government reportedly bought US\$ 2 billion worth of military hardware at “friendship prices” from China.¹² The military government has also reportedly received assistance in building new radar stations, roads, railroads, ports, dams, sports stadiums, and bridges. Furthermore, the Chinese government has also given the military government more than US\$ 500 million interest free and low interest loans in the last 18 years.¹³ The Chinese government also allowed its citizens to invest freely in Myanmar. Since most Chinese investment has come into the country through overseas Chinese, it is hard to know how much China has invested in Myanmar. Some local analysts and businessmen have surmised that China is the largest foreign investor in Myanmar. China is also Myanmar’s largest trading partner. Of Myanmar’s 2005 total trade of US\$ 5 billion, Myanmar’s trade with China accounted for US\$ 1.5 billion.¹⁴ Therefore, many Myanmar analysts have noted that China has helped

¹¹ Interview, June 25, 2006

¹² David I. Steinberg, “Burma: Feel-Good US Sanctions Wrongheaded,” *Yale Global Online*, 19 May 2004, p. 1, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=3901>

¹³ Nyi Nyi Lwin, “Economic and Military Cooperation between China and Burma,” September 2006, <http://www.narinjara.com/Reports/BReport.ASP>, (December 20, 2006).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Myanmar to alleviate the problems engendered by the western economic embargo.

Although India initially supported the pro-democracy movement wholeheartedly, it changed its policy toward Myanmar after realizing that China's extended presence in Myanmar could hurt India's interests in the region. Since the early 1990s, India has stopped criticizing the Myanmar government and started giving economic and technical assistance. In the early 2000s, the Indian and Myanmar armies cooperated closely enough to jointly fight insurgent groups that were fighting against the Indian government and operating along the India-Myanmar border.¹⁵ After the discovery of a large off-shore gas reserves in western Myanmar, the Indian government has planned to make large investments in building a gas pipeline to transport gas from Myanmar to India. As a result, Myanmar has become a trading partner which the Indian government has to have good relations with. Russia has also sold several million dollars worth of arms and MiG 29 fighters to the Myanmar government. Although the Russian top leadership appeared to have kept some distance from the Myanmar leadership, it has also offered technical training to Myanmar civilian and military technicians and officials. Moreover, Russia has reportedly agreed to build factories "for repairing and upgrading arms bought from the former Soviet Union."¹⁶

Most ASEAN countries, especially Thailand, also adopted a constructive engagement policy toward Myanmar soon after the military reasserted control over the country. Some ASEAN countries, especially Malaysia, invited Myanmar to join the Association in the middle of the 1990s. Unlike the European Union, there is no political requirement to become a member of ASEAN. Many ASEAN countries at that time were not democratic. Therefore, unlike the case of East European countries that wanted to join the EU, Myanmar was never pressured to undertake political reforms before it joined ASEAN. Although not every ASEAN member wholeheartedly supported Myanmar's membership into the organization, all ASEAN

¹⁵ Sudha Ramachandran, "India presses Burma over insurgents," *Asia Times Online*, September 20, 2006, <http://www.yuyu.net/burmanet2-1/archive/1238.html>, (December 20, 2006).

¹⁶ Åshild Kolås and Stein Tønnesson, "Burma and its Neighbors: The Geopolitics of Gas" *Austral Policy Forum* 06-30A, 24 August 2006, p. 10.

countries backed Myanmar whenever Myanmar was criticized by western countries at the UN or at ASEAN's meetings with western countries. Membership in ASEAN did provide the military government with much needed legitimacy in the international community. Myanmar also received large investments from ASEAN countries especially before the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Even after the crisis, Singapore and Thailand remained Myanmar's second and third biggest investors respectively. Although the assistance and investment it received from the aforesaid friendly countries were by no means sufficient, they have helped the Myanmar government to keep the government and private businesses running. Therefore, the support of China, India, Russia, and ASEAN countries has given government officials much needed confidence to deal with western countries. As a retired Myanmar diplomat noted:

Western countries treated our country like a pariah state. If our neighboring countries sided with western countries, it would have been very difficult for us to withstand international pressure. We are now confident that China would not support any UNSC move to impose economic sanctions on our country. As for senior government officials, the support rendered by countries like China, India and Russia, and ASEAN countries convinced them that they did not have to yield to pressure from western countries. With the help and support of friendly countries, they believed that we could beat the sanctions. Whether we could beat the sanctions or not is a different matter. What was more important was that our superiors believed that they could handle western economic sanctions as long as they could work with some major countries like China, India, Russia and ASEAN countries.¹⁷

Although China appeared to have asked the Myanmar leadership to work with the UN in the wake of the September 2007 protests, it refused to pressure the Myanmar government to undertake political reforms. Regardless of the international criticism, the Indian government also refused to criticize the Myanmar junta for forcefully quelling the September 2007 protests.

¹⁷ Interview of a retired diplomat, July 14, 2006.

However, as noted above, since early 2000, many of ASEAN's founding members have begun to express their frustration with the slow pace of political reforms in Myanmar.¹⁸ Although many ASEAN leaders criticized the junta for shooting at peaceful demonstrators, all nine of the other ASEAN governments still refused to impose any sanctions on Myanmar, let alone expel their most controversial co-member. Accordingly, the Myanmar top leadership has not appeared to be too worried about the possible ASEAN expulsion of Myanmar. In any case, some top government officials were reportedly not very enthusiastic about joining ASEAN in the first place. A senior government official was quoted as saying that his government did not worry about the expulsion from ASEAN or western economic sanctions as long as they had good relations with China, India, and Russia.¹⁹ The same official was also quoted as saying that his government did not need very many friends. With the support of and business with India, China, and Russia, he believed he and his colleagues could keep the government running.²⁰ The sale of the country's rich natural resources to neighboring countries has alleviated many of the problems the government has had to face. Although the resources will gradually be depleted, many local analysts have surmised that the country still has sufficient natural resources to keep the government running for another half a decade. The recent discovery of large offshore gas reserves in western Myanmar will strengthen the government's ability to resist western economic sanctions. According to some analysts, Myanmar could earn from US\$ 800 million to US\$ 3 billion a year once the production from the new gas fields begins. While the military junta could get into trouble if its three allies, especially China, began to support the pro-democracy groups, there is no indication on the part of all these three countries that they would change their positions towards the military government in the near future.

The absence of a strong middle class and politically active civil society in the country has made it easier for the government to control the public as well. If the membership of the middle class is based on one's salary, even senior

¹⁸ John Quigley, "Burma holds EU-ASEAN relations back," *EurAsia Bulletin*, Vol. 7, No. 10 & 11, October–November 2003, pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ Interview, May 28, 2005.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

government officials could not be considered as belonging to the middle class. Only a small number of businesspeople would be qualified to be members of the middle class. Unlike their counterparts in Thailand, the small middle class in Myanmar could not be expected to play a crucial role in the democratic movement. Most rich businesspeople cannot afford to engage in any form of anti-government activities, as the success of their business activities depends upon their connections with the government. In other words, their business interests are intertwined with those of the government. Although the cronies of senior government officials have been hurt by western economic sanctions, they have also found a way to circumvent the restrictions inflicted on them by the sanctions. Due to the US economic sanctions, Myanmar businesspeople have not been able to undertake business transactions in US dollars legally. However, many big business enterprises have managed to do business even with western countries through their business partners in neighboring countries. Although no systematic research has been done on the impact of Western economic sanctions on Myanmar, interviews with more than 50 businesspeople have indicated that the business enterprises hurt most have been medium and small-sized ones. Although people could have different positions regarding the Western sanctions on Myanmar that have been directed at undermining the government, most agree that sanctions have also hurt ordinary people, who have already suffered a lot from the economic hardships engendered by the government's mismanagement of the country.

While about 25 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line, most people have to devote most of their time to economic survival.²¹ When 300 survey respondents were asked in 2004 what they spent most of their time, energy, and resources on, 78 per cent answered "economic survival," 12 per cent said "academic pursuit," five per cent said "religious practices," while the rest expressed no opinion. This situation has prevented many people from participating in anti-government activities. When asked whether they would join a movement akin to that in 1988, only ten per cent responded positively; 68 per cent said no, while the rest expressed uncertainty. Currently, the public does not appear keen to be involved in any political

²¹http://www.photius.com/rankings/economy/population_below_poverty_line_2006_o.html. (December 21, 2006).

movement that seeks to bring down the regime. When asked whether they would join the NLD, 80 per cent of the 300 survey respondents said that they would not, 15 per cent said that they would, while the rest expressed no opinion. The rising cost of living and economic problems are also reasons that have prevented many students from taking part in any political activities. The cost of university education during the pre-SLORC/SPDC days was approximately 12,000 *kyats* a year; now, a student needs 30,000 to 40,000 *kyats* a month. Therefore, 93 out of the 120 students interviewed added that one of the reasons why they stayed away from involvement in politics was that they did not want to create additional problems for their families that were already going through several economic difficulties.²² Economic sanctions are most effective when they enable civil society to organize social movements by taking advantage of the weakening state. In the case of Myanmar, although economic sanctions have vitiated the military junta, civil society remains weaker than the weakening state. Realizing that, many EU and American officials have both privately and publicly noted that the sanctions imposed on Myanmar by western countries have not generated the desired or intended results.

All in all, regardless of the fact that the activities undertaken by pro-democracy groups and the international community have undermined the government both in terms of fiscal capacity and legitimacy, the military has remained the strongest institution in the country. Because of their disengagement from the Myanmar government, Western governments have had little influence over the military government. Although China has a lot of influence over the Myanmar government, the Chinese communist government seems keen to continue to support a subservient government in a neighboring country. If Western economic sanctions persist for a long time, the government gradually might go bankrupt, especially when the country runs out of its natural resources. No one knows for sure when that will happen. In the meantime, however, although it has become one of the most notorious governments in the world, the military government has managed to retain power.

²² Interviews, 2001–2006.

Why Is the Movement No Longer Vibrant?

Of 65 pro-democracy activists interviewed by the author between 1999 and 2006, only seven said the movement was doing well and the rest expressed their frustration with the failure to mobilize major protests inside the country and noted that the pro-democracy movement had become significantly weakened over time. Of the people who were frustrated with the movement, only three said the movement would take off again soon; 29 said the movement would have to try to come up with a new strategy before it could effect any substantial changes inside the country; 23 said there must be a leadership change in the movement before it could achieve anything; three said nothing would come out of the movement. Frustrated with the state of the overseas pro-democracy movement, one of them even said, “Even if the military government were to invite these groups to a dialogue session, none of our organizations are prepared to talk to the government. We have been doing everything that we could to bring political change to the country and we have been doing whatever we could to undermine the government. But, we haven’t been able to bring the government down.”²³ After a long pause, this leader also said, “I think, the movement is hopeless now. I don’t think we can expect anything out of it.”²⁴ Although the exile movement is by no means hopeless, this statement indicated the magnitude of frustration the members of the exile movement were having with their own movement. Even after the events of September 2007, many exile activists spent more time on arguing over who should get credits for the protests than on reviving the momentum of the entire pro-democracy movement. The author’s interviews with five activists in Chiang Mai in December 2007 indicated that most exile groups had failed to take advantage of the political awakening of the general public caused by the monk-led protests.

Scholars of contentious politics have explained the rise and fall of social movements in terms of the opportunities and constraints social movement activists are subjected to. However, as noted above, focusing on the existence of opportunities or constraints alone will not help us better understand the state of a social movement. We will have to probe if political activities are able to exploit the opportunities. Also, if political activities manage to find a

²³ Interview, August 21, 2006.

²⁴ Ibid.

way to overcome the constraints they are subjected to, the movement can move forward regardless of the existence of constraints. Therefore, in order to understand the current state of the Myanmar pro-democracy movement, we will have to pay attention not only to the structural and cultural opportunities and constraints activists are subjected to, but also to the ability of activists to deal with those opportunities and constraints in trying to mobilize the public, to keep the movement in a vibrant mode and to influence the government's decision making process. The constraints that political activists are subjected to often come from different sources. It is very natural that the government will try to curb the activities of its enemies by imposing various forms of constraints on them. At the same time, the constraints encountered by social movement organizations are not confined to the ones created by their enemies. Especially exile pro-democracy groups that are based in foreign countries are often exposed to the constraints created by the conditions in the host areas. Furthermore, not all constraints pro-democracy groups have encountered are external; many constraints they have been subjected have been caused by their own internal problems and weaknesses.

Government-Inflicted Constraints and Pro-Democracy Groups

The current military government seems to be prepared to do anything to keep itself in power. It has exerted constraints on pro-democracy groups through repression, smear campaigns and offering incentives. The repressive actions the military government has been willing to take are hard to exaggerate. The government first used existing rules and regulations and made new ones to control the activities of legal opposition groups and to punish the people who helped illegal opposition groups both inside and outside the country. The new rules and regulations promulgated by the government were so rigid that opposition groups often found it hard to do anything without breaking laws. The government then detained opposition group members whenever the opportunity arose. Many political activists were detained more than once. Not only were party leaders arrested, they were also "neutralized" upon their release from prison: upon leaving prison, all had to sign an agreement in which they vouched that they would refrain from politics. While it was not mandatory for every individual to sign

similar agreements, all were warned against participation in opposition movements. The writers among the arrested NLD leaders were reportedly cautioned that they could write freely – so long as they stayed out of politics. Once they joined opposition parties, the government’s censorship board banned the publication of their articles, thereby depriving them of an income. As a result, many people ceased participating in opposition activities altogether. The government also increased the prison terms of many NLD members when they were about to be released. Some local NLD leaders were not allowed to leave their townships until they agreed to quit the party. A local NLD member was quoted as saying, “I did not have a choice. Military intelligence officers said that they would arrest me if I left my township. I got a family to feed, so I had to resign from the party.”²⁵ In some areas, NLD members were forced by the local authority to quit the party. They were threatened that it would not be good for them and their families if they failed to leave. Several thousand members have been reportedly forced to leave the party in the last five years or so. The government’s repressive action against the NLD has made it very difficult for its leadership to coordinate the activities of the party with those of the groups operating in border areas and foreign countries. The government repeatedly accused the NLD of working with anti-government activists and warned that it could disband the party any time. The NLD leaders, including Daw Suu, became very careful about communicating with members of other pro-democracy groups. Therefore, the government successfully undercut the NLD’s ability to engage in anti-government activities by keeping it as a legal political party.

Learning lessons from the way the Four-Eights Democratic movement spread throughout the country, the government did not show any mercy to student protestors either. The government reportedly arrested about several hundred students between 1988 and 2000. Although the government released ordinary participants of the movement within a few years, it gave long prison terms to leaders of the movement. The government’s treatment of political prisoners also dissuaded many students from joining anti-government movements. During the parliamentary period, student activists were considered ‘A’ class detainees who were given decent food. They were also allowed to read and write freely. Since the middle of 1960s, political

²⁵ Interview, June 19, 2006.

prisoners no longer enjoyed special privileges. They have been given the same food as all other prisoners. Under the rule of the SLORC/SPDC government, political prisoners have not even been allowed to read and write freely, only being allowed to read religious writings, with some prisoners being allowed out of their cells only once a week.²⁶ Many also have been sent to prisons in far-flung areas, making it impossible for their families to send food to them regularly. All 120 survey participants noted that they would refrain from any activity that could risk them getting detained by the government. All claimed that they had heard of the atrocious situation in government prisons and would not want to spend any time in them. The government has also established more universities with the intention of breaking up the concentration of students. Consequently, it has made it harder for students from different universities to get together because the campuses, which are located in outlying areas, are far from each other.

Although most military leaders are Buddhists, they have not tolerated monks that have been actively involved in anti-government activities. After it took control of the country, the government arrested and sent monk activists to labor camps. The government humiliated many monks by forcing them to leave the monkhood and wear prison outfits. The government also issued a law banning any *sangha* organization other than the nine sects which have existed in the country since pre-colonial days.²⁷ Since the aftermath of an anti-Muslim riot in 2003, large monasteries have not been allowed to accommodate more than 300 monks.

In contrast to the way it has interacted with domestic opposition groups, the junta has not been able to arrest members of overseas pro-democracy groups freely. The government has, however, launched military operations against ethnic insurgent and student armed forces. As noted above, the government could also take repressive actions against the members of the overseas pro-democracy groups when they came into the country. Although there is no way of knowing the exact number of members of overseas pro-democracy groups who have been detained in government prisons, it is public knowledge that the prison terms given to members of overseas pro-democracy groups ranges from fifteen to seventy years. Serious punishment

²⁶ Interviews, 1998, 1999, 2001–2006.

²⁷ The State Law and Order Restoration Council Law No. 20/90, October 31, 1990.

has also been meted out to people who have helped members of overseas groups with their activities inside the country. Although there is no reliable data on the number of people who have gotten into trouble for helping underground agents, there are cases in which many people received long prison terms and lost their jobs for associating themselves with underground anti-government activists knowingly or unknowingly.

The government has also undertaken smear campaigns against pro-democracy groups through the state media. Hundreds of anti-Daw Suu and anti-NLD articles published in government newspapers have referred to the leader of the NLD as “a lackey of imperialists,” “she who did not care about the purity of her own race,” “she who married a man from the race whose people masterminded the assassination of her father,” “she who did not understand and appreciate the goodwill of military leaders,” “she who did not genuinely care for the interests of the country,” etc. The junta amplified its anti-Daw Su campaign when the grande dame and other NLD leaders began calling on Western governments to impose economic sanctions on the country and to exert more pressure on the junta. Senior military officers including the chairman and vice chairman of the military council refer to overseas pro-democracy groups as sources of many of the political, economic and social problems the country has been facing. Government newspapers have published several hundred news articles describing members of overseas pro-democracy groups as terrorists, rapists, power mongers, naive lackeys of neo-colonists, anarchists, absconders etc. TV Myanmar has also aired several teleplays describing how naïve, innocent students who joined the anti-government groups in border areas were raped and tortured by selfish, exploitative villains who pretended to be democratic activists. When a series of explosions took place in Yangon in late 2005, the government held the ABSDF, the FTUB and the NCUB accountable and formally labeled them as terrorist organizations. The government media also accused the 1988-generation student leaders of trying to destabilize the country when the latter failed to refrain from political activities and political parties.²⁸

The junta’s smear campaigns against pro-democracy groups have proved to be quite ineffective. Of the 290 participants of a survey conducted between

²⁸ *The New Light of Myanmar*, May 8, 2005.

2004 and 2006, only 9 per cent said they took the government's propaganda against pro-democracy groups seriously; 35 per cent considered that there was some truth in the government's criticism of pro-democracy groups; the rest said that they did not take what they learned from articles about pro-democracy groups from government newspapers seriously. 91 per cent of the readers said these articles did not affect their attitude towards pro-democracy activists.

It is also important to note that the government has not, however, always resorted to repression. It has also tried to drain the NLD through the offer of assistance to members on the condition that they retire from politics. Not every former NLD member solicited help from intelligence officers. Five ex-political prisoners told the author that their credentials as political activists were seriously undermined by their resignation from the NLD. They then said that they did not want to further undermine their credentials by being associated with military intelligence officers. However, they admitted that some of their former comrades did try to get assistance from intelligence officers.

The government also launched a large-scale campaign to win the support of influential political monks by reconstructing and renovating religious buildings and temples; they made generous donations to influential monks, and created new titles for them. As the titles came with regular allowances and large donations, many monks were eager to be conferred these titles by the government. Senior monks were also provided with excellent medical care. Similarly, the junta gave very grand and imposing funeral ceremonies for influential political monks. The explicit military courtship of the *sangha* has seen such a significant increase in the local televised coverage of donation ceremonies, that it is often commented that one only sees green and yellow on television – green military uniforms and yellow monks' robes. The junta's overtures have thus improved the government's relations with several prominent monks. Since the middle of 1990s, many former activist monks were also found to have joined the divisional and township *sangha* councils. Some Myanmar watchers and local critics of the government have concluded that the junta's tactic has transformed the initial widespread resentment of monks against the government to appreciative acceptance of the military government as a principal patron. The reason why many monks shifted their

position with regard to the government, however, was not simply because they coveted the government's donations. A prominent Buddhist monk said in the author's interview with him that it was in the interests of the monks studying under his supervision that he had disengaged himself from anti-government activities. He said that when he was imprisoned, there was no one who took care of the monastery and his pupils. His students were encountering many problems and the entire monastery was in disarray. He said that he did not want his student monks to go through the same experience again. Fifteen other prominent monks also said that they had to be on good terms with the government, for they wanted to work freely for the propagation of Buddhism. In so doing, they said they needed the government's support. Seven monks said they tried to be on good terms with government officials, especially intelligence officers, for they wanted to prevent Myanmar from becoming a Muslim country.²⁹

In an attempt to win the hearts and minds of students, the government also announced that it did not "harbor any grudge against students."³⁰ Two weeks after it took control of the country, the junta issued an announcement signed by the then Deputy Commander-in-Chief, General Than Shwe, that "requested teachers and parents to prevent their children and students from joining the groups operating in insurgent controlled areas."³¹ The government also called for students who fled to border areas to come back to the country. With the assistance of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, the then Commander-in-Chief of the Thai army, the government opened a reception center in Tak, Thailand and 27 centers inside the country. More than 2000 students reportedly came back to the country.³² The government reportedly also offered some economic assistance to some returning students, especially the ones who were willing to provide the government with information about student organizations along the border. Most returnees who stopped participating in political activities were allowed to go on with their lives freely. However, some returnees who joined the NLD or some other political

²⁹ Interview, July 17, 2004.

³⁰ *The New Light of Myanmar*, July 2, 2002.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kyaw Htin Nawratha, "Yodaya, which is fond of fanning the flames of boiling situation of others," *The New Light of Myanmar*, July 2, 2002, <http://www.myanmar.gov.mm/Article/Article2002/july/july2c.htm>

parties were later arrested; many of them, however, were released after they promised that they would stop all their political activities. Those who refused to make the promise were reportedly detained for five to ten years. Some of the returnees, after realizing that they could not do much inside the country, went back to the border areas. While the government praised itself for being able to bring back “run away” students, many opposition members claimed that the government’s attempt to nip the overseas pro-democracy in the bud was an utter failure. The fact that the strength of the ABSDF was about ten thousand until the early 1990s indicated that the government had not managed to weaken the overseas pro-democracy movement, let alone uproot it.

The junta’s repression, neutralization and incentive offering strategies had both negative and positive impacts on the pro-democracy movements. Many scholars of social movements have asserted that repression could sometimes “lead to social movement mobilization,” for “repressive events that are perceived as unjust have the potential to generate enormous public outrage against those seen as responsible.”³³ However, as Gurr and others have noted, the intermediate level of repression is more likely to give rise to social movements than a high level of repression.³⁴ As can be seen above, the military government’s harsh, high level of repression against pro-democracy groups did have some intended results. An NLD local leader confirmed that while they still supported the party, a large number of members had left the party for they could no longer bear the constraints imposed on them by the government. It was partly because of the government’s repression that pro-democracy groups could not organize protests in the country.

However, not all constraints have had a negative impact on the movement all the time. As Jeff Goodwin and others have argued, while decreasing the possibility of non-violent protests, high levels of repression could give rise to

³³ David Hess and Brian Martin, “Repression, backfire, and the theory of transformative events,” *Mobilization*, Vol. 11, No. 1, June 2006, p. 249.

³⁴ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 238–9; James C. Franklin, “Political Party Opposition to Noncompetitive Regimes: A Cross-National Analysis,” *Political Research Quarterly* Vol. 55, No. 3, September 2002, pp. 526–7.

violent protests.³⁵ In response to the government's indiscriminate repression, many pro-democracy activists joined the armed struggle in border areas in the 1990s. More than 20 former ABSDF members confirmed that they and many of their comrades decided to leave the country mainly because the government's harsh repression did not allow them to engage in any form of protests without running the risk of getting arrested. It is therefore not preposterous to note that the government's harsh repression helped student leaders to create one of the biggest student armies in the world. The government's repression of the pro-democracy movement also provided the pro-democracy groups with the ammunition it needed to develop an effective "injustice frame," (underscoring "the seriousness and injustice of a social condition" or redefining "as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable") in lobbying Western governments and international organizations to take punitive actions against the military government.³⁶ Also, many pro-democracy activists gained moral legitimacy to be leaders after they were detained by the government. A veteran political activist noted, "this government had produced many heroes. Many little known political activists became world renowned political activists only after they were arrested by the government."³⁷ At the same time, being criticized by the government media is not a bad thing for pro-democracy activists. As the public has been unhappy with the regime, a large majority of the populace often believes the opposite of what the government media reports. A political activist is more likely to get into trouble if he is praised in the government media. When FBC leader Zar Ni's criticism of western economic sanctions was quoted in a government newspaper, many critics of his used it as an indicator that he had sold his soul to the government. The government's incentive offering activities have also had only a limited negative impact on the pro-democracy movement. To begin with, the government did not have sufficient resources to bribe many members of pro-

³⁵ Anne Marie Baylouny, "Democratic Inclusion: A Solution to Militancy in Islamist Movements," *Strategic Insights*, April 2004, p. 4,

<http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2004/apr/baylounyApro4.asp>

³⁶ William Gamson, "Constructing Social Protest," in Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans, eds., *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 87.

³⁷ Interview, July 12, 2003.

democracy groups. Only a small fraction of the people the government tried to bribe accepted and became collaborators of the government.

The Long Tenure of the Movement, the Survival Issue and Pro-Democracy Groups

The long tenure of the movement has had significant negative impact on pro-democracy groups. It is not easy for activists to endure hardships inflicted over an extended period. Many student leaders are no longer the young student leaders they used to be. Most of them are now between 30 and 60 years of age. Many have families to take care of. Hence, when the US and other Western countries started offering political asylum to members of the exile groups, many chose to leave the movement. The same argument can be made for domestic opposition groups and activists. Many NLD members and other opposition activists retired from anti-government activities as they and their family members could no longer bear the hardships inflicted on them by the long tenure of the movement. Another problem with the long tenure of the movement is that with the passage of time, resources dwindle and it becomes increasingly difficult for movement organizations to stay afloat. Needless to say, they need large amounts of money to provide their members with basic needs.

Much as it was relatively easy for the organizations to receive financial assistance in the early stages of the movement, it has become more and more problematic to secure funding over time. As it was very difficult to obtain financial assistance for its armed struggle, the ABSDF had to suspend all of its military operations against the government forces. Most exile groups, therefore, have to engage themselves in activities which enhance their chances of getting funding from foundations in the West. In other words, they have to do more of what they think funding agencies want of them, rather than what they believe they ought to be doing. When the organization of capacity-building workshops helped them secure funding, many organizations including the ABSDF began to organize them. Since the organization of these workshops became an end in itself, many workshop organizers ended up investing more effort in it, than in the training of members of pro-democracy groups. All 25 leading members of the exile groups interviewed noted that the capacity-building workshops had not been

of very much use to the exile groups. The main problem is that most workshops were participated in by the same people.

To be sure, it is not that the need to please funding agencies has always prevented exile groups from doing what they wanted to do or doing what they should have done. In many cases, their agenda is actually in line with the objectives of the funding agencies. For instance, the AAPP and the FTIB basically went ahead with their own agenda which – in the first place – matched the requirements of the funding agencies.

Self-Inflicted Constraints and Pro-Democracy Groups

Many social movements are hampered by internal problems of social movement organizations and the mistakes of movement activists. The Myanmar pro-democracy movement is no exception. A major problem with many Myanmar pro-democracy organizations is that there is no unity within or between various pro-democracy groups and organizations. This is not to suggest that all successful social movements must be united. However, the 1992 Thai pro-democracy protests indicated that other things being equal, united social movements are more likely to be successful than disunited ones. Scholars and political activists have written about the importance of unity among political activists and opposition groups in fighting against a strong authoritarian regime. Scholars of the Cuban pro-democracy movement have argued that in spite of millions of dollars of financial aid and technical assistance from the US government, infightings in the Cuban pro-democracy movement prevented Cuban exile groups from achieving anything in their anti-Castro activities. In terms of the degree of disunity, the Myanmar pro-democracy movement is not very different from the Cuban pro-democracy movement. In describing the state of Cuban exile groups, a Cuban writer noted, “A popular joke in Miami in the 1960s said that if you put two Cubans in a room with a political problem to solve, they would come up with three organizations.”³⁸ Similarly, a Myanmar scholar-cum-activist noted in his critique of the state of the Myanmar pro-democracy movement in 2005, “...if

³⁸ Maria Cristina Garcia, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 130-1.

we put two Myanmar in a cell they will form three political parties....”³⁹ Like their Cuban counterparts, Myanmar activists understood the importance of unity within the movement. Several leading political activists including Daw Suu both explicitly and implicitly noted that the movement must be united before it could bring down the military regime, which was stronger and more ruthless than pro-democracy groups. Many pro-democracy activists have tried to establish unity in the movement. Regardless of such attempts, the split in the pro-democracy movement has not only lingered but has also got worse over time.

As noted above, there have been disputes between various groups, even in the NLD. Although they all expressed their support of Daw Suu, members of intelligentsia and ex-commander groups have not often been able to work with each other. To make matter worse, many NLD youth members also thought that ex-commanders and politicians were taking advantage of them. They thought that since they initiated the pro-democracy movement, they should also be given important positions in the party.⁴⁰ They all, however, accepted Daw Suu’s decision whenever they have had problems. Problems arose whenever Daw Suu was not around. Members of different groups within the NLD have also often found it hard to work with each other. Many members of the intelligentsia group were unhappy with the fact that most leading NLD members arrested by the government belonged to their group. They appeared to have suspected that some members of the ex-commander group might have leaked the information about the activities of their group to the military intelligence.⁴¹ That’s why many intelligentsia groups quit the party when the party’s caretaker leadership was taken over by ex-commanders when Daw Suu was placed under house arrest. Many members of the NLD youth wing have also had problems with ex-commanders. They thought that ex-commanders were too old and indecisive to lead the party.⁴² When some young NLD members tried to organize some small protests on their own initiative, the caretaker leaders expelled them from the party. A former leading member of the NLD noted, “These old uncles are keeping the

³⁹ Kanbawza Win, “A personal Letter to Henry Soe Win” *Asian Tribune* (June 16, 2006), http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=14762

⁴⁰ Interviews, 2005, 2006.

⁴¹ Interview, November 29, 2006.

⁴² Interviews, 2005, 2006

party barely alive. The party is still alive mainly because Ma Suu is still alive and people love and trust her. If the party had not been led by Ma Suu, it would have been broken apart since long time ago.”⁴³ As Daw Suu spent most of the first half of the 2000s under house arrest, the frustration many NLD members have experienced with their caretaker leadership has gotten worse over time.

There have also been serious factional disputes within and between exile pro-democracy groups. This condition can be understood in light of the underground movement during the socialist period. As mentioned earlier, during the socialist period, most anti-government organizations had to carry out their activities in a discrete manner. As a result, not trusting others became a cultural norm for anti-government activists in Myanmar. Before the 1988 demonstration broke out, several study groups organized sporadic student protests in Yangon; some of these study groups later emerged as leading student organizations. All student leaders appeared to believe that they all deserved to be leaders of the movement. A prominent leader of the Four-Eights Movement, noted, “There were many groups that were trying to organize anti-government activities. But we did not know of each others’ existence. Whenever we organized some anti-government activities, we thought we were the only group doing it. We did not consider the possibility that other groups might also be doing the same thing. As we were young and immature, we all wanted all the credits.”⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, this condition led to a factional struggle between the two main student organizations, ABFSU and AMFSU, in Yangon during the Four-Eights Movement.

The first group that was led by Min Zeya played a crucial role in pro-democracy protests that took place in early 1988. The Min Zeya group was arrested soon after its early protest. When it was under arrest, a group of students led up Paw Oo Tun and Moe Thee Zun came to play a major role in the student movements. Paw Oo Tun and some of his friends, Thuyein, Aung Kyaw Soe, Moe Thee Zun, Win Moe, Aung Naing and KoKo Gyi created a *nom de plume* called Min Ko Naing, which means Conqueror of the King. They all wrote anti-government statements and leaflets and distributed them under the name Min Ko Naing. In July that year, upon the

⁴³ Interview, June 29, 2006.

⁴⁴ Interview, October 24, 2006.

release of several members of the Min Zeya group, the All Burmese Student Democratic Organization was formed. Although some members of the Min Zeya group met members of the Paw Oo Tun group in prison, they shared a mutual distrust and were unable to cooperate. In 1988, a few other student organizations emerged. One of the most famous ones was the Rangoon University Student Union led by Than Win. On August 12, 1988, the All Burmese Student Democratic Organization held a public meeting on the Rangoon University campus. With the assistance of the Australian embassy, the organization invited high school and other strike organizations from all over the city to the meeting.

Moe Thee Zun said that his group was also planning to organize a public meeting at the same place at the same time. He said he did not know the plan of the Min Zaya group. He said, on the day of the meeting, Paw Oo Tun, the leader of his group, and he, accompanied by other members of their group, went to Rangoon University and took to the podium and announced the formation of the All Burma Student Democratic Movement Organization. Members of the Min Zaya group remembered the event differently. They accused Moe Thee Zun and his friends of hijacking the meeting they were organizing. Needless to say, Min Zeya and his group were outraged at the Moe Thee Zun-Paw Oo Tun group. Later in September 1988, some students tried to unify the various student organizations in Yangon. Though the leaders of various student organizations, especially Paw Oo Tun (who now assumed the name Min Ko Naing) promised to work on it together, it was clear that there was a permanent schism in the student organizations. The Min Ko Naing and Min Zeya groups could not find a way to cooperate. Moe Thee Zun recalled that as he knew Min Zaya quite well, he wanted to reconcile with his group. However, whenever he asked his people to try to do something with the Min Zaya group, his proposal was rejected. A former member of the Min Zaya group said that he and his comrades were disgusted with the Min Ko Naing group as much as they were with the BSPP government. When the students fled to the border areas after the military took over the country, members of the Min Ko Naing and Min Zaya groups continued to dominate the formation of the ABSDF in the major Karen and Mon controlled areas. Due to the fight between members of these two groups, the first ABSDF congress could not elect a chairman for a long time.

Finally, they chose Tun Aung Kyaw, a student leader of the 1970s, to be the first chairman because they deemed him a neutral third party. The election of Tun Aung Kyaw did not bring an end to factional politics in the ABSDF.

In 1990, a leading member of the Min Ko Naing's All Burma Federation of Student Unions, Moethee Zun joined the ABSDF and was elected as chairman of the organization at the second congress of the ABSDF held in the same year. As could be anticipated, this new election did not bring an end to the factional politics in the ABSDF. The new secretary general of the ABSDF, Naing Aung, a medical doctor who fled to the border area from a small Mon town, Mudon, emerged as a rival to the new chairman. Although he did not belong to any major groups, it was unsurprising to note that he won the support of the Min Zeya group at the congress. By the end of the congress, the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups emerged as the two rival groups within the ABSDF. When students from the Naing Aung group expressed desires to study at foreign universities, Moethee Zun reportedly denied them permission with the 1970s Burmese communists' argument that the revolution was their university and armed struggle their lives. In the face of such denial, many students who wanted to study decided to leave the organization. In 1991, the Naing Aung group proposed to hold an election for the entire committee. When the Moethee Zun group rejected the idea, the argument over the matter escalated and the organization split into two. Thus, between 1991 and 1992, there were two ABSDF organizations operating along the Thai-Myanmar border. Through the good office of some old student activists, the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups decided to remerge their two organizations in 1996. Upon their reunification, a new election was held and Naing Aung was elected the chairman. However, in spite of the organization's apparent reunification, the Naing Aung and Moethee Zun groups continued to function like separate groups within the ABSDF. In 2001, Naing Aung was expelled from the ABSDF for being involved with a married woman. Although Moethee Zun became a *de facto* leader of the organization, he was soon replaced at the new election after he was exiled by the Thai government to the United States.

The tension between members of the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups spread literally to the entire movement. Even the KNU, the NLD, the NCUB were divided into pro-Moethee Zun and pro-Naing Aung groups.

Pro-Nang Aung KNU units did not allow members of the Moethee Zun groups to go through the area they controlled. Similarly, pro-Moethee Zun KNU units refused to work with members of the pro-Naing Aung groups. A member of the DPNS also noted that it became difficult for him and his fellow DPNS members to socialize with members of the Naing Aung group as Moethee Zun was a former leader of the DPNS. He said that some members of the Naing Aung group spread a rumor that the DPNS was a communist organization. He then noted, “KNU leaders did not like communists. They could kill us if they believed we were really communists. We know many of the people who spread the rumors very well. Out of their anger for Moethee Zun, they tried to put us into trouble.”⁴⁵ After they left the ABSDF, many members of the Moethee Zun and Naing Aung groups joined other exile groups. That is, the factional struggle from the ABSDF spread to other exile organizations. A leading member of the Moethee Zun group noted that “even though half a decade has passed since we left the ABSDF, our problems lingered. Many people from these two groups still could not trust each other. What happened in the ABSDF in the 1990s has had long term and deep impact on the entire movement.”⁴⁶ This condition has made it very difficult for exile groups to come up with a unified movement.

The magnitude of the problem engendered by personal rivalries among pro-democracy activists is discernible in that instead of working together to find a solution to their problems, many leaders of various exile organizations sought to assassinate each other’s characters. For instance, Naing Aung, the former chairman of the ABSDF, was admitted to the John F. Kennedy School in Harvard. However, he was unable to study there because he was blackmailed by some rival ABSDF members. When he was the chairman of the organization, the ABSDF was accused of involvement in a massacre in Northern Myanmar. Despite the fact that he was at the Thai-Myanmar border at that time and was several hundred miles away from the area where the massacre happened, Harvard cancelled his admission on the receipt of a poison-pen letter from some former members of his organization. In another case, an exiled activist sought revenge against his former leader who had

⁴⁵ Interview, December 5, 2006.

⁴⁶ Interview, November 20, 2006.

expelled him from an organization by siding with the latter's opponent in an ethic-related court case. The activist lied to the court under oath that his former leader was mentally ill.

The factional struggle within and between exile groups seriously undermined the effectiveness of individual pro-democracy groups and the movement. As leaders tried to consolidate their position within their own organizations by appointing only their trusted people to important positions in the organizations, cronyism became the bedrock of many pro-democracy groups. As a result, although many exile groups have introduced formal procedures to elect executive committees of the organizations and the code of conduct which the executive members were required to abide by, they mostly functioned more like entourages of some powerful political activists.

A similar problem has been present in the NLD as well. Currently, the NLD resembles a haphazard congregation under the guidance of a charismatic leader rather than a properly institutionalized political party. The group effectively functioned only in the presence of its leader. The NLD is currently in a critical state and needs urgent reform. Its old caretaker leadership has done little more than keeping the party alive on a drip. Its members take no initiative in formulating and pushing ahead with resolute policies – that which is badly needed should the party aspire to reform and rearm itself with a more distinct strategy. This means that reforms may only be instituted after consultation with Daw Suu. The party defers to her on all things big and small; her view is to be ascertained prior to any decision. These former military commanders resemble inept caretakers, incapable of the least action without Daw Suu.

The fact that the NLD without Daw Suu has not functioned well can be seen in the failure of the NLD caretaker leaders to manage the party effectively. Right after the elections, General Khin Nyunt reiterated the army's pre-election announcement at a press conference that the winning party of the election would have to convene the National Convention and draw up a constitution prior to its ratification in a referendum and a further election so as to form a new government. The NLD's caretaker leadership accepted these terms. The central executive committee then declared that the party would aim to finish drafting the constitution within the year; in the meantime, the

military would govern the country. Once the constitution was ready, the NLD would call for the constituent assembly to be instituted so that it could form a new government. However, many NLD members from local areas were disgruntled with this decision, as they wanted to adhere to the ultimatum.⁴⁷ Due to this, the NLD was split by an internal disagreement. The more radical proponents attempted to form an alternative parliament, but were arrested before they could put their plan into action. Two former leading NLD members noted that if Daw Suu had been with the party at that time, things could have been under control.⁴⁸

The treatment of Daw Suu as a “democracy goddess” by the entire pro-democracy movement has also had some unintended effects on the movement. Out of their reverence for Daw Suu, many activists became very protective of her and started labeling those who, they thought, questioned her policies as enemies of the “pro-democracy revolution” or apologists of the military regime. For instance, when the FEC leader Zar Ni remarked that the military government would not have any dialogue with Daw Suu and that pro-democracy organizations should consider alternative leadership and alternative approaches, many activists accused him of being a power monger who wanted to take over Daw Suu’s place. This situation has given rise to a cultural practice that no one in the movement must challenge Daw Suu and her policies. The problem here is that when she is placed under house arrest, nobody knows for sure her positions on the ongoing developments in the country. Activists have to base their actions on her past remarks. Even those who thought that her remarks were made for different contexts, they dared not question them. A political activist noted:

Criticizing Daw Suu or doing things she would not approve of is a taboo for pro-democracy activists. If you did it, your political career would be over. I do not agree with her all the time but I am not going to talk about it publicly. People worship her, so you cannot do anything which people think she will not approve of. If you did it, your enemies would be happy

⁴⁷ Interview, July 20, 2004.

⁴⁸ Interview, July 20, 2004; Interview, December 17, 2006.

as this would give them necessary ammunition to assassinate your character.⁴⁹

Pro-democracy groups have often failed to come up with comprehensive and concrete strategies to deal with the military government. A good example of this is the NLD's lack of contingency planning in dealing with major political issues. This is discernible in the way NLD leaders dealt with the military junta in the wake of the election in 1990. Ignoring the advice given by a group of veteran politicians that the NLD should try to find a way to work with the regime, the NLD, led by the members of the intelligentsia group, issued an ultimatum to the military government. The ultimatum which was known as the Gandhi Declaration stated that the junta should surrender power to the NLD by the end of September 1990. A member of the former military commander group, Major Chit Khine, reportedly disapproved of this ultimatum because the party did not have a contingency plan in the event of failure. The members of the intelligentsia group ignored this warning, leading the veteran politicians to conclude that after winning the election, NLD leaders were too conceited to see the reality of the situation.

Most exile groups also lacked contingency plans. Since their inception, most exile pro-democracy groups made getting Western countries to impose sanctions on the military junta their priority. None had a clear strategy as to what they should or would do if the junta were to withstand the punitive actions of the Western countries. When the government cracked down on the underground political activities, exile groups did not retaliate with any new strategy either. They only pursued in blaming the government's brutality for their inability to organize protests within the country without making sufficient effort to create new underground cell groups in Myanmar. They could organize protests only when their old networks existed. As such, when the government uncovered and did away with most of their network groups, their potential for action within the country was neutralized. The success of the Burma Communist Party's underground activities in the 1970s and 1980s shows that it is possible to recruit underground cells regardless of a repressive regime. In containing and quelling political opposition, the

⁴⁹ Interview, November 21, 2006.

previous military-dominated Socialist regime was no less repressive than the current military junta. The lack of strategic planning on the part of the exile groups in creating underground cells inside the country has brought about one more setback to the movement. Since the situation in which the BCP organized underground cells is different from the current political and social contexts, exile pro-democracy groups need to come up with new strategies adapted to the new parameters of the game.

Since their inception, pro-democracy groups have been very idealistic and many of the demands they have made on the military government have been based on moral values and international norms. In dealing with military leaders, pro-democracy groups should also try to understand the mindset of military leaders. It is futile preaching to hardheaded military leaders who want to keep themselves in power at all costs. While placing emphasis on moral values, the message must be framed in such a way as to convince them that it is in their interest to enter into dialogue with the opposition. Rightly or wrongly, military leaders do have their own values and certainly will not be eager to listen to moralistic arguments made by the opposition. Neither are they likely to comply with demands made on the basis of moralistic values which they do not endorse. Most pro-democracy groups have remained quite idealistic and the few activists who have called for pro-democratic groups to be more pragmatic have noted that their proposals were not well received by their colleagues.

In calling for dialogue, pro-democracy groups should make clear what they could give in return for what they want from the military regime. Until recently, pro-democracy groups including the NLD placed emphasis mainly on what they wanted from the military government. To be sure, the military government never made what they could give to pro-democracy group clear either, with the result that both sides became disappointed with each other when they did not get what they had hoped for. It can be said that it was partly due to their frustration with each other that both parties adopted hard-line positions. For pro-democracy groups, the political deadlock remained unresolved solely because of the military junta's refusal to honor the election of 1990. As for the military junta, pro-democracy activists, especially Daw Suu, were seen as the biggest mischief-makers in the country. If Daw Suu and pro-democracy groups had called for the lifting of economic sanctions,

the Depayin incident might not have taken place. Similarly, if the military leaders had given concessions to the NLD, pro-democracy groups might not have taken a confrontational approach. Both parties did not find a way to work with each other.

The aforesaid problems with the pro-democracy groups have seriously undermined their ability to keep the movement together, to exploit the opening opportunities and to find a way to overcome the barriers they have encountered. The prevalence of cronyism in pro-democracy organizations and the failure of leading activists to resolve their personal differences in a peaceful manner have given rise to the exodus of many members from various pro-democracy groups. As they became less and less trusting of members who belonged to neutral or rival groups, cronyism became the bedrock of many pro-democracy organizations. A retired activist noted:

Our leaders were very authoritarian. In a way, they are not very different from the military leaders. They did not take criticism well. Even though we were supposed to be fighting against corruption and cronyism, they were nicer to their sycophants. They allocated more resources to their cronies too. If they did not like you, they would not listen to you; even if the advice you were giving was a constructive one, they would not listen to you. Until there is a change in leadership, the movement will remain weak. I ceased active participation in the movement mainly because I could no longer understand my leaders. They undermined the unity of the organization. As the time passed on, things got worse; we became less trusting and more frustrated; leaders became more corrupt; the movement became more and more disunited.⁵⁰

Some former NLD members noted that they left the party because they could not work with ex-military commanders. Also, some ex-military commanders noted that they left the party because they could not work with Daw Suu and NLD youth members. A former member of the ex-military commander noted, "I tried to do everything I could for the party and Daw Suu. Daw Suu and the people around her, especially NLD youth members

⁵⁰ Interview, December 15, 2006.

were very arrogant. I am old enough to be their father. I am a retired colonel. But I felt that they wanted me to be subservient to them.”⁵¹

The feuds within and between pro-democracy groups have also had a negative impact on the government’s perception of them. A government officer noted that the government did not have to worry about exile groups very much as they were very divided.⁵² The NLD and other pro-democracy groups will need to be taken seriously by the military government before they can have any meaningful dialogue with it.

The prevalence of the culture of insecurity and the low stock of social capital in the movement also prevented many pro-democracy activists from exploiting the opening of opportunities. Many activists feared that their rivals might try to assassinate their characters if they accidentally did something which ran counter to the policies endorsed by Daw Suu or something which shed some positive light on the activities of the junta. As a result, they became exceedingly rigid in their evaluation of alternative strategies to deal with the military junta. Taking a hard-line position against the military government has been the movement’s classic stance; any statement out of line with this diametrically confrontational attitude would be interpreted as sympathetic to the junta and thus considered traitorous. In the late 1990s, the military government invited the chairman of the NLD, Aung Shwe, to discuss the country’s political situation. He declined because he did not want to engage in any talk without Daw Suu. Some NLD members felt that the NLD leadership should have taken up the government’s offer. Others went as far as to say that they would continue to fight for Daw Suu’s release from house arrest while negotiating for probable political change with the military. They would not gain anything by refusing the offer to enter into discussion with the military.

A similar explanation can be made for the reason why pro-democracy groups failed to exploit the fierce factional struggle between the intelligence corps and the army. In an attempt to consolidate his position, Intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt tried to reach out to pro-democracy groups. Messages were passed to pro-democracy leaders through trusted diplomats and

⁵¹ Interview, February 21, 2006.

⁵² Interview, September 22, 2004.

intermediaries. Some associates of the out-going Prime Minister Khin Nyunt also informed certain governments in the West through mediators that there were people in the government who understood the need for political changes within the country. They in turn asked for more understanding and support in bringing about changes. Some sources also revealed that General Khin Nyunt and his associates also planned to form an interim government in collaboration with ex-intelligence officers. They also planned to share power with the opposition, especially the NLD, if they could successfully stage a coup. Some sources showed that some within the NLD did know of the relatively liberal position of General Khin Nyunt but did not initiate any action as mutual trust was not forthcoming. Not surprisingly, both Daw Suu and her colleagues treated the upper echelons of the military government as unitary. They dealt with them en bloc and conceived all interaction with the military officers as if they were dealing with a homogeneous entity. Five leading activists who were contacted by military intelligence noted that they were interested in dealing with the military intelligence. However, since the position of movement was very rigid, four of them said they were not free to discuss it, let alone to act on it. Only Zar Ni, the founder of the FBC, accepted the invitation to go to Yangon and talked to intelligence officers. Most political activists stopped associating with him after he came back from Yangon. Although the junta hardly missed the least opportunity to undermine the NLD and other pro-democracy groups, Daw Suu and her colleagues failed to reach out to the officers who accepted in principle that political reforms had to be undertaken for the sake of the country's future. Only after Khin Nyunt and his associates were fired by the hardline military officers, many activists expressed their regret for failing to work with them. The pro-democracy movement could have been in a more favorable position should pro-democracy groups have found a way to exploit the factional struggles amongst the senior military officers.

Conclusion

As Huntington and others have noted, a political transition in an authoritarian country is more likely when the opposition is stronger than the regime. Myanmar pro-democracy groups have understood this and engaged in activities designed to undermine the regime. As discussed above, while

keeping the movement in the international limelight for almost two decades, pro-democracy groups successfully undermined the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime both domestically and internationally. At the same time, the economic sanctions imposed by western countries seriously undermined the regime's ability to legitimize itself. However, although it is not as financially as strong as it used to be, the Myanmar military junta has not looked like an organization that is on the verge of collapse. While keeping itself in power, the junta has managed to contain the activities of domestic pro-democracy groups within the narrow legal space by imposing several legal constraints and severely punishing those who break its rules. Although the junta has not been very strict about enforcing many economic rules, it has systematically and carefully enforced the rules for its political opponents. Domestic pro-democracy groups did not come up with a comprehensive strategy on how to deal with a stronger enemy. As a result, the pro-democracy movement in the country has become less and less vibrant over time.

The government's forceful repression of domestic pro-democracy groups has led many young people to flee the country and join exile pro-democracy groups. However, the constraints imposed on them by their host areas, the international system and their international problems, has undermined exile groups' abilities to consolidate their positions vis-à-vis the junta. Because of factional struggles, many pro-democracy activists gave priority to the interest of their group (sub-groups within SMOs) rather than to the overall interest of the movement. In other words, the movement failed to develop a strong collective identity. This situation in turn has contributed to the lack of trust within and between pro-democracy groups. As the movement became very rigid, many pro-democracy activists refused to work with each other. Many leading activists then came to adopt the negative practices which pro-democracy activists associated with the regime such as cronyism, authoritarian behaviors and character assassination. To make matters worse, like their comrades operating in the country, exile groups did not come up with a comprehensive strategy other than calling for western countries to take more punitive actions against the junta. As a result, pro-democracy groups failed to exploit multiple opportunities to make the situation work to

their advantage; and they did not find a way to overcome the constraints encountered.

As for the Myanmar military leaders, they seem burdened with few worries about the future. They went ahead with drafting a constitution that would perpetuate the military's leading role in Myanmar politics. To their credit, pro-democracy groups have managed to sustain the movement for almost two decades and it is very unlikely that the movement will dissipate in the near future. However, most of their internal problems remain unresolved. That is why many people have noted that Myanmar has been cursed with both a bad government and a weak and ineffective opposition. It is worth noting that a few leading activists have recently begun to speak out about both their past mistakes and the problems gnawing away at the entire pro-democracy movement. It will be nonetheless difficult for the exile groups to find a way out of the political deadlock so long as each pursues ideological rigidity and remains intolerant of alternative methods to resolving the situation. In other words, without a paradigm shift, many political activists will find that they are themselves their own biggest enemies.

IV. Myanmar/Burma's Political Development and China-Myanmar Relations in the Aftermath of the "Saffron Revolution"

Chenyang Li

The military government's act of suddenly raising the price of oil on August 15, 2007 had serious repercussions. Sporadic demonstrations broke out in Yangon (the biggest city of Myanmar and the former capital) from August 19. On August 30, monks in Sittwe (a city in north-west Myanmar) protested the decision made by the government. A week later, a large number of monks paraded on the street in Pakokku (a township in central Myanmar). The police fired warning shots to disperse the monks, and force (using bamboo rods) was used; many monks were injured and the confrontation between the monks and the government escalated. Angry at the military government's lack of public apology for its sudden decision on the oil price hike, monks and ordinary citizens in Yangon, Mandalay, and other cities continued to hold many large-scale demonstrations. The number of protestors reached 100,000 on September 24-25 in Yangon, including more than 20,000-30,000 monks, with the result that the foreign media branded the public protests as the "Saffron Revolution" owing to the leading role played by monks. The military government declared a 60-day curfew (from 9 pm to 5 am) in Yangon and Mandalay, banning any gathering of more than five people during the daytime and dispersing protestors by extreme measures (including shooting). According to the figure published by the military government, ten people died, ten more were injured, and 2,093 arrested in the suppression.¹ The Western media estimated the actual number of fatalities to be many times higher, though it furnished no hard evidence. The government lifted the curfew in Yangon and Mandalay on October 20 to show that the military had the situation under control, and that the anti-government demonstrations had, temporarily at least, subsided.

¹ *The New Light of Myanmar*, October 7, 2007.

While the “Saffron Revolution” may have been crushed, it has exerted profound influence on the political situation of Myanmar. Opposing sanctions and interference in Myanmar’s internal affairs, China itself became the target of world criticism, and has been under great pressure to act in the issue. This situation is attributable, in a way, to a lack of understanding of the actual problems in Myanmar by the international community on the one hand, and a misunderstanding of the Chinese government’s policy toward Myanmar on the other. This paper provides analysis of the trends of Myanmar’s political development and elaborates on perspectives of China–Myanmar relations, in the hope of facilitating understanding and merging the gap between China, ASEAN, and the EU concerning the issue of Myanmar.

Myanmar/Burma’s Political Development in the Aftermath of the “Saffron Revolution”

The “Saffron Revolution” has many implications for Myanmar’s political development. Firstly, the military has moved from a proactive position to one that is comparatively disadvantageous and passive. In particular, it was forced to hold dialogue with the opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi in response to the demands of the international community to allow the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi to participate in future political reform. In a way, the events of September provided the dwindling NLD with an opportunity to reorganize and reenter the political stage. This has become a serious problem confronting the military government.

Secondly, the solidarity and stability of the military may be shaken to a certain degree. Different voices among the military were expressed on suppressing the peaceful demonstrations of citizens and monks. As *Lianhe Zaobao* (Singapore) reported, more than 400 soldiers and five generals were arrested for refusing to fire at monks, though there has been no evidence to support this claim.

Thirdly, suppressing the peaceful demonstration with force has further deteriorated the military government of Myanmar’s standing in the international community, and has made it impossible for it to return to the state that existed before the large-scale protests. For example, the U.S., EU,

and Japan have implemented new sanctions against Myanmar, and have taken a tough stance toward it. ASEAN, China, and India, meanwhile, have also adjusted their policies. For instance, Singapore on behalf of ASEAN delivered a presidential statement harshly criticizing the military government for firing upon protestors; China agreed to the UN Security Council's usage of the expression "strongly denounce" in response to the violent suppression; and India reiterated its appeal to release Aung San Suu Kyi after 15 years under house arrest.

All this suggests that political development in Myanmar needs to be understood in terms of a contest between different political forces and the pressure imposed by the international community.

The political dialogue between the SPDC government and Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD will not achieve any significant progress in national reconciliation

In October 2007, the military government and Aung San Suu Kyi agreed to hold another round of political dialogue. The whole purpose of holding such a dialogue from the point of view of the government is to lessen pressure from international society. In fact, dialogue between the military government and Aung San Suu Kyi has been held several times, and sometimes both sides have appeared to reach some agreement, but the military government has never moved any further from the meetings, and dialogue has remained in the phase of confidence-building. Indeed, it could be surmised that the government will never yield to Aung San Suu Kyi or hand over power to the NLD. Accordingly, the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi have lost their trust in the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Experts on the Myanmar issue from Japan, Australia, and Thailand, and the International Crisis Group all think that there is no genuine intention from the military government to hold such a dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi again.² Nor will Aung San Suu Kyi be released in the near future before the military government believes it can control the situation in Myanmar.

² *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), February 1, 2008.

The Characteristics of the New Constitution Draft and the Prospects of the Referendum

The Myanmar government declared on February 9, 2008 that it would hold a public vote on the new constitution in May of the same year, and a new general election in 2010. The drafting of the constitution was completed on February 19. The full text was publicized on April 9, and the public vote will be held on May 10.

The new constitution has encountered much skepticism from the international community, with the military government rebuked for the undemocratic process of the constitution's drafting. There is no doubt that the only function of the new constitution is to keep the military in power, as it affirms the military's participation in the political leadership of the country as a basic principle. According to the new constitution, 25 per cent of seats in parliament are reserved for the military.³ In case of national emergency, the president will be authorized to turn over legislative, executive, and judicial powers to the general-commander for a period of one year, and this period can be further prolonged twice by a period of six months. It is stipulated in the new constitution, furthermore, that any amendment to the constitution can only be put to a national referendum when over 75 percent of legislators approve—which means that without support from the military representatives in the parliament the constitution cannot be amended. The new constitution also prevents military officials from being sued for whatever actions they take in performing their duties.

The new constitution has a more positive stipulation in that the military cannot exert direct control over the power of the state for an indefinite period of time. The realization of a real multi-party democratic system and the creation of a "fairer, freer and more equal society" is also stressed. In addition, some concessions have been made in the offering of local-level autonomy as demanded by the ethnic minorities. Myanmar is currently divided into seven provinces and seven states according to the new constitution, but it is permitted to set up autonomous counties (or autonomous districts) on the basis of the existing jurisdiction of Naga, Paoh, Daru, Palaung, Kokang, and Wa. Because of the existence of Kachin State,

³ Ibid., April 10, 2008.

the military government does not agree on establishing an autonomous county under its jurisdiction by the Kachin Independence Army and New Democratic Army-Kachin. Although the two ethnic forces have complaints, the constitution concerning the arrangement to establish autonomous districts has reduced the confrontation between minorities and the military government.

At present, it is obvious that there are two different attitudes toward the new constitution and the public vote in Myanmar. One is to disapprove of the new constitution and reject the public vote, or vote against it. People holding this opinion come mainly from the NLD, the 88 Generation Students Group, and the All Burma Monks Alliance. The NLD pointed out in April 2008 that the new constitution is formulated under the direct control of the military government without any participation of pro-democracy organizations. Furthermore, the constitution stipulates that the president must have lived in Myanmar for more than 20 successive years before the election. The president, his/her parents, spouse, children, and children's spouses should be Burmese, which disqualifies Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming the leader of Myanmar in the future. It is therefore natural that the NLD is opposed to the new constitution. The other opinion expressed is that it is better to have the constitution in spite of its flaws and shortcomings, and that it could lead to further changes. There is little prospect for Myanmar if the constitution is rejected, as it would then not be implemented and the country would remain under the control of the military. At the present time, comparatively more people hold a pragmatic attitude *vis-à-vis* the new constitution and so it is likely that it will be accepted.

The Myanmar military government takes a comparatively practical attitude toward the referendum on the new constitution. Although it has rejected the suggestion by the international community to dispatch observers to supervise the vote on the constitution, as proposed by the UN Secretary-General's envoy Mr. Gambari, it does not mean that the military government is worried about adopting the constitution. As a matter of fact, the military government is more worried about international observers provoking people into public opposition of the government by availing themselves of their legal status. In fact, the military government does not necessarily strive for a high rate adoption, as campaigning may not start until 40 days prior to the

referendum. As long as the Union Solidarity and Development Association controlled by the government keeps in line with the government, the public vote on the constitution will receive more than 50 percent of the affirmative vote. In addition, the military government has been fully prepared for the public vote. In the Referendum Law for the Approval of the Draft Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2008, enacted in February 2008, provisions have been made for voting qualification, organizing the administration of the referendum, and so on. Anyone who violates the rules will be dealt with by the military government according to the law.

The Prospect of the New General Election

The time announced by the military government between the new general election and the public vote on the new constitution is two years. In the opinion of the author, the military government made this decision for the following three reasons. Firstly, the government wants to have a clear and full comprehension of people's attitudes through the referendum on the new constitution, so that the military has time to adjust its policy to turn the situation around if people still express strong dissatisfaction with the government. If the situation does not work in its favor, the military government can create other pretexts for postponing the general election because of the unstable domestic situation. Secondly, it takes time for the Union Solidarity and Development Association to be viable for election, as it is predicted that USDA will be registered as a political party before the election. The influence of minority parties is limited to their settlements and will thus not challenge the Association comprehensively. Therefore, even though the NLD is substantially weakened, it is still a great fear for the military government. The next step for the military government is to further weaken the NLD. That is to say the military government will not release Aung San Suu Kyi lest she reinvigorates the NLD. Thirdly, adjustments to the internal power framework need time. The two dominant leaders are elderly—the President of the SPDC General Than Shwe is 76 years old and the Vice President Vice-Senior General Maung Aye is 72 years old. But neither is willing to retire or hand over power to a younger generation. A possible scenario is that Than Shwe may retire with Maung Aye. In view of

the uncertainties surrounding the leadership succession, time is needed to resolve problems of internal relations.

To sum up, although it is too early to conclude whether the new general election will be held according to schedule and who will win, the military will maintain its dominant role in the process of Myanmar's political development for at least the next five to ten years. There are three potential political forces in the political transition of Myanmar: the SPDC military government, the opposition group (including the NLD, some students, and Buddhist monks), and the various parties and armed forces of the ethnic minorities. Political settlement in Myanmar depends on the contest of force and political struggle among them. There is growing recognition that the military must be part of any future transitional process in Myanmar. Therefore the result of political transition in Myanmar will not likely lead to a Western-style democratic regime, but instead it will lead to a "disciplined or guided democracy," which intends to serve as a contrast to what the Myanmar leadership perceives as the "undisciplined democracy" of the 12 years of the era of Parliamentary Democracy (1948-1958, 1960-1962).

Views on Many Important Issues Concerning Political Development in Myanmar/Burma

(a) To what extent have the economic sanctions affected Myanmar's democratization?

The United States and some other Western countries have adopted a hard-line policy of sanctions and diplomatic isolation, prioritizing the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and transition to democratic rule under the NLD as their core policy goals. But there is little evidence to show that the two-decade long policy of economic sanctions imposed by the United States and EU since 1988 has played a positive role in the country's democratization. On the contrary, the average Burmese citizen has suffered to a great extent from the sanctions. This action has consequently lost an opportunity which might, otherwise, have led the military government to integrate into international society for its self-reconstruction into a non-military government.

(b) Is Myanmar ready for a nationwide democratic movement?

The misunderstanding over Myanmar's political instability is the reason why any sign of disturbance in the country draws the world's attention. The Chinese believe that there is unlikely to be any positive media reports or objective analysis in the West regarding the Myanmar military government. Another reason is that the Western world proactively proclaims that the military government is duly the cause of domestic instability and, as a result, any anti-government movement will lead to the collapse of the military government. Myanmar's *de facto* situation might not, however, be tested by the proclamation. In the author's view, the deeper structural conditions that led to military rule and the collapse of democracy 56 years ago have not yet changed, and Myanmar does not yet possess the state capacity for a transition to democratic rule.

(c) Would the collapse of the Myanmar military government duly lead to the country's democratization and improvement of human rights?

China and Western countries have divergent interpretations on this point. China believes that the collapse of the Myanmar military government would not necessarily bring about a democratic system and eliminate violations of human rights. On the contrary, a sudden breakdown of the existing military government may lead the country toward anarchism, resulting in substantially increasing the number of violent deaths and abuses of human rights. The current situation of Iraq might be a good example.

(d) Can any of the existing and potential domestic political parties replace the military government?

It might be inferred that no political parties, including Aung San Suu Kyi and the opposition NLD as well as the armed ethnic minority groups, are likely able to replace the military's status and role in the next five to ten years. A new powerful political party may not emerge in a short period of time as political development is a variable responsive to a country's level of economic development, civic engagement, and public political culture.

(e) Do Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have the political capacity to rule the country?

The answer to this question is negative, albeit the scenario presenting a certain unpredictability. Aung San Suu Kyi is more likely to be regarded as a symbol of democracy rather than a stateswoman with qualified leadership.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD are, therefore, not likely to be able to govern the country given the fact that she and her party have been unable to secure political support from the armed ethnic minority groups in the country, where the latter accounts for one third of the country's total population, and occupies nearly half of the country's landmass.

Recently, some democratic campaign members have criticized the NLD for its Central Executive Committee made up of a group of elderly people who are autocratic, suppress the new forces, and are incapable of challenging the status quo governed by the military. For example, NLD President Aung Shwe is 90 years old, the Spokesman U Lwin is more than 80 years old, with Aung San Suu Kyi, the General-Secretary, at 62, being the youngest leader of the NLD. It is easy to imagine that such a geriatric leadership is not only lifeless but also unable to take appropriate and timely measures in response to the suppression of the military government. Given moreover that President Aung Shwe is a retired Brigadier-General, and that other members of the Executive Committee all have military backgrounds, or were once ministers in last terms of the military government, their opposition to the military government cannot be taken for granted.

(f) What role can Buddhist monks play in the process of democratization in Myanmar?

There are some 400,000 Buddhist monks in Myanmar.⁴ According to the doctrines of Buddhism, monks cannot intervene in politics, but stemming from the colonial era, intervention in politics has gradually become the tradition of Myanmar's monks. After Myanmar regained independence, the Buddhist monks in Myanmar continued to be involved in political affairs. During the democratic movement from March to September 1988, the Buddhist monks played a vital role in boosting the movement. When the military government refused to recognize the result of the general election in 1990, nearly 10,000 Buddhist monks rejected the doles from soldiers and their families. Finally, the military government suppressed the movement using force. Most recently, during the "Saffron Revolution," Buddhist monks acted as the main force and leaders of the movement.

⁴ "Monks and the military," *Economist.com* (September 24, 2007), <http://www.ecocn.org/forum/redirect.php?tid=7341&goto=lastpost>

Although Buddhist monks have a great impact on Myanmar's society, intervention in politics is against the doctrines of Buddhism, and not all the monks have a strong desire to overthrow the military government, and especially the Buddhist dignitary mostly support the military government. So from the author's viewpoint, although the Buddhist monks are an important political force, they are unlikely to play a dominant role in the political development of Myanmar in the near future.

Analysis of China–Myanmar Relations

Of all the bilateral relations China has with ASEAN member states, China–Myanmar relations appear to be the most unique. This uniqueness has been underpinned by the traditional *paukphaw* (brotherhood) between the two nations. This brotherhood continued to thrive following the formation of the Myanmar military government in September 1988. Some foreign government agencies, members of academia, and international organizations (including NGOs) have presented a variety of arguments on China–Myanmar relations, most of which are adverse. When the “Saffron Revolution” broke out in September 2007, China became the target of international criticism, with major media networks blaming Myanmar's giant neighbor for the situation in the country, while maintaining that exerting pressure (including sanctions) on China would bring desirable solutions to the longstanding Myanmar issue.

The following paragraphs make analytical comments on these specific arguments. It should moreover be emphasized that the following presents my personal academic comments and arguments, and does not reflect the endorsement of any official agencies and organizations.

China's Objectives in Pursuing a Relationship with Myanmar/Burma

According to average Chinese understanding, Myanmar is a country with plenty of natural resources and geographically of strategic importance. The country is on the list of the world's least developed economies on two accounts: first of all, the military government carried out inappropriate economic policies; secondly, the Buddhism religion plays, to a greater or lesser extent, an adverse role in the context of the country's economic modernization. The Chinese feel somewhat baffled at the international

pressure and criticism directed at China in regard to the lack of change in Myanmar, even though China has tried to help the country.

China aims to be a responsible stakeholder in the post-Cold War world economic and political arena. As one of China's neighbors, Myanmar has been since 1988, and is still, under the control of a military government and its anti-democracy activities and violation of domestic human rights are condemned worldwide. China keeps close relations with the military government under its policy of non-interference, which however causes some critical and suspicious arguments.

China's motives in maintaining good relations with Myanmar are clear: first of all, since 1978, China has devoted itself to developing its domestic economy and therefore one of its major tasks is to normalize diplomatic relations and to ensure a peaceful environment along its periphery. Given the fact that China and Myanmar share a 2,200 kilometer-long borderline, China is unlikely to be hostile no matter what kind of government might be in power in the country. Secondly, China's foreign policies are in line with the baseline of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence and will not change this baseline for Myanmar. Thirdly, Myanmar is of key importance to China's domestic economic development in terms of its geographical location and affluent natural resources. As Jared Genser argues, China's two major motives in developing relations with Myanmar concern natural resources and security.⁵ Geographically being at the hub in connection with China, South and Southeast Asia, Myanmar is a key economic cooperation partner for China's Southwest Provinces especially Yunnan as well as a passage linking Southwest China, Mainland Southeast Asia, and South Asian countries. It also plays as a landbridge connecting Southwest China with the Indian Ocean and even with African and European markets. Myanmar is therefore part and parcel of China's grand strategic design to achieve its overall goal of becoming a great power in the 21st century.⁶ Myanmar's role in

⁵ Jared Genser, "China's Role in the World: The China-Burma Relationship," Testimony to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 3, 2006, http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2006hearings/written_testimonies/06_08_3_4wrts/06_08_3_4_genser_jared_statement.php

⁶ Poon Kim Shee, "The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations: Strategic and Economic Dimensions," *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies*, Vol. 1 (2002), p. 51.

China's national security might be traced to World War II, during which the Yunnan–Myanmar Highway became a significant supply line in the Anti-Japanese War. China is, however, unlikely to consider Myanmar as a strategic pawn in its potential confrontation with other great powers, or as a satellite state. There is no evidence to show China's motives are to make the country its economic and military colony.⁷

China's efforts in developing relations with Myanmar neither obstruct the integration of Southeast Asia nor encourage Myanmar to divorce from regional integration. After all, for China its relations with ASEAN are far more important than its relations with Myanmar; therefore, the former is not going to affect the latter as a whole. Some scholars thus argue that since 2000, China's Myanmar policy might be well evaluated in the frameworks of East Asian Free Trade Area (EAFTA), ASEAN plus One (China), ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan and South Korea) as well as China–ASEAN economic integration.⁸ Singapore and Thailand worry that Myanmar will become China's new passage for oil and goods transport which might lead to China's external trade flowing through Myanmar thus undermining the Malacca Strait line and the proposed Kra landbridge. As a matter of fact, with China's economic development and sea transport being of crucial importance in modern times, China's external trade in oil and goods via Malacca may not be reduced even if China were to have a new trade passage toward the Indian Ocean via Myanmar. From a long term perspective, China is not against the construction of the Kra landbridge.

Is the China–Myanmar Relationship Particular or Normal?

A normal state-to-state relationship is based on mutual benefit and each party moderates its policy toward its counterpart in accordance with its own state interest, instead of one state being under complete control of the other. Quite a number of scholars are critical of China–Myanmar relations, reporting that Chinese are new colonialists in Myanmar,⁹ while some others argue that the mass migration from China to Myanmar could have severe consequences that may result in anti-Chinese riots like those that broke out

⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

⁹ Denny Roy, *China's Foreign Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 174.

in 1967.¹⁰ Some even argue that Myanmar plays with fire in keeping close ties with China.¹¹ It is therefore of great significance to make clear the reality of China-Myanmar relations.

First of all, close China–Myanmar ties are of mutual benefit to both sides. China has been providing assistance to Myanmar in terms of technology and low-interest loans to help develop its domestic economy, covering a wide range of cooperation fields encompassing road and bridge building, ports, power stations, building materials, communications, textiles, shipments, locomotives, vehicles, tractors, diesel engines, generators, reaping machines, liquescence gas, and paper pulp.¹² All these cooperation projects play an active role in the development of infrastructure construction and the industrialization process of the country. For instance, the Banglang Power Station, the largest hydropower station in Myanmar, was constructed with export credit from China Export and Import Bank totaling US\$ 250 million and was completed in March 2005. It has a total installed capacity of 280 thousand KW and an annual output of 910 million KWH or nearly one third of the country's total demand of power supply—which has to a great extent eased up the shortage of power supply in Myanmar.

Secondly, Myanmar's China policy has been under gradual readjustment since 1988 in accordance with its national interest, especially through intentionally declining some of the proposed bilateral cooperation projects. During the early years of the military government, Myanmar exhibited particularly close ties with China on the account that it was not an ASEAN member country; while its giant neighbor, India, and the Western world put political pressure on Myanmar, implementing economic sanctions. Later on, India, Japan, and ASEAN moderated their Myanmar policies and advocated “constructive engagement” from the early 1990s. The military government thereafter decreased its dependence on China accordingly and carried out

¹⁰ Donald M. Seekins, “Burma–China Relations: Playing with Fire,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (1997), p. 530; Shee, “The Political Economy of China–Myanmar Relations,” p. 48.

¹¹ Seekins, “Burma–China Relations,” p. 539.

¹² Guo Kuan, *Zoujin Miandian* [Entering Myanmar] (Kunming: Yunnan Fine Arts Press, 2004), pp. 25–29.

“equal-distance foreign policies” toward ASEAN, China, and India.¹³ ASEAN is also ready to take the place of China in Myanmar’s foreign policy. After the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Myanmar made a new adjustment of its foreign policy and reconfirmed China’s prime position in its external relations, though it continues to secure close ties with ASEAN and India. However, after five years of negotiation, Myanmar refused to reach an agreement on the China–Myanmar road-water highway project in 2001, which is of strategic consequence to China. The military government asserts its self-determination in dealing with domestic issues. For instance, the military government did not make any announcement to China in advance before it arrested former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in October 2004.

Thirdly, the military government in Myanmar keeps closer and more frequent contact with the Thai government; the state heads and prime ministers of other Southeast Asian countries also visit Myanmar; China is neither Myanmar’s largest trade partner nor the biggest foreign investor in Myanmar; the military government also keeps close contact with India and Russia in military and security cooperation; the former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, who was considered as a friendly leader to China, also kept close ties with the government leaders of Singapore and Thailand.

Professor Poon Kim Shee at National University of Singapore therefore argues that since 1988, the China–Myanmar entente is uneven, asymmetrical, but nevertheless reciprocal and mutually beneficial. The strategic entente and economic relations are a marriage of convenience. Myanmar is neither a strategic pawn nor an economic pivot of China.¹⁴ Myanmar scholar Tin Maung Maung Than also argues that China–Myanmar relations should be evaluated appropriately, and that it is too simplistic to describe Myanmar as a vassal state of China.¹⁵ The author holds similar perspectives with these two scholars.

¹³ Yue Deming, “Lengzhanhou Miandian duihua zhengce chuyi” [A Preliminary Study of Myanmar’s China Policy in the Post-Cold War Era] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiandai guoji guanxi yanjiuyuan, n.d.), p. 58.

¹⁴ Shee, “The Political Economy of China–Myanmar Relations,” p.34.

¹⁵ Tin Maung Maung Than, “Myanmar and China: A Special Relationship?” *Southeast Asian Affairs 2003* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), pp.189–210.

China-Myanmar Relations are not a Key Factor of Myanmar/Burma's Democratization

It is a common understanding that the Myanmar military government is able to withstand the economic sanctions imposed by the West partially because of China's close relations with the military government since 1988.¹⁶ The Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, Mr. Brad Adams, stated on June 9, 2005, the military government survives international pressure because it has been backed up by China, Thailand, and India. If China wants to be an Asian leader or a world great power, it must stop providing economic and military assistance to the military government.¹⁷ There is however no reason to regard China-Myanmar relations as posing a major obstacle to the country's democratization.

First, the critical factor determining the country's democratization is the domestic situation. In terms of economic development, political culture and leadership, Myanmar is currently not ready for a transition to a democratic regime. By comparison, the military government and other associated groups under its control have absolute advantage over opposition parties and domestic ethnic minority groups. The latter are unlikely to be able to take over from the military government in the coming future.¹⁸ The bulk of the democratic movement in Myanmar (e.g. college students, monks, and average citizens) politically do not hold a strong desire of overthrowing the military government. Instead, they submit to the military government to a greater or lesser extent.¹⁹

Secondly, China places priority on its national interest rather than Myanmar's human rights when it reinforces bilateral relations with Myanmar. Currently no domestic group is able to take over the military government even if it were to be overthrown. Therefore Myanmar is most

¹⁶ Cai Yuming, "Breaking through the Two Ocean: A Study of China's Myanmar Policy," *Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences in Fengjia*, No. 8 (May 2004), p. 303.

¹⁷ Xiao Jing, "Zhongguo zhichi Yangguang zu'ai guoji shehui nuli?" [Does China's support for Rangoon hinder international efforts?], June 12, 2006, www.voanews.com/chinese/archive/2005-06/w2005-06-11-voa23.cfm

¹⁸ Li Chenyang and Chen Yin, "Yingxiang Miandian minzhuhua jin Cheng de zhuyao zhengzhi shili" [Major political forces that impact on democratization in Myanmar], *Contemporary Asia-Pacific*, No. 4 (2006), pp. 19-26.

¹⁹ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Myanmar in 2004: Why Military Rule Continues," *Southeast Asian Affairs 2005* (ISAS, 2005), pp. 250-6.

likely to descend into disorder in the situation where the military government loses power. This would duly bring about uncertainty and security issues in the border areas of China, India, and Thailand. China and East Asian countries share a common sense that they are more interested in the country's stability rather than its problematic human rights record.²⁰

Thirdly, Myanmar's issues not only concern China, but also India, Thailand, and ASEAN's policies to the country. The factual situation is that China also pays attention, to a greater or lesser extent, to the issues of democracy and human rights in Myanmar. As China's state president, Hu Jintao, pointed out when he held talks with SPDC vice president Maung Aye in August 2003, "As a friendly neighbor, China is delighted to see peace of politics, harmony of ethnic minority groups, development in economy and happiness of the average people's lives in Myanmar. China believes that the military government is ready to develop domestic situation towards a more active and constructive direction."²¹ China supports the idea of UN mediation to facilitate political dialogue between the ruling military government and the National League for Democracy's Secretary-General Aung San Suu Kyi. China has also endorsed the ASEAN idea of "constructive intervention" or "comprehensive engagement" in Myanmar's domestic issues with a view to possible political reform.²² The ASEAN members are divided on Myanmar, however. Nonetheless, China will be in line with ASEAN's resolution in case its member countries come to a common agreement on the issues so as to help the situation in Myanmar develop into a more peaceful and stable one.²³ China's economic support is therefore only a secondary factor to the issue of democracy in Myanmar. It is irrational to ascribe the continued survival of the existing military government to the economic support from China and other neighbors of Myanmar.

Is China-Myanmar Military and Security Cooperation so Important?

Reports in the foreign media indicate that China has helped construct deep water seaports on Myanmar's southwest coastal islands and installed radar

20 Xiao Jing, "Zhongguo zhichi Yangguang zu'ai guoji shehui nuli?"

21 "Hu Jintao meets Myanmar's SPDC Vice President," *Xinhuanet*, Aug. 22, 2003.

22 Shee, "The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations," p.38.

23 Zou Keyuan, "China's Possible Role in Myanmar's National Reconciliation," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, No. 17 (2003), p.71.

and electronic eavesdropping facilities. It is further posited that Myanmar agreed to China utilizing these facilities to collect intelligence, or even leasing these islands to China's military agencies so that China's Navy may gain access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar.²⁴ The specific places mentioned in the media reports include Coco Island, Hgyi Island, Mergui, Thilawa Island, Zadetkyi Island, Kyaukpyu, and Sittwe. These also reported China's presence in the Indian Ocean as well as being a hidden threat to Indonesia, Thailand, and ASEAN as a whole in the long run. It is also deemed to have consequences for the long-term strategic interests of India, Japan, and the United States.²⁵

It is clear that these reports do not reflect the real situation of China-Myanmar military and security cooperation. China's intentions aside, an analysis of the strategic thinking of the military government makes it clear that the above reports do not reflect the reality. Myanmar's military has never fully trusted any external great power, including China, its northern giant neighbor, because Myanmar's leaders possess deep-seated feelings of Sinophobia as well as xenophobia. Indeed, Myanmar's politicians have been socialized in a political culture of distrust.²⁶ Myanmar would have become China's strategic pawn if the military government had chosen to keep such close military and security cooperation with China. As a matter of fact, the leaders of the military government are fully aware of the potential danger of closer military and security ties with China. The military government therefore started to develop a "Balance-of-Power Strategy" by reinforcing multilateral relations, especially with India, ASEAN and, to a lesser degree, with the Western countries. It has also increased its purchase of military hardware from India, Russia, and Pakistan so as to decrease military dependence on China.

Myanmar would therefore not lease islands to China's military agencies and would not agree to China's intentions (if any) to collect intelligence from the countries around the Indian Ocean. The presence of China's military agency in these islands only reflects China's intentions to provide logistic services

²⁴ Shee, "The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations", p. 36.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 38.

and operational instruction to Myanmar's military forces rather than permanent residence in these areas.

What does "the World Power's Responsibility" Mean to China in Terms of Economic Sanctions on Myanmar/Burma?

In the past several years, along with China's rapid economic development and its building of soft power, the role of China in international affairs has drawn increasing attention.

The Chinese government pursues a practical, matter-of-fact approach on the issue of Myanmar. The Chinese argue that the result of economic sanctions since 1988 has proven that they have not served their intended purpose. Economic sanctions as a policy toward Myanmar is, therefore, not successful as the policy itself is a "bind" rather than a "bridge."

Over the past several decades, the Chinese government has encouraged the Myanmar military government to follow the examples of China and Vietnam in terms of market-oriented economic reform, and Myanmar has, to a certain degree, made progress. The Chinese government agreed to the UN Security Council's Statement to deplore the military crackdown on the protesters in September, 2007. The Chinese government also persuaded the Myanmar military government to accept visits by the UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari. It can therefore be inferred that China's "non-interference" foreign policy is by no means against the universal principle of democracy and freedom. The Chinese government, unlike its Western counterparts, actively mediated among the parties concerned for win-win resolutions on the Myanmar issue.

In fact, the Chinese government has adjusted its policy toward Myanmar. Chinese leaders (including former State President Jiang Zemin, current State President Hu Jintao, and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao) have supposedly given friendly and timely advice to Myanmar leaders that they should implement a political system which would be suitable for the country, in order to fulfill its promise of implementing a multi-party democratic system, but Myanmar leaders have not accepted such advice.

Prospects of China–Myanmar Relations

As to the future prospects of China–Myanmar relations, Singaporean professor Poon Kim Shee has presented three scenarios: alarmist, pessimistic, and guardedly optimistic. He has also pointed out that the scenario most likely to evolve depends on the following questions: First, how long can the military hold on to power? Second, can the military survive in the 21st century? Third, how does Myanmar's membership in ASEAN affect its strategic relationship with China? Fourth, what will be the attitude of the U.S., the EU, Japan, and India toward Myanmar? Fifth, how far will Myanmar tilt toward China? The answer to the last question will also depend on the extent of the success and failure of Myanmar's economic development and its free market policy.²⁷

The author argues that the above factors will influence China–Myanmar relations. However another more important factor—geopolitical factor—was neglected. Comparatively, changes in Myanmar's domestic political situation and other countries' policies in regard to Myanmar are not critical factors in China–Myanmar relations. Meanwhile the existing issues between China and Myanmar only have limited impact on the bilateral relations, such as non-traditional security, illegal migrants, cross-border crimes, drug trafficking, ethnic and religious issues, and Myanmar's trade deficit in China–Myanmar bilateral trade as well as the environmental issues resulting from some Chinese firms' excessive exploitation of natural resources in Myanmar. The author therefore advances the following arguments on the future prospects of China–Myanmar relations:

(a) The military government is reluctant to make great change in its policy toward China due to geopolitics and geoeconomy. The two sides are unlikely to be hostile toward each other even though China–Myanmar relations have experienced ups and downs.

The most important factor in geopolitics is the peripheral environment while the natural environment is an invariable and the geographical distance plays a decisive role. In a neighborly relationship, a country that is friendly to the other will boost its own interest, whereas a country unfriendly to the other

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

will increase the adverse impact.²⁸ In a regional grouping of neighboring countries, small countries will naturally fear the larger powers. In the case of China and Myanmar, the two countries share a long border with convenient access to each other because there are no notable mountain and river obstacles along the borderline. For Myanmar, to have China as a great neighbor and as a UN Security Council permanent member is of great significance. Myanmar also needs China's cooperation in dealing with the issues of the armed ethnic minority groups in the border areas of northern Myanmar.

From the perspectives of world system theory and geo-economics, all countries do their utmost to secure development under the regional frameworks and systems.²⁹ Currently Myanmar is somewhat dependent on China in its economic development, especially the upper northern part of Mandalay which has formed a dependent economic zone greatly relying on China. It is therefore of great significance for the country to share in China's own domestic development.

In a way, whichever political force is in power in Myanmar is not a key factor for future China–Myanmar relations. The future leaders of Myanmar will not have the intention of containing China by relying entirely on the United States, India, Japan, and other Western countries. Myanmar, like other ASEAN members, will carry out a balanced foreign policy vis-à-vis the great powers. From the perspective of constructivism, changes in Myanmar's domestic leadership will not strategically bring about great impact on China–Myanmar relations even though the individual feelings and political ideas of particular leaders may bear some slight influence.

(b) China's Myanmar policy is propitious to China–Myanmar relations.

A harmonious and stable international environment is critically important to China's peaceful development and China is, and will continue, pursuing the establishment of a harmonious world. In respect to the relations with its neighbors, China's external policy with its neighbors will firmly focus on being a friendly and intimate country, and also help its neighbors to be more

²⁸ Ye Zicheng, *Geopolitics and China's diplomacy* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1998), p. 16.

²⁹ Wang Zhengyi, *Fringe Areas: World System and Development of Southeast Asia* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1997), pp. 12–13.

peaceful and affluent ones. As to the specific case of Myanmar, China's current and future policy toward the country is, and will be, based on economic cooperation, long-term strategy, and national security. Regional economy and long-term strategic interest are the core factors in China's Myanmar policy. The Chinese government will develop friendly relations with Myanmar whatever the ideology of its government as long as it does not become a strategic pawn of some other countries or organizations to contain China's development.

(c) China will expand economic cooperation with Myanmar

China will speed up economic cooperation with Myanmar in the fields of agriculture, human resources, natural resources, and infrastructural construction. The two countries will also reinforce cooperation in bilateral trade, investment and energy development. The unique geostrategic location of Myanmar avails itself of the opportunity of becoming an important transit for energy for China while Myanmar's affluent oil reserves might become a key resource for China's energy imports.

(d) The China-Myanmar relationship is reciprocal and mutually beneficial

The author agrees with Professor Poon Kim Shee's argument on the point that despite growing Chinese influence over Myanmar, it was not and will never become a strategic satellite base for China. Myanmar's strong sense of nationalism, its past ability to successfully deal with foreign powers, and its determination to preserve its independence and cultural identity will likely make Myanmar withstand any attempts at undue external interference.³⁰

Conclusion

After the suppression of the "Saffron Revolution," Myanmar's military quickly resumed control of the domestic situation and moved forward with the roadmap under international pressure, with renewal of dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, introduction of the new constitution draft, and confirmation of the date for the referendum on the constitution. This year (2008) is the 20th anniversary of the "8888" (August 8, 1988) Uprising, and there are reasons to believe that the U.S. will increase its interference in Myanmar, but the domestic situation is likely to remain calm on the whole.

³⁰ Shee, "The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations," p. 18-19.

While there could be an increasing number of disruptive events, any large-scale movements like the events of last September are unlikely to occur. Furthermore, the public vote on the new constitution can be expected to be held smoothly, and it is likely that it will be approved by most people. As far as the future political development in Myanmar is concerned, the Chinese government will keep clear-headed and adopt an earnest and practical attitude, notwithstanding how it is viewed by the Western powers.

Part Two

Regional and Global Perspectives

V. ASEAN and the Situation in Myanmar/Burma

Jürgen Haacke

Introduction

For years debate of how to best deal with Myanmar's pugnacious military rulers has focused on the relative merits of two distinct approaches: 'constructive engagement' and international ostracism. Whereas the first approach is understood to involve practices of quiet diplomacy and economic exchanges and cooperation, the latter builds on efforts to diplomatically isolate and punish the country through a combination of political and economic sanctions. ASEAN is associated with the former, although 'constructive engagement' is arguably a problematic or inappropriate concept to denote ASEAN's approach towards Myanmar.¹ The Western countries have opted for the latter approach.

This paper attempts to contribute to the debate by examining how ASEAN has dealt with Myanmar and whether it has been successful in influencing Myanmar's military leadership. It is divided into five sections. The first briefly outlines the broader international context in which ASEAN states have for the past few years had to decide on how best to address the situation in Myanmar and recounts some of the key developments in intramural ties with Naypyidaw. The second section focuses on how ASEAN responded to the suppression of street protests in Myanmar in September 2007. Section Three examines why ASEAN countries have considered it inappropriate, if not counterproductive, to impose Western-style sanctions on Myanmar and supported instead the good offices role of the UN Secretary General and his Special Adviser, Ibrahim Gambari. The fourth section examines the

¹ ASEAN did not invoke the term 'constructive engagement' after Myanmar's accession in 1997, which has the connotation of dealing with an outsider. Only in recent years has language crept into ASEAN documents whereby the Association is to remain 'constructively engaged' with Myanmar. See, for instance, the Joint Communiqué of the 40th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting; <http://www.aseansec.org/20764.htm>

rationale for and the implications of Singapore's – ultimately unsuccessful – efforts to organise a briefing by Gambari for the participants of the 2007 East Asia Summit. Finally, the paper briefly explores ASEAN's reaction to the unexpected announcement by Myanmar's leadership to hold a referendum on the draft of a new constitution in May 2008, which is to be followed by multiparty elections in 2010.

The paper will offer five basic conclusions: (1) ASEAN has failed to influence the ruling regime's slow embrace of constitutional rule and political transition in any substantial way; (2) in response to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)'s perceived political recalcitrance ASEAN states have over time in their dealings with Myanmar become increasingly prepared to dismiss diplomatic shackles associated with the non-interference principle; (3) the acrimony characterizing the decision to invite Gambari to brief EAS leaders has highlighted important intramural divisions among ASEAN states; (4) as a consequence of the cancellation of the Gambari briefing, the grouping at least temporarily limited its collective diplomatic role to one of merely supporting the good offices role of the UN Secretary General; (5) there remains the potential that the Association will face renewed external pressure and intramural contestation over Myanmar, especially if the military regime defies international and regional calls to ensure the credibility of the planned referendum and general elections, including verification.

The International Context and ASEAN's Myanmar/Burma Policy

Myanmar has faced significantly more critics in international society than it has partners or friends. However, since the late 1980s Myanmar has gradually become successful at developing positive political and military relationships with China, India and Russia. These ties have yielded diplomatic support and economic assistance as well as a degree of international legitimacy. In particular, the relationship with China has allowed Myanmar's ruling military regime to circumvent the effects of Western sanctions, not least the lack of access to funds normally provided by international financial institutions to developing economies. Myanmar's ties with India have markedly improved since 1993, as a *quid pro quo* of sorts was reached between Yangon and New Delhi, whereby New Delhi dropped support for Burmese

pro-democracy groups in return for Myanmar's cooperation against ethnic insurgents fighting the Indian government. While both China and India have a range of interests in Myanmar, both countries have been especially keen to access and exploit Myanmar's energy resources. This interest in securing exploration and delivery contracts has afforded the military leadership some useful opportunities to 'reward' its diplomatic backers. In part because Beijing is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China remains more important for Naypyidaw than India. Significantly, so far, neither of these two major powers has wavered in providing continued diplomatic protection to the regime when it has mattered, despite New Delhi and Beijing being subjected to increasing international pressure to use their presumed influence with the military regime to produce political change. Despite adjusting their respective public and private rhetoric about the need for change *vis-à-vis* Naypyidaw in response to pressure from Myanmar's Western detractors, both India and China reject the resort to punitive measures against the country.

In contrast to the development of broadly positive relations with China and India (and Russia) since 1988, Myanmar's military leadership has for two decades failed to make headway in improving its relations with Western countries and Japan. The reason for this is the military junta's obstinate pursuit of the country's political-security imperative,² which has outraged governments and publics across the developed world and in turn has led to the repeated adoption by Washington and Brussels of new sanctions packages. Using the United Nations Security Council to apply added pressure to force political change has become a key aspect of Western policy towards Myanmar. To achieve this objective, US diplomatic pressure has moreover not merely targeted Myanmar but also other members of ASEAN. To some extent, Washington has arguably made Myanmar a test case for how far Southeast Asia will support its values in international diplomacy.

ASEAN states have found it difficult to adopt an approach towards Myanmar that would simultaneously respect Southeast Asia's traditional norms of interstate conduct, and satisfy Myanmar's many extra-regional detractors. Partly in response to Western pressure, ASEAN has for some

² See Jürgen Haacke, *Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Domestic Influences and International Implications*. Adelphi Paper 381 (Abingdon: Routledge for IISS, 2006).

years practised a version of 'enhanced interaction' towards Yangon/Naypyidaw, which amounts to a weakening of the non-interference principle and involved commenting on and criticizing the situation in Myanmar, not least at the annual ministerial meeting and ASEAN summits. This practice apparently began at the Fourth ASEAN Informal Summit hosted by Singapore in 2000, an event where the ruling junta's leading member, Senior General Than Shwe, participated. The quiet diplomacy then preferred gave way to more open criticism in the aftermath of the May 2003 Depayin incident, which saw the entourage of Aung San Suu Kyi involved in a bloody clash with pro-government elements and her being detained. ASEAN responded by urging Myanmar to resume its efforts of national reconciliation and dialogue among all parties concerned to achieve a peaceful transition to democracy. The grouping also looked forward to the early lifting of restrictions placed on Aung San Suu Kyi and other detainees. Importantly, these two points remained at the heart of ASEAN's position towards Myanmar until 2007. While denoting a new chapter in how the grouping managed the Myanmar issue, ASEAN diplomatic language was qualitatively very different from the post-Depayin outrage articulated in Europe or the verbal attacks on the junta mounted by the US. Then, as later, ASEAN countries considered unhelpful the imposition of sanctions, smart or otherwise.

The detention (and subsequent house arrest) of Aung San Suu Kyi proved a sore point in members' corporate and individual ties with Myanmar. In the summer of 2003 Malaysia's ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamed suggested that Myanmar might have to be expelled from ASEAN as 'a last resort' if Yangon failed to release her. Also, Indonesia, as the then ASEAN Chairman, piled on the diplomatic pressure in an unprecedented manner as Jakarta became seriously concerned that the SPDC's failure to set Aung San Suu Kyi free might derail the ASEAN Summit that was to be organised in Bali in October 2003. Reacting to regional and international pressure, Myanmar outlined its seven-step roadmap towards a 'discipline-flourishing' democracy in late August 2003. Yangon's road map made no mention of Aung San Suu Kyi, however, and failed to clarify whether Myanmar would comply with

Indonesia's demand to release her before the ASEAN Summit.³ Only by moving Aung San Suu Kyi back to her home in September 2003 did the regime earn guarded praise from fellow ASEAN states. The 2003 ASEAN Summit statement declared that the seven-point road map constituted 'a pragmatic approach and deserves understanding and support.'⁴

The implementation of the roadmap since 2003 has also proved a sore issue for ASEAN. First, the National Convention (NC) was revived only in 2004 and made what most regional governments regarded as excruciatingly slow progress. (It was completed only in September 2007). Secondly, the NC did not meet ASEAN's expectations regarding the perceived requirement of greater inclusivity of the political dialogue and process. Third, the SPDC's rejection of criticisms directed at the NC increased rather than eased Western pressure on ASEAN countries to exert more influence on the military leadership.

The second Bush administration has steadily sought to increase international pressure on the generals, in part by winning more support among Myanmar's neighbours for a tougher policy directed against the SPDC. In January 2005 Condoleezza Rice attached to Myanmar the label of 'outpost of tyranny' primarily to protest the military's disregard for basic freedoms, but arguably also to embarrass ASEAN. Soon thereafter, the prospect of Myanmar assuming the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2006 met with considerable hostility in Washington. In effect, Washington threatened ASEAN with diplomatic boycott at the annual ministerial meetings and potentially significant funding implications should Myanmar become the grouping's chairman without first undergoing political change. In the event, ASEAN reacted to this demand by suggesting to the junta that Myanmar would do well to postpone its assumption of the chairmanship. The military leadership ultimately complied. As a face-saving gesture, ASEAN states committed themselves to allowing Myanmar to assume the ASEAN chairmanship whenever the SPDC felt it was ready for it.

³ Fabiola Desy Unidjaja, 'RI hopes to see Suu Kyi freed in October', *Jakarta Post*, 31 July 2003, p. 1.

⁴ Press Statement by the Chairperson of the 9th ASEAN Summit and the 7th ASEAN+3 Summit, Bali, 7 October 2003, <http://www.aseansec.org/15259.htm>

The Bush administration also used the November 2005 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting to complain about Myanmar's neighbours not putting sufficient pressure on Myanmar. It was at this point that Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo indicated support for the idea to have the UN Security Council discuss Myanmar.⁵ This stated willingness stood in contrast to the position of fellow ASEAN members and hence demonstrated a lack of coherence in ASEAN's approach vis-à-vis Myanmar.

Suggesting that Myanmar should be more responsive to the demands of the international community, the then ASEAN Chair, Malaysia, in December 2005 raised the idea of an ASEAN delegation visiting Yangon to ascertain progress in the country's implementation of its road map. The reason for the visit, so Prime Minister Badawi intimated, was that ASEAN could no longer defend the SPDC if members remained unclear about the situation in Myanmar. In response, the Myanmar delegation would appear to have agreed in principle to a visit by foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar in his capacity as ASEAN Chair. Malaysia's Summit Statement welcomed this decision, also calling for the release of those placed under detention.⁶ In the event, the leadership first pushed Syed Hamid's visit into the long grass, then refused to welcome him as ASEAN Chairman, before denying him the opportunity to speak to Senior General Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi. Parallel Indonesian attempts to convince the junta to embrace a political transition also produced no substantive outcome.

Following this experience, ASEAN's preparedness to provide the generals with diplomatic protection dwindled. Syed Hamid, for instance, argued that ASEAN had reached the stage 'where it is not possible to defend Myanmar if it does not cooperate with us or help itself by delivering tangible progress on economic and political reforms.'⁷ He suggested also that Myanmar could

⁵ Clive Parker, 'Philippines to Support UN Action on Burma', *The Irrawaddy*, 22 November 2005; see also 'PGMA: RP to join UN efforts to speed up democratic reforms in Myanmar', 19 November 2005, <http://www.macapagal.com/gma/act.html>.

⁶ Chairman's Statement of the 11th ASEAN Summit, 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community', Kuala Lumpur, 12 December 2005: <http://www.aseansec.org/18039.htm>.

⁷ Syed Hamid Albar, 'It is not possible to defend Myanmar', *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2006, www.burmanet.org/news/2006/07/24/asian-wall-street-journal-it-is-not-possible-to-defend-myanmar-syed-hamid-albar

have accommodated ASEAN by releasing Aung San Suu Kyi. Other foreign ministers reinforced the message that Myanmar could no longer count on ASEAN's diplomatic support. Thai foreign minister Kantathi offered the view that ASEAN was no longer in the mood 'to shield Myanmar from a UN debate.'⁸ In other words, exasperated ASEAN governments asked pointed questions about why they ought to offer Myanmar diplomatic support if the SPDC itself continued to implement unswervingly its political-security imperative even at the cost of ASEAN's collective reputation. Moreover, individual members, and ASEAN as a whole, saw their more critical stance towards Myanmar applauded by the U.S. Secretary of State, who for instance referred to ASEAN's 2006 communiqué as embodying 'an important evolution.'⁹

When the procedural vote to put the situation in Myanmar on the UNSC agenda was successful in September 2006, ASEAN countries did have second thoughts about whether this would reflect negatively on the Association's record. After all, even though some ASEAN governments privately may have viewed Myanmar as a threat to international peace and security, such views were not presented publicly; in fact, most openly disagreed with the proposition. However, in a further indication of frustration with Myanmar's leadership, ASEAN members did subsequently not extend unambiguous diplomatic support for Myanmar at the UNGA in 2006 as they had done in the previous and other years. All voted in favour of a non-action motion at the UN in November 2006, which was defeated by a 77-64 margin with 30 abstentions; but some ASEAN states then voted in favour of the draft resolution on Myanmar that was approved by a margin of 79-28 votes with 63 abstentions. More specifically, six countries voted against (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Vietnam), but the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand abstained.¹⁰

⁸ Mark Bendeich, 'Interview: ASEAN would allow UN debate on Myanmar-Thailand', *Reuters*, 26 July 2006.

⁹ Condoleeza Rice, Press Conference with Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid, Kuala Lumpur, 28 July 2006, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/69665.htm>

¹⁰ UNGA, Third Committee approves draft resolutions on human rights in Myanmar, Belarus; Rejects Texts on Canada, United States', UNGA 61st General Assembly, Third Committee, 22 November 2006, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/gashc3877.doc.htm>

The failed attempt by the United States and the United Kingdom to have a UNSC resolution passed against Myanmar in January 2007 temporarily eased international pressure on ASEAN to push the generals to move speedily ahead with a genuine dialogue involving Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD with a view to bringing about a transition to democracy. As a non-permanent member of the UNSC Indonesia had abstained in part on the grounds that concerns related to Myanmar were better discussed by the Human Rights Council. From the perspective of many ASEAN countries the double veto by China and Russia was also welcome as it promised a refocusing of relations with dialogue partners and more attention to issues considered more pressing and important for the Association to deal with.

In an apparent attempt to get back to normal business, Singapore's foreign minister George Yeo visited Yangon and Naypyidaw in April 2007, where he was assured that the National Convention would be successfully concluded before the end of the year. Singapore also extended an invitation to Than Shwe to pay an official visit to the city-state. A month later, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong argued that ASEAN-US relations should not be held hostage to the Myanmar issue.¹¹ Anecdotal evidence suggests moreover that at the 2007 Asian Security Summit Singapore policy makers expressed considerable annoyance when pushed on the topic of Myanmar.

ASEAN's Stance since August 2007

The Association did not comment on demonstrations during August and September until the military regime decided to crack down on protesters using force. Meeting in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA Plenary, the ASEAN Chair, Singapore, issued a statement on 27 September. This statement marked the culmination of growing unease and concern over developments in Myanmar, not least on the part of the ASEAN chair.

In the preceding days, Singapore had initially expressed concern as well as hope that the protests would be resolved peacefully (24 Sept). This concern was reiterated as violence ensued, leading Singapore to urge Myanmar

¹¹ Lee Hsien Loong, 'America And Asia: Our Shared Future', Speech given at The Asia Society Washington Center/US-Asean Business Council Joint Gala Dinner, Washington, D.C., 3 May 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

authorities to 'exercise utmost restraint' (26 Sept). On 27 September, Singapore said it was 'deeply troubled and concerned by reports that the demonstrations in Yangon have been suppressed by force' and welcomed the decision to send Special Adviser Ibrahim Gambari to Myanmar. Notably, Singapore's MFA added that:

The situation in Myanmar affects all ASEAN countries. We hope that the Myanmar authorities and all other parties in Myanmar will appreciate the broader implications of their actions on the region as a whole and act accordingly. The UN offers the best hope for a peaceful resolution of the situation.

The same day Prime Minister Lee contacted Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi of Malaysia, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo of the Philippines, Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont of Thailand and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung of Vietnam. Lee highlighted that the confrontation in Myanmar would have implications for ASEAN and the whole region. ASEAN, he argued, therefore could not credibly remain silent or uninvolved in this matter.¹² According to Singapore, all of the aforementioned ASEAN leaders agreed with Lee Hsien Loong that ASEAN should issue a clear statement urging the Myanmar authorities to exercise restraint, and find a political solution for national reconciliation without resorting to violence. They apparently moreover agreed on the importance of the mission to Myanmar then to be undertaken by the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari.

The ASEAN Chairman's statement released later that day in New York is to date the toughest ever released in relation to Myanmar. The language mirrors the tone of moral condemnation also invoked across Western capitals.¹³ Ministers expressed their 'revulsion' to Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win over reports that the demonstrations in Myanmar were being suppressed by violent force and that there had been a number of fatalities.

¹² MFA Spokesman's Comments on PM Lee Hsien Loong's calls to ASEAN leaders on the Myanmar issue, 27 September 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

¹³ Statement by ASEAN Chair, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo in New York, 27 September 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

Ministers also called upon Myanmar to resume its efforts at national reconciliation with all parties concerned, and work towards a peaceful transition to democracy, as well as for the release of all political detainees including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Expressing full support for the good offices role of Ibrahim Gambari, ministers urged the Myanmar government to grant him full access to all parties in Myanmar and to cooperate fully and work with him.

The ASEAN Chairman's statement on Myanmar of 27 September marked a significant diplomatic escalation towards Naypyidaw. Although a Chairman's statement rather than a joint statement, the release was nevertheless a joint product in the sense that Singapore's original draft was amended as ASEAN foreign ministers discussed the situation in Myanmar on the sidelines of the UNGA Plenary Session. It was also delivered to the media in the presence of all ASEAN foreign ministers except Myanmar's Nyan Win. While following up the position taken by their leaders, the Chairman's statement also served the immediate need to formulate a coherent ASEAN position in advance of foreign ministers' group meeting with the UNSG that was certain to focus on developments in Myanmar. As the previous section demonstrated, a common position beyond the demand for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and political detainees and some progression towards democracy could not be assumed. However, the September events in Myanmar, and the international outrage they generated, were clearly qualitatively different from previous protests after August 1988, expressed not least in the regime's resort to force against monks. As such, the events necessitated a reassessment of ASEAN's practice of acceding to Myanmar's apparent preference for the UN rather than ASEAN to be the platform on which to address the concerns of the international community in relation to its domestic situation. In the eyes of Foreign Minister George Yeo, not adopting a more critical consensus position on Myanmar would have undermined the Association's credibility.¹⁴

The ASEAN Chair's statement represented something of a diplomatic coup for Singapore and ASEAN as a whole. In particular, the language was

¹⁴ Transcript of Interview with Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo by the Straits Times US Bureau Chief, Derwin Pereira, New York, 30 September 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

sufficiently strong for the international community to take note. More specifically, it satisfied American expectations. Secretary Rice associated herself with the statement on the day it was issued. Moreover, whereas ASEAN policy towards Myanmar had before failed to impress Western governments and global civil society, the New York statement suggested that ASEAN had finally joined the side of Myanmar's long-time critics. As George Yeo indicated already in late September though, the statement did not mark 'a significant shift in policy'.¹⁵ After all, one might want to add, ASEAN had by then already become highly critical of Myanmar by the standards of the Association, and its practice of 'enhanced interaction' far surpassed the more pristine interpretation of non-interference that the grouping has been accused by its detractors of continuing to champion.

No Coercive Measures

Despite winning plaudits for their New York statement, ASEAN countries have continued to face calls to impose sanctions on the military regime in Naypyidaw. The growing and palpable frustration with the military junta notwithstanding, ASEAN has consistently rejected both the adoption of sanctions against Myanmar and its suspension from the grouping. While the reasoning varies from member to member, ASEAN's key arguments may be said to comprise the following points: (1) Sanctions will prove ineffective if applied by the US and the EU members but not by India and China; (2) regional governments see themselves as having at best moral but no economic leverage over Myanmar; (3) the imposition of sanctions and in particular the suspension of Myanmar's membership in ASEAN would lead members to lose even the minimal (residual) leverage they might possess; (4) as a consequence of imposing coercive measures, Myanmar might retaliate and de facto withdraw from active cooperation in ASEAN (at the expense of the region); and (5) suspending its membership or expelling Myanmar would constitute a blow both to ASEAN's image and its strategic goal of forming One Southeast Asia.

The claim that ASEAN possesses insufficient economic leverage in relation to Naypyidaw would seem to rest on the argument that there is but limited

¹⁵ Ibid.

trade and investment between Myanmar and other ASEAN states. More particularly, it rests on an assessment that even where economic interaction is relatively substantial, the ASEAN states concerned – Thailand and Singapore – also possess no leverage. Myanmar's highest trade volume with an ASEAN country is with Thailand. Significantly, this does indeed not give Bangkok any leverage, as Thailand is now dependent on natural gas deliveries from its western neighbour. This situation will not change. For instance, Thailand's PTT Exploration and Production (PTTEP) is seeking to invest about US \$1 billion in Block M9 in the Gulf of Martaban,¹⁶ which is earmarked to yield its first gas in 2012. Clearly, therefore, existing Thai investments in Myanmar's gas and oil sector would not be withdrawn, and even if they were, the investments would likely be immediately taken over by Chinese, Indian or Korean countries. That said, to diversify its risks, in February 2008, Thailand's PTTEP announced a swap of its 20 percent stake in offshore Block M3 and M4 for blocks awarded to the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

Whether Singapore enjoys greater leverage than Thailand in terms of being able to put pressure on Myanmar as a result of its investment and trade relations is also not clear. Though Singapore has considerable cumulative investments in Myanmar (S\$ 742 million by 2005), no track is kept of how much Singapore investment in Myanmar has been made by government-linked companies.¹⁷ As regards suggestions that Singapore has leverage derived from the banking services made available to Myanmar, Singapore's government has clarified that the Monetary Authority of Singapore 'does not track the amount of money remitted into or out of Singapore by any country.'¹⁸

Notably, as the previous section argued, ASEAN has also not succeeded in consistently bringing to bear the moral influence it arguably continues to have over Myanmar. The military government has only rarely complied with ASEAN's expectations, although some concessions have been made.

¹⁶ 'Thai PTTEP in deal with CNOOC in Myanmar', *Reuters*, 13 February 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/rbssEnergyNews/idUSBKK2053820080213>

¹⁷ Transcript of Reply by Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo to questions on ASEAN and Myanmar in Parliament on 22 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Even Indonesia, despite its historical ties, has not found the military junta very amenable to its recommendations and offers to learn from its experience with political transition. Most ASEAN governments have instead been routinely upset by the level of procrastination exhibited by Myanmar over political reform, and in particular the timing of the routine renewal of Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest, which on many occasions has occurred during, after or just before important ASEAN meetings. The only countries that possess some leverage to influence the SPDC, it would seem, are those that can provide backing to Myanmar at the UNSC.

ASEAN's own focus on diplomacy has persisted despite the costs that members have collectively incurred as a result of Myanmar's defiance. Indeed, ASEAN has maintained its preference for a diplomatic approach despite sustaining continued political costs imposed by the US and EU. At the most recent ASEAN Summit meetings in Singapore, the U.S. Trade Representative, Susan Schwab, suggested that given the political situation in Burma it was impossible to imagine in the near term a US free trade agreement with ASEAN. Moreover, the proposed inaugural US-ASEAN Summit, already postponed from last September 2007, is likely to be cancelled altogether for the near-term. The summit would have involved Myanmar's representation, albeit not at the level of head of state. Meanwhile, the EU signaled that prospects for talks on the proposed EU-ASEAN FTA are in danger unless Myanmar implements reforms.

ASEAN countries may be troubled by the US and EU holding their bilateral relations with the region to some extent hostage to the situation in Myanmar, but they are not really in a position to do much about it. However, they generally appreciate that in view of their opposition to coercive measures, it is all the more important that ASEAN also continues to push diplomacy for the situation in Myanmar to move forward. They recognize in particular that ASEAN's collective position has significant bearing on the level of international criticism to which ASEAN is subjected and the role that Myanmar's neighbours, particularly China, are able to play behind the scenes. In this context, how to position ASEAN in relation to UN efforts has thus been a key question and concern. Since the September protests, the task of developing a practical collective response to develop-

ments in Myanmar has been left above all to Singapore, which holds the ASEAN Chairmanship until August 2008.

Singapore, Myanmar/Burma, and the UN Process

In September, Singapore suggested that the good offices role of the UN Secretary General and his Special Adviser on Myanmar stood the best chance of advancing the latter's domestic political process. Speaking in anticipation of Gambari's first visit to Myanmar following the violent suppression of street protests in September, foreign minister George Yeo assessed the prospects for success as follows: 'We're not very hopeful but it's the best shot we have and the key now is to build up the authority and the moral prestige of Ambassador Gambari.'¹⁹ This message would also seem to have been communicated to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, whom Yeo met in New York at the time. Following Gambari's return from his first visit to Myanmar, Singapore's permanent representative at the UN expressed greater optimism still. In his words, 'the UN's efforts, as embodied by Mr Gambari, are unique and irreplaceable. At this stage, Mr Gambari represents our best hope and is also the only game in town.'²⁰ The Special Advisor was again assured of the city-state's full support while in Singapore on 21 October during a six-nation Asian consultation tour. The support offered seemed to pay off when Gambari used a stopover in Singapore following his November visit to Myanmar to read out a statement by Aung San Suu Kyi in which she expressed inter alia her readiness to cooperate with the Myanmar government to pursue a 'meaningful and timebound dialogue with the SPDC leadership'.²¹ For Gambari this development implied that 'We now have a process going which would lead to substantive dialogue between the Government and Aung San Suu Kyi as a

¹⁹ Transcript of Doorstop Interview with Minister George Yeo and UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband at the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly on 30 September 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

²⁰ Remarks by Mr Vanu Gopala Menon, Singapore's Perm Rep to the UN at the Security Council Session on the Situation in Myanmar, 5 Oct 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

²¹ The full statement is available at:

www.freesuukyi.org/blog/2007/11/statement_released_by_daw_aung.html. Also see Aung Zaw, 'Decoding Aung San Suu Kyi's Statement', *The Irrawaddy*, 9 November 2007, www.irrawaddy.org

key instrument in promoting national reconciliation in an all-inclusive manner'.²²

By giving Gambari strong diplomatic backing Singapore has focused on achieving peaceful regime transition in Myanmar. Singapore also joined Western and other states in calling for a genuine dialogue among all parties: the government, the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, and the minority groups. As Foreign Minister Yeo argued, 'It has to be a genuine dialogue and not just for show.'²³ However, to Singapore the continued involvement of the military in this process has been crucial. In the words of its UN Permanent Representative Ambassador Menon: 'If the military is not part of the solution, there will be no solution.'²⁴

In supporting the good offices role of the UN and in particular the efforts of Gambari, Singapore rejected a number of alternative approaches, both for itself and ASEAN. For instance, while clarifying that it would abide by *any* UNSC resolutions, Singapore dismissed the idea that ASEAN countries would follow the US in imposing a trade embargo against Myanmar. Singapore also sought to nip in the bud any talk of boycott, expulsion, let alone military intervention. Beyond the reasons already mentioned above, a key reason for repudiating such means was Singapore's belief that coercive measures would negatively impact on efforts expended on the UN good offices role. Pointing furthermore to the 'tenuous' ceasefire accords in Myanmar, Ambassador Menon, for instance, stressed that Singapore and the wider ASEAN did not 'want a Yugoslavia in Southeast Asia'.²⁵ Foreign minister Yeo similarly warned of Myanmar forming a parallel to the Iraqi situation 'where we said it's good Saddam Hussein is no longer there, but

²² 'Pro-democracy leader ready to cooperate with Myanmar authorities-UN envoy', UN New Centre, 8 November 2007, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=24595&Cr=myanmar&Cr1=&Kw1=Myanmar&Kw2=&Kw3=>

²³ Transcript of Doorstop Interview of Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo following his visit to the Sasanaramsi 'Burmese' Buddhist Temple, 20 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

²⁴ Remarks by Mr Vanu Gopala Menon, Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN at the Security Council Session on the Situation in Myanmar, 5 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

²⁵ Remarks by Mr Vanu Gopala Menon, Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN at the Security Council Session on the Situation in Myanmar, 5 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

then did not know how to handle the insurgency that went on after he was gone.²⁶ He also stressed the region's interest in avoiding a situation whereby Myanmar would become an isolated buffer state between China and India. Indeed, Singapore has been clear that Myanmar ought to remain a member of the ASEAN family, allowing other member states to exert 'moral pressure' to influence Myanmar's decisions.

In its diplomacy, Singapore strongly supported Gambari's early return to Myanmar following his initial visit in September and hoped that the regime would offer its full cooperation, including access to the highest levels of the SPDC as well as Aung San Suu Kyi, the monks and members of the State Constitution Drafting Committee. Yeo argued that there should be no preconditions to the dialogue between the regime and the NLD leader other than the commitment of both sides to work for national reconciliation (in contrast to SPDC preconditions that Aung San Suu Kyi reject sanctions).

Singapore's support for Gambari's early return was also based on the assessment that an unstable Myanmar constituted, in the words of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, a 'time bomb'.²⁷ This assessment was reaffirmed by George Yeo, who made clear that there was not only a possibility of the country imploding but also suggested that neighbouring countries would potentially have to face the anger of the Myanmar diasporas. As he put it:

There is a lot of anger in Myanmar and among the Myanmar people in Singapore - there are tens of thousands of them here... They readily admitted that the recent crackdown was much less than what had happened in 1988, which was a really brutal crackdown. But that was the period before the Internet and handphone cameras, and today whatever happens will be quickly spread worldwide. And the Myanmar diaspora is over 2 million, not only in neighbouring countries, but also in Europe,

²⁶ Transcript of Reply by Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo to questions on ASEAN and Myanmar in Parliament on 22 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

²⁷ 'Lee Kuan Yew: Myanmar crisis destabilizes ASEAN region', Radio Singapore International, 6 October 2007, http://www.ntu.edu.sg/corpcomms2/news/RSIonline_071006_MinisterialForum.pdf

Australia and America. So there is no way the current situation can go on like this for a long time.²⁸

While Singapore regarded Gambari as a 'catalyst', who 'somehow has been able to win the trust of both sides',²⁹ the success of Gambari's November mission was considered as depending on him receiving the full backing of all of East Asia's regional powers. In line with Singapore's objective to advance the political process in Myanmar, Yeo visited China and Japan in late October for exchanges on how regional countries could support both a genuine process of peaceful reconciliation in Myanmar generally and Gambari's good offices role in particular. Notably, the visits were not undertaken in the capacity of ASEAN Chair – an evident lesson from the experiences endured by Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar in 2006.

Deliberating on the Myanmar issue with Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi in Beijing at the end of October, Yeo elicited a commitment whereby China would support ASEAN's efforts to bring about national reconciliation in Myanmar and work closely together with the Association to assist the mission of the UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor. Japanese foreign minister Masahiko Koumura offered even greater support, concurring in particular with Singapore on the need for a 'genuine dialogue'. Yeo had earlier suggested that the death of a Japanese journalist during the protests in Yangon should not induce Tokyo to switch to a Western position on Myanmar, which was contrary to the recommendations the Bush administration had put to Japan. In the event, Yeo and Koumura would appear to have discussed how Gambari's hand might be strengthened.³⁰ In November George Yeo also visited India, with Myanmar again the principal item on the agenda. With Singapore's foreign minister trying to persuade New Delhi to support the Gambari process, his Indian counterpart, Pranab Murkherjee, apparently said that, '... it can't just be India and China. It has

²⁸ Transcript of Reply by Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo to questions on ASEAN and Myanmar in Parliament on 22 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

²⁹ Transcript of Door-stop Interview of Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo following his visit to the Sasanaramsi 'Burmese' Buddhist Temple, 20 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

³⁰ Transcript of Doorstop Interview of Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo with Kyodo News, Gaimusho, Tokyo, 27 October 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

to be India, China and ASEAN together.³¹ In other words, while promising to support the UN Special Advisor, all of East Asia's major powers indicated to Singapore that they expected ASEAN to play a key role in dealing with Myanmar.

The East Asia Summit Briefing Fiasco

It was in this context that Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong issued an invitation to Gambari to brief East Asia Summit (EAS) leaders, when the UN Special Adviser arrived in Singapore on 8 November on a stopover to New York upon the return from his fourth visit to Myanmar. The invitation to Gambari was extended once more when Prime Minister Lee telephoned UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on 15 November. Its purpose would appear to have been threefold: (1) to allow East Asian states to affirm their collective support for Gambari's good offices role; (2) to demonstrate that ASEAN – alongside China, Japan, and India – was playing a role in addressing the situation in Myanmar; and (3) to prevent the Myanmar issue from hijacking the Summit's main agenda – the signing of the ASEAN Charter in celebration of the Association's 40th anniversary.³²

However, what initially was designed to further strengthen Ibrahim Gambari's role turned out to be a major public relations disaster as Myanmar's Prime Minister, Thein Sein, objected strongly to the Gambari invitation at the informal ASEAN Leaders' meeting two days prior to the convening of the EAS. Emphasizing that the situation in Myanmar was a domestic affair, and that Myanmar was fully capable of handling the situation by itself, Thein Sein also reaffirmed that Myanmar had every confidence in managing itself the good offices of the UN by itself without others getting involved. In the event, not only was the plan of Gambari briefing the EAS summit dropped but also that of the idea of substituting this briefing with one organized instead in an ASEAN setting. ASEAN's disarray was perhaps epitomized by the pointed question of Indonesian President Yudhoyono as to how ASEAN had reached such discord. This

³¹ Transcript of interview with Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo by Singapore media representatives, 17 November 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

³² Foreign Minister Yeo knew that some EAS participants intended to raise Myanmar as an issue. Yeo moreover expected the Europeans to raise Myanmar at the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit, which was also scheduled for late 2007.

outcome raises at least two important questions. First, why did Singapore fairly confidently pursue for weeks an idea that was ultimately rejected? Second, what have been the implications of this episode? While not attempting to provide a comprehensive analysis of the event, the following points aim to shed some light on what may have transpired.

First, Singapore's decision to pursue the idea of Gambari briefing EAS leaders on Myanmar to some extent probably reflected the government's perception that given global public opinion after the use of force by the military regime against unarmed protesters Myanmar's generals were politically in a weaker position than Aung San Suu Kyi. In addition, Singaporean officials may have interpreted the junta's decision to re-activate the UN good offices role as a signal of the generals' preparedness to finally respond to external pressure and strike a political deal.

Second, as regards reasons why Singapore confidently pursued the idea, it is possible that any concerns Myanmar might have expressed about the proposed Gambari briefing were not appropriately articulated, perhaps not even when Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Zainul Abidin Rasheed, visited Myanmar from 13–14 November 2007 to brief Prime Minister General Thein Sein and government ministers on the ASEAN summit and related meetings. Exchanges in Singapore's parliament suggest that a 'senior Myanmar leader' (probably Thein Sein) directly informed Singapore's envoy in November 'that if the briefing would be of benefit to Myanmar, Myanmar would have no objections to it.'³³ This reading would support the argument that Than Shwe forced his prime minister to reject the briefing only later in November.³⁴ However, the generals probably appreciated that Singapore was in effect promoting the briefing to put added pressure on the military regime to avoid them procrastinating on starting a genuine dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi. Accordingly, Naypyidaw may have communicated concerns but did not find that these were properly understood or taken seriously enough. In the event, Prime Minister Lee telephoned UNSG Ban Ki-Moon on 15 November to formally extend the invitation for Gambari to brief EAS Leaders.

³³ Transcript of Replies by Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Raymond Lim to Questions in Parliament on 21 Jan 2008, www.mfa.gov.sg

³⁴ Personal communication.

Myanmar's top military leadership would appear to have expressly raised vehement objections to the briefing just before the ASEAN Summit. Apparently, Myanmar threatened to stay away if Gambari's briefing was included on the official agenda.³⁵ Singaporean foreign policy makers had not taken for granted that a unified position would be reached at the informal dinner preceding the ASEAN Summit.³⁶ Yet the thinking clearly was that if a consensus were to emerge, Japan, India and China would fall in line. The same, it was believed, would also be true of Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. Indeed, merely two days before the ASEAN informal leaders' meeting, George Yeo suggested that the EAS might issue a statement to support Myanmar's national reconciliation process by calling for a time bound dialogue, the purpose of which was to prevent the generals from backsliding in the political process that seemed to have ensued. In the event, Singapore clearly did not want to run the risk of Myanmar staying away from the Summit and therefore cancelled the Gambari briefing.

At least three reasons can be identified for this outcome. First, having apparently been persuaded by Singapore to support the idea of an EAS briefing despite some objections to and doubts about the plan, China did not choose to confront Senior General Than Shwe on the issue. The Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, visited Naypyidaw as a special envoy from 14–16 November for discussions with the SPDC leadership as well as Foreign Minister U Nyan Win, Information Minister Brig Gen Kyaw Hsan and Minister for Labour Aung Kyi. It would appear that during this visit China indicated its continued support for Gambari's good offices role, but not necessarily in the context of the EAS. While using the occasion to lean more heavily on Myanmar than was perhaps the case in the past, China nevertheless yielded to Myanmar's resolve to resist the proposed briefing.

Second, a number of ASEAN governments failed to back up Singapore at the Summit. Ostensibly, an important reason for this – as mooted in the region but dismissed by Singaporean diplomats – was the city-state's failure to

³⁵ 'Junta against Gambari's Asia briefing', *The Brunei Times*, 19 November 2007, http://www.bt.com.bn/en/asia_news/2007/11/19/junta_against_gambaris_asia_briefing

³⁶ Transcript of interview with Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo by Singapore media representatives, 17 November 2007, www.mfa.gov.sg

sufficiently consult in advance on the issue. It would appear to be true that Singapore did not formally consult with all ASEAN states about the proposed briefing. However, based on the information made publicly available by Singapore, foreign minister Yeo had accommodated the schedule of his Indonesian counterpart to personally brief Dr Wirajuda in early November on ASEAN's forthcoming summits, and he also travelled to Jakarta to brief President Yudhoyono in early November. The Indonesian President at that point seems to have given his support for extending ASEAN's fullest support to the good offices role of Gambari, although it is unclear to what extent he specifically endorsed the idea of Gambari briefing EAS leaders. Singapore would also seem to have properly briefed Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines – but not Vietnam. Significantly, insider accounts suggest that the Vietnamese foreign minister persistently dodged Singapore's attempts to speak to him about the issue.

This underlying reason why Singapore attracted less than full support for the Gambari briefing proposal from among some other ASEAN members was that these countries feared that the briefing would create an undesirable precedent. Up to that moment in time, Myanmar had offered briefings on its domestic situation at ASEAN meetings, but at no point had the Association invited other players to use a regional platform to evaluate the regime's progress. After quietly abiding by the evolving ASEAN consensus on Myanmar over many months and years, leaders from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia especially would appear to have become troubled by Singapore's eagerness to have Myanmar's domestic politics become the focus of a formal briefing to EAS participants, which include Japan and Australia. Having such a briefing was at the very least perceived as tantamount to violating the Association's non-interference principle. More importantly, the idea could be used against them in the future. Even Malaysia and Indonesia seem to have had some doubts over the likely effectiveness of internationalizing a regional but ultimately internal issue.

There may well be other reasons for the diplomatic fiasco. First, supporting unreservedly the EAS does not come naturally to all ASEAN countries. Malaysia has been known to be less than fully enthusiastic about politically investing in the EAS and instead prefers to reinforce the ASEAN+3 framework. Malaysia and Indonesia moreover seem agreed that the EAS

should better only serve the originally agreed purpose of a strategic regional dialogue. Also, quite different considerations informed Thailand's position: the historically complicated relationship with Myanmar that has significantly improved only in recent years under former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and Premier Surayud Chulanont's point that Thailand's then interim government in power after the September 2006 coup did not possess the requisite moral authority to take action against its neighbour. Unequivocal intramural support for the EAS briefing was thus limited to the Arroyo administration, which espouses democracy but is vulnerable over a significant number of purported extra-judicial killings and governance shortcomings. In short, the unsuccessful attempt to allow Gambari the opportunity to brief East Asian leaders on the progress achieved with respect to the UN Secretary General's good offices role highlighted significant divisions among regional governments, particularly in relation to the grouping's non-interference principle.

Singapore, as ASEAN Chair, responded by releasing a sharp statement. Noting Thein Sein's reasons for rejecting the briefing to EAS leaders, the statement somewhat caustically reported that 'ASEAN Leaders agreed that ASEAN would respect Myanmar's wishes and make way for Myanmar to deal directly with the UN and the international community on its own.'³⁷ It also affirmed ASEAN's readiness 'to play a role whenever Myanmar wants it to do so', while stating that '[m]ost Leaders expressed the view that Myanmar could not go back or stay put.'³⁸ Finally, the ASEAN Chairman's Statement, read out by Prime Minister Lee and supported by eight counterparts, outlined leaders' expectations that Myanmar work with the UN in order to: (1) Open up a meaningful dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD); (2) Make full use of the good offices of the UN Secretary-General Gambari in this process; (3) Lift restrictions on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and release all political detainees; (4) Work towards a peaceful transition to democracy; and (5) Address the economic difficulties faced by the people of Myanmar. The statement also emphasized that leaders would 'strive to prevent the Myanmar issue from

³⁷ ASEAN Chairman's statement on Myanmar, 20 November 2007,

<http://www.aseansec.org/21057.htm>

³⁸ Ibid.

obstructing ASEAN's integration efforts, especially the ASEAN Charter and the establishment of the ASEAN Community.'

Put differently, if Singapore's diplomatic efforts in the weeks before the Summit were designed to demonstrate that ASEAN was moving squarely into the diplomatic ringside to find a solution to the 'Myanmar problem', the message was now no longer that 'ASEAN had a role to play and will continue to play the role'.³⁹ As Singapore's Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, Raymond Lim, argued: 'so long as Myanmar insists on dealing with the UN and international community on its own, what ASEAN and any other country can do is obviously limited. Nonetheless, ASEAN stands ready to do what we can when and if Myanmar changes its mind.'⁴⁰ Significantly, albeit perhaps not entirely convincingly, Lim also stressed that at least Singapore no longer saw ASEAN's inaction as a problem of credibility in so far as the grouping had responded strongly to the events in September and clearly mapped out its expectations.

Even before the 2007 ASEAN Summit ASEAN's minimal leverage over Myanmar was well recognized by detractors of the regime and the wider international community. With the sanctions-based approach of the Western countries coming in for criticisms of ineffectiveness too, some analysts have put forward the view that a new multilateral vehicle would be best placed in order to change the political status quo in Myanmar, involving ASEAN, China, India, Japan and the United States,⁴¹ or some variant also involving the European Union. For some, this idea draws on the experience of the Six-Party talks. In contrast, the International Crisis Group has emphasized the potential usefulness of multiparty talks that would exclude Western governments and be modeled on the Jakarta Informal Meetings that helped break the Cambodia deadlock in the late 1980s.⁴² The idea of a regional

³⁹ Transcript Of Doorstop Interview with Minister George Yeo And Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda On 2 November 2007, Raffles Hotel, Singapore, www.mfa.gov.sg

⁴⁰ Transcript of Replies by Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Raymond Lim to Questions in Parliament on 21 Jan 2008, www.mfa.gov.sg

⁴¹ Michael Green and Derek Mitchell, 'Asia's Forgotten Crisis: A New Approach to Burma', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007, pp.155-58.

⁴² International Crisis Group, *Burma/Myanmar: After the Crackdown*, Asia Report No.144, 31 January 2008, p. 33.

initiative has apparently been raised in Bangkok and Jakarta.⁴³ No such regional process has as yet evolved, however. Instead, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam all accepted invitations to join the Group of Friends on Myanmar which is convened by the UN Secretary General. This group of countries, expected to provide support and advice in carrying out the UNSG good offices mandate, also includes Australia, China, France, India, Japan, Norway, Russia, Slovenia (as EU president), the United Kingdom and the United States. Following an initial meeting in December 2007, the group has to date only met again once after Myanmar's leadership announced that it would hold a referendum on the new constitution in May 2008 and organize multiparty elections in 2010.

Myanmar/Burma Referendum and Elections

The announcement of a timetable for both the referendum and general elections took ASEAN governments by surprise. Initial responses from ASEAN to Myanmar's planned referendum and elections were cautious but supportive. For instance, Surin Pitsuwan, the incoming Secretary-General of ASEAN, welcomed the announcement and called it '...a development in the right direction' in that it was a 'clear, definite beginning'.⁴⁴ Singapore's foreign ministry termed it a 'positive development' and expressed the hope that the political process would be inclusive. Malaysian foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar, while hoping that Myanmar would continue to engage with Gambari to ensure the credibility and integrity of the roadmap, emphasized that 'we want the pressure on Myanmar by the international community to be taken off or reduced or minimised so that Myanmar can concentrate on development and play its role in ASEAN.'⁴⁵ These comments stood in some contrast to the response of the United States, which suggested that the referendum would be both conducted in a 'pervasive climate of fear' and inconsistent with the October 2007 UNSC presidential statement which

⁴³ Ibid., p.12.

⁴⁴ 'ASEAN Chief: Burma charter vote a first step', *Reuters*, 13 February 2008, http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10335

⁴⁵ 'Malaysia hopes Myanmar election goes on as planned', *Bernama*, 12 February 2008

called on Myanmar to create the conditions for a genuine dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi.⁴⁶

At the ASEAN foreign ministers retreat in Singapore in February 2008, Myanmar's foreign minister Nyan Win provided a more detailed briefing on the planned referendum and elections. In the event, ASEAN member states reacted cautiously and sceptically as regards the referendum's implementation. Moreover, having also understood that Aung San Suu Kyi would be barred from running for office, some ASEAN countries have taken issue with Myanmar's clarification regarding Daw Suu Kyi's apparent non-eligibility. George Yeo suggested that excluding Aung San Suu Kyi on the grounds of her marriage to a foreign citizen might be seen to be not in keeping with the times. Moreover, emphasizing the importance that the referendum and subsequent elections must have international credibility, Singapore's foreign minister also called for their 'independent verification.'⁴⁷ Other ASEAN ministers have made somewhat different points. For instance, Indonesia's government stressed anew that Jakarta might play a role by sharing its experience of transition from a military government to full democracy, although foreign minister Wirajuda also expressed his hope that Suu Kyi would be allowed to stand for office. Thailand's new Foreign minister Noppadon Pattama said that 'the contents of the Constitution, whether it's democratic or not' was an 'internal problem of Myanmar.'⁴⁸

Myanmar's referendum announcement poses a particularly delicate issue for the Philippines, however, in so far as Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo had suggested a link between her country's ratification of the ASEAN Charter and political progress in Myanmar, particularly the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. This position had been publicly stated at the time of the signing of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007. The underlying reasoning, as advised by the President, was that by signing the ASEAN

⁴⁶ U.S. State Department, Press Statement: Burmese Regime Announces Sham Referendum, 11 February 2008, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2008/feb/100254.htm>

⁴⁷ Transcript of the Door-Stop Interview of Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo following the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Welcome Dinner, 19 February 2008, www.mfa.gov.sg

⁴⁸ Transcript of the joint Doorstop Interview of Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand Noppadon Pattama on 21 February 2008 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, www.mfa.gov.sg

Charter, Myanmar had committed itself to democratic reforms that involved releasing Aung San Suu Kyi. She again linked the release of Aung San Suu Kyi to the Charter's ratification by Congress at the January 2008 World Economic Forum.⁴⁹ A potential problem faced by the Association thus is that Philippine legislators might actually hold the ASEAN Charter hostage to the evolving situation in Myanmar. This has given rise to some concern within ASEAN. Some ASEAN states have therefore intimated that the ratification of the Charter should take precedence over other issues.

ASEAN and Gambari's Good Offices Role

Following early successes during his visits in September and November, most notably the resumption of discussions between Aung San Suu Kyi and Myanmar's military regime, the UN Special Adviser Ibrahim Gambari has been treading water with the authorities since November 2007. By deciding to hold the referendum in May 2008, the junta seems to have unambiguously dismissed demands for widening the pre-referendum political process to include Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, let alone other political actors. This was confirmed when on 13 February the regime extended by another year the house arrest of NLD Vice-Chairman Tin Oo, and within a week the Myanmar State Constitution Drafting Commission also announced the finalisation of the draft of the new constitution. These developments have led some analysts to conclude that '...Gambari's mission is as dead as Burma's pro-democracy movement.'⁵⁰ Seeking to still make an impact on Myanmar's political process, the UN Special Adviser returned to Naypyidaw in early March for his third visit since the September 2007 protests. However, the likelihood of him persuading the military leadership to accede to Ban Ki-Moon's call on the generals to make the constitution-making process 'inclusive, participatory and transparent' and to engage 'without delay in a substantive and time-bound dialogue' with Aung San Suu Kyi was remote. In the event, the visit yielded no concessions from the military regime.

⁴⁹ 'President renews call on Myanmar to return to the path of democracy', Office of the President, Republic of the Philippines, released 26 January 2008, <http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2008/jan26.htm>

⁵⁰ Aung Zaw, 'Gambari's Mission is Dead in the Water', *The Irrawaddy*, 20 February 2008, http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=10498

Before returning to Myanmar in March, Gambari continued his shuttle diplomacy with visits to Jakarta and Singapore. The planned organization of a referendum has again raised profound issues for ASEAN states whose position since November is inextricably tied up with the role played by the UN Special Advisor. First, despite having both remained very supportive of the UN Special Advisor and also impressed on the regime to accept his suggestions (e.g. to build up a permanent presence to facilitate the good offices role), it is difficult to see how the announcement of a referendum by the ruling military leadership has not undermined and in effect proved untenable the position ASEAN spelled out at the Singapore Summit. Ultimately ASEAN now again faces the choice of either itself still working towards attaining the same objectives that it relied on the Gambari process to achieve or endorsing as credible and legitimate the process that the military regime is keen to pursue.

Second, an unambiguous response is difficult because members are divided over Myanmar, as discussed above. The continued house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi continues to ruffle many feathers, as does the exclusive nature of Myanmar's political process, but concerns about a hollowing out of the non-interference principle are real, too. Members seem uncertain about what further approaches or initiatives are the most appropriate and potentially effective. Myanmar also plays different roles in the domestic politics and public opinion of the other members. In an apparent attempt to achieve political gain at home (and abroad), Philippine policy-makers have pointed to disenchantment with Myanmar in Congress and suggested that its ratification of the ASEAN Charter was tied to political concessions by the SPDC. The manner in which the May referendum is conducted may therefore impact on whether the ASEAN Charter is ratified. It would of course be ironic if Myanmar moved beyond extra-constitutional rule, while a linkage ostensibly made for domestic political reasons would delay ASEAN becoming more of a rules-based organization.

Third, existing divisions within the membership may be reinforced by external pressure exerted in particular by the West. It is likely that the United States and the European Union member states will continue to focus on and criticize the perceived lack of credibility and legitimacy of the planned referendum and the elections. However, it is difficult to see how

ASEAN could easily influence the SPDC leadership either in relation to their respective timetable or its implementation. In any case, Myanmar's leadership is probably out to prove that it can embrace its desired kind of democracy independent of ASEAN involvement and in spite of manifold internal and external challenges.

Conclusion

The paper offers five conclusions. First, ASEAN has not been any more successful than the West in making the SPDC leadership respond positively to widespread expectations and hopes regarding the role of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in Myanmar's slow move towards constitutional rule and political transition. Second, in response to the SPDC's perceived political recalcitrance ASEAN states have over time in their dealings with Myanmar become increasingly prepared to dismiss diplomatic shackles associated with the non-interference principle. Under Singapore's chairmanship, when responding to the crackdown on protesters last September, ASEAN countries agreed to endorse what in effect has to date constituted the most severe public criticism ever of one of its members. Third, the acrimony characterizing the decision to invite Gambari to brief EAS leaders has highlighted important intramural divisions among ASEAN states, which in part still relate to the question of what now constitutes a legitimate flexible practice of the non-interference principle. Fourth, as a consequence of the cancellation of the Gambari briefing and the furore surrounding the issue, the grouping limited its collective diplomatic role to one of merely supporting the good offices role of the UN Secretary General. This was a logical but risky decision as it was quite uncertain whether Gambari's efforts would bear significant fruit. In the event, the refusal of the military to open up the political process in line with UN exhortations before a forthcoming referendum implies that ASEAN's post-November stance has little to show for. Fifth, there clearly remains the potential that the Association will face renewed external pressure and intramural contestation as a result of developments in Myanmar, especially if the military regime defies international and regional calls to ensure the credibility of the political process.

VI. ASEAN's Policy to Myanmar/Burma: Changes, Reasons, and Tendencies

Jianwen Qu

Since the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) admitted Myanmar as its member on July 23, 1997, the Myanmar issue has arguably been the toughest issue for ASEAN to deal with since its founding, and it has been a major obstacle to ASEAN's building of relations with the United States and the European Union. A "constructive engagement" policy was adopted by ASEAN in line with its objection to the UN Security Council's vote on intervention in the Myanmar issue, and the policy has served as a shield for Myanmar to fend off pressures from the West. However, inaction on the part of the military regime in moving toward democratization has served to put a millstone around ASEAN's neck. Under mounting pressure from the U.S. and Europe, some members have found themselves losing patience and have voiced increasing criticism of Myanmar, appealing for a readjustment of ASEAN policy toward Myanmar. In September 2007, the largest anti-government protests since 1988 broke out, which were harshly suppressed by the ruling junta, and served to provoke widespread condemnation, including from ASEAN members. This paper traces the changes of ASEAN's policy toward Myanmar in different phases. It analyzes the reasons for policy adjustments and discusses the dilemma that ASEAN policy has faced since the successful adoption of the ASEAN Charter on November 19, 2007 in Singapore. In an effort to sustain the organization as a whole and to promote the building of a regional community, ASEAN will by no means abandon Myanmar. The military regime of Myanmar for its part, striving for security and expanding the scope of socio-economic development, is keen on cooperating with and consolidating its position within ASEAN as well. The article contributes to understanding of the evolution of ASEAN's foreign policy and the difficulties for ASEAN's future integration.

The Event That Sparked Debate

On August 19, 2007, the Myanmar government's sudden decision to increase the fuel price caused a simultaneous and sharp increase in the price of transportation and food, inflicting more hardship on Myanmar's already impoverished population. This condition sparked protests which escalated as monks joined forces and became the main body of protestors; later on, their demands changed from the improvement of living conditions to political change. On September 24 and 25, up to 100,000 people, monks and laymen alike, took to the streets. The junta was forced to impose curfews in Yangon and Mandalay on the night of September 25. Starting from September 26, police in Yangon warned off the protestors by shooting in the air. The crowds were dispersed by using tear gas and batons, and hundreds were arrested; finally the unrest was quelled. The official news stated that "by October 7, 2007, 1,215 people had been released having signed their pledges, and 398 monks had been sent back to their respective monasteries."¹

This event renewed debate on the Myanmar issue that has been a focus of international attention, and the regional (China and ASEAN) and international community at large is divided. Among all stakeholders in the Myanmar issue, ASEAN has an important and special role. In the wake of the "Saffron Revolution," however, ASEAN's policy and stance on Myanmar is ambiguous, leaving many questions to be answered.

The Essence of the Myanmar/Burma Issue

The issue of Myanmar has been in the limelight of international affairs for almost two decades now, and it is an issue on which scholars hold different opinions. In general, Western scholars represented by U.S. experts usually view the Myanmar issue through the prism of dictatorship and human rights violations, focusing on how to depose the ruling junta and promote democracy in the country.

Chinese scholars, on the other hand, take a two-pronged view of history and reality, holding that the essence of the Myanmar issue, apart from complex ethnic minority issues in the country, is the gulf between Myanmar's slow development in economy, politics and society, and people's urgent desire for

¹ Nay Pyi Taw, *The New Light of Myanmar*, October 7, 2007.

an improvement in living conditions and democracy progress. As a result, civilians hold strong grudges against the military regime, causing wide concerns among the international community. Since 1987, Myanmar has remained on the UN list of the world's Least Developed Countries. Indeed, the Myanmar issue can be depicted as an issue of backward development and severe imbalance, which can be further expounded as follows:

First, the growth of the national economy is slow and uneven; fruits of development benefit the privileged class but not the majority population. This is the root of Myanmar/Burma issue.

Objectively speaking, the military regime has held economic development relatively high on its agenda since it seized power by force in September 1988, as is manifested in its adoption of an opening policy to attract foreign investment for the exploration of natural resources which has achieved some results. However, due to its weak economic foundation, poor infrastructure, inadequate capital, technology, expertise and human resources needed for development, imbalanced development among the country's regions, and the crippling of exports due to the long-imposed sanctions of the West, the economy on the whole has registered slow and inefficient progress over the past two decades. Apart from administrative expenses for the government, military expenditure and new capital construction have consumed a huge amount of precious economic resources. Suffering from the government's spending without restraint, mismanagement of the macro-economy, and skyrocketing inflation, many people's plight has remained largely unchanged or gotten worse in a situation where the price of daily necessities and fuel has increased.

Secondly, the junta's legitimacy has been questioned and disputed by Myanmar/Burma's civilian population and the West. As domestic democracy progress remains slow, its international standing has declined. This is the reflection of the issue at the international level.

The election of 1990 resulted in a landslide victory for the Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD)—but the junta failed to honor the result. Since 2003, when the military government introduced its “roadmap to democracy,” the National Convention has made only snail-

paced progress in crafting a new constitution, while without the constitution, new elections are impossible, thus placing the ruling junta under double pressure due to lack of legitimacy. The U.S.-led Western countries have branded the Myanmar government as an “outpost of tyranny.” In thus doing, they have persistently denounced the human rights record of Myanmar, pressed the military regime using various means, and have covertly or openly supported anti-government forces.

Thirdly, stagnant development in remote ethnic minority areas has stalled the national reconciliation process, and the unimproved relations between local and central governments have prolonged military conflicts.

The longstanding ethnic issue has not only undermined national integrity and the unity of Myanmar, but has consumed vast resources and efforts. It has disrupted the national economy, created conditions for external powers to intervene and interfere in Myanmar’s affairs, and has posed as a formidable challenge to Myanmar’s modernization and transformation. Since coming into the ASEAN fold, the Myanmar issue has been a sticking point in the association’s relations with the U.S. and EU. In pushing forward the greater ASEAN program after the Cold War, ASEAN has insisted on treating Myanmar’s internal affairs as a domestic issue. Confident in handling the issue at a regional level, ASEAN admitted Myanmar as its member despite criticism from the West. In the ten years following Myanmar’s admission, ASEAN’s policy to Myanmar has been influenced by changes in the international arena and within ASEAN itself. When the United States and Europe coerce ASEAN and its member countries at the expense of their interests, the Myanmar issue becomes a question on the agenda of ASEAN in a real sense, which, as dubbed by some Chinese, is “a hot potato” and “a pain in the heart” for ASEAN.

Changes to ASEAN’s Myanmar/Burma Policy

ASEAN was formed on August 8, 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.² In the context of the Cold War when the international system was divided into Eastern and Western blocs, its

² Lu Jianren, *Dongmeng de jintian yu mingtian* [The Present Situation and Future of ASEAN] (Beijing: Jingji guanli chubanshe, 1999), p. 1.

aims included the acceleration of economic growth, social progress, and cultural development among its members through joint endeavors.³ But the actual focus was on political and security cooperation throughout this period. Therefore, its foreign policy during the time of the Cold War was characterized by guarding against Communism and by seeking neutrality. This is because, for one, Southeast Asia was both a “hot war field” and a “Cold War frontier.” Until the end of the Cold War, ASEAN had been committed to strengthening internal solidarity and jointly staving off the so-called “Threat of Communism.” Secondly, the founding of ASEAN originated from a strong desire to safeguard national independence, as the Southeast Asian countries became newly independent nations only after the Second World War. On November 26–27, 1971, five foreign ministers held a special meeting in Kuala Lumpur, claiming to “exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, South East Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers.”⁴ During the Cold War, ASEAN did not close its door to Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries in spite of its impasse with three of the Indochina countries due to ideological reasons. The Bangkok Declaration stressed that “the Association is open for participation to all States in the South-East Asian Region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes.” But during the Cold War, only Brunei joined the association as part of its first enlargement in 1984.

From 1967 to 1991, Myanmar, the second largest country of Southeast Asia in size, showed little interest in joining ASEAN. In March 1972, when Lahann, the foreign minister of Myanmar, paid a visit to Indonesia, he expressed Myanmar's disinterest in joining ASEAN but agreed with the idea of a “neutralized South-East Asia.” In April of that year when Lahann visited Malaysia, he reaffirmed that “Myanmar does not need to strengthen economic cooperation with member countries through acceding ASEAN,” as

³ *The Bangkok Declaration*, The founding document of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), signed in Bangkok of Thailand on August 8, 1967.

⁴ *Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration*, Malaysia, 27 November 1971.

“we have established cooperation through bilateral and other multilateral mechanisms.”⁵

Myanmar’s refusal stemmed from its foreign policy of neutrality and Non-Alignment advocated during the Cold War. Neutrality is a distinct feature of Myanmar’s diplomacy, whether in theory or practice, spanning the period from its independence to the end of the Cold War.⁶ After Ne Win took power in a coup in March 1962, he proposed an “absolute neutrality” policy, holding that “Myanmar’s foreign policy should be absolutely neutral; neither to the right nor to the left. It is unwise to make an alliance with any group or state without any conditions.”⁷ At the *Non-Alignment Summit* in la Habana in 1979, Myanmar “ended its membership of the Non-Alignment Movement because some members like Cuba and the Philippines made alliances with either the communist bloc or western bloc.”⁸ Myanmar became a solely independent country that neither favored ASEAN nor the other countries of Indochina during the Cold War.

In 1987, Myanmar expressed its interest in joining ASEAN in an informal way for the first time when its prime minister paid a visit to Indonesia. But the military crackdown on the pro-democracy protests in September 1988 rendered Myanmar’s membership impossible. The country afterward was led by the military’s State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In the general election of May 27, 1990, the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won a landslide victory but was never allowed to take office, with the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi being placed under house arrest and thousands of NLD supporters and leaders arrested by the military junta. This sparked widespread condemnation of human rights abuses and pressure to restore the democratic process. Faced with increasing international isolation and pressure, the SLORC’s position became even more critical. The government urgently needed foreign

⁵ Hu Qiongyao, *Miandian rongru Dongmen yanjiu* [Study on Myanmar’s Integration into ASEAN], MA Dissertation (Kunming: Yunnan University, 2006), p. 6.

⁶ John F. Cady, *Zhanhou Dongnanya shi* [History of Post War Southeast Asia: Independence Problems] (Shanghai: Yiwenshu chubanshe, 1984), p. 448.

⁷ He Shengda and Li Chenyang, *Miandian: Lieguozhi* [Myanmar: A Guide to the States of the World] (Beijing: Social Science Documents Press, 2005), p. 342.

⁸ Nicholas Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol. II (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2003), p. 503.

exchange, capital equipment, and technical expertise to prevent the collapse of its ailing economy and so maintain the military's grip on political power.

From 1991 to 1997, ASEAN made a significant adjustment to its Myanmar policy with "constructive engagement" policy as the guiding principle. In the last phase of the Cold War, the international system collapsed and went into a stage of restructuring in which regionalism boomed. ASEAN began to adjust its strategies of self-development and external relations for strengthening internal binding and independence in decision-making, taking a leading role in regional affairs, and filling the "power vacuum."⁹ The formation and acceleration of the Single European Market and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the initial accomplishments of reform in China and India brought a sense of urgency to ASEAN. With the tendency of the U.S., Japan, and China to play a leadership role in Asia-Pacific affairs, ASEAN viewed itself as being placed in a disadvantaged position in the future Asia-Pacific architecture.¹⁰ Based on political, economic, and security concerns, therefore, ASEAN hoped to absorb Myanmar and the three Indochina countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Politically, the expansion was seen to add to the comprehensive strength of the bloc, enhance its international status, and as helpful for its growth as a "pole" in the Asia-Pacific region; in economic terms, the entry of Myanmar and three the Indochina countries meant that ASEAN's area would be enlarged to 4.5 million square kilometers, encompass a population of 500 million, and a GDP of over US\$ 700 billion.¹¹ In terms of security, it was argued that ASEAN's expansion would contribute to the forming of a security mechanism that would leverage big powers and safeguard regional security. In May 1994, senior officials from ASEAN member states, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia held a meeting in Manila and thereafter signed a statement on a 10-country community building plan, thus symbolizing the development strategy of transforming from a single "ASEAN Expansion" to a geo-political "Greater ASEAN"; it was unanimously supported by all countries in the region.

⁹ Lu Jianren, *Dongmeng de jintian yu mingtian*, p. 34.

¹⁰ Wang Shilu, Wang Guoping and Kong Jianxun, *Dangdai Dongmeng* [Contemporary ASEAN] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1998), p. 170.

¹¹ Lu Jianren, *Dongmeng de jintian yu mingtian*, p. 1.

The policy toward Myanmar at this stage fully demonstrated ASEAN's determination to deliver its development strategy and confidence in dealing with regional affairs. Ten years have passed since Myanmar finally entered ASEAN.¹² Before 1994, Myanmar had expressed its intention of joining ASEAN many times.¹³ Given that ASEAN at the time had no plan for expansion, however, and that Myanmar had developed imbalanced relations with some ASEAN member countries, ASEAN only welcomed the will of Myanmar with reservations while taking no concrete action. In 1994, after the plan of building Greater ASEAN was introduced, ASEAN expedited its expansion and changed its attitude toward Myanmar. Leaders of Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia visited Myanmar one after the other, showing their support for Myanmar to join ASEAN. In 1995, Myanmar appointed representatives to attend the 28th Foreign Minister Meeting in Brunei and signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and applied for observatory status. In December of the same year, SLORC Chairman General Than Shwe attended the informal summit of ASEAN in Bangkok, and signed the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Treaty.¹⁴ In July 1996, furthermore, Myanmar representatives participated in the 29th ASEAN Foreign Minister Meeting in Jakarta and became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In August, Myanmar officially submitted a written application to ASEAN. In November 1996, ASEAN decided to accept Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar as its members and, in July 1997, Myanmar formally acceded to ASEAN. During this period, ASEAN withstood huge pressures from the West and accepted Myanmar on its own footing. The U.S. government voiced its discontent in regard to Myanmar's ASEAN membership on many occasions.¹⁵ In June 1996, the United States sent two envoys to lobby around Southeast Asia in expectation of a discussion on how

¹² On a state visit to Indonesia in 1987, the Burmese PM for the first time expressed its government's wish to join ASEAN as soon as possible. See, for example, Yu Dingbang, *Miandian* [Myanmar] (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1994), p. 205.

¹³ Wang Shilu et al. *Cong Dongmeng dao da Dongmeng* [From ASEAN to Greater ASEAN] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1998), p. 188.

¹⁴ Jurgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture Origins: Development and Prospects* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p.144.

¹⁵ Zhao Xuegong, *Judade zhuanbian: zhanhou meiguo dui Dongya de zhengce 1945-2000* [Great Changes: American's Policy to East Asian after the Second World War, 1945-2000] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2002), p. 429.

to sanction Myanmar; the U.S. proposal was duly rejected by all ASEAN members. The Vice President of the European Commission also criticized ASEAN's relations with Myanmar on account of Myanmar's human rights record.

Notwithstanding the above, ASEAN did not cave into American and European disapproval. Indonesia stressed that "Myanmar's entry is necessitated by peace and the stability of Southeast Asia"; Malaysia's then prime minister, Mahathir Mohammad, noticeably responded to the pressure by saying: "I don't like others to teach me whom I shall make friends or enemies."¹⁶ From ASEAN's perspective, the Southeast Asia "orphan" Myanmar joining the big family of ASEAN was a "new milestone" in its implementation of "Greater ASEAN," eliminating the last barricade to realizing the goal of "one Southeast Asia." Meanwhile, ASEAN's confidence was bolstered by its successful reconciliation and resolution of the Cambodia issue, believing that effective measures could be made through concerted endeavors with a "constructive engagement" policy.¹⁷ If successful in the case of Myanmar, ASEAN's capability of resolving regional issues would be confirmed again, thus contributing to the enhancement of ASEAN's influence, unlocking the fetter of big powers, choosing a development path in accordance with ASEAN's values, and playing a leading role in dealing with regional affairs.

Myanmar's foreign policy adjustment and its eagerness to join ASEAN also made it possible for ASEAN to change its policy and welcome Myanmar. Starting in the mid-1980s, the political and economic conditions inside Myanmar worsened and public sentiments of discontent surfaced. In March 1988, a large-scale public protest occurred, leading to the collapse of the Ne Win regime. On September 18, 1988 amid the nationwide disorder the military became involved in political life again and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council under General Saw Maung, ushering in a new regime of the junta. In May 1990, a multi-party election was held but the junta did not honor the result of the election failing to hand over power to

¹⁶ Wang Shilu, Wang Guoping, and Kong Jianxun, *Dangdai Dongmeng*, p. 150.

¹⁷ Adeliemi Isola Ajipeiwa, *Miandian jiaru Dongmeng: Tiaozhan yu qianjing* [Myanmar entering ASEAN: Challenges and Prospects], *Nanyang ziliao yicong* (1999, No. 2), p. 51.

the winning National League for Democracy (NLD). This was met by sanctions from the U.S.-led developed countries. In dealing with the sanctions and seeking a diplomatic breakthrough, the military regime began to uphold a flexible and pragmatic, multi-dimensional foreign policy that aimed at developing relations with neighboring countries including China, India, and ASEAN countries, with the focus on joining ASEAN as a key diplomatic goal. The military regime believed accession to ASEAN could get help it obtain legitimacy, and also that through the platform of ASEAN, it could find a way out of the impasse, alleviating the heavy burden of isolation and improving relations with the West.¹⁸ Three years after the blueprint of the ASEAN community was introduced, Myanmar joined ASEAN as wished.

ASEAN's policy toward Myanmar in the wake of the Southeast Asia financial crisis has found itself under adjustment, wavering from a "constructive engagement policy" to "constructive intervention," and from "flexible engagement" to "enhanced interaction," thereby reflecting mixed sentiments.

In the same month as Myanmar joined ASEAN, the Asian Financial Crisis swept across Southeast Asia, drastically impinging on the political, economic, and social development of ASEAN members. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand registered a minus GDP growth; the Indonesian and Thai governments were forced to step down; and political upheaval occurred in Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines, where the population living under the poverty line significantly increased. According to statistics, by October 1998, the 15-month long crisis had turned one trillion US dollars into Non-Performing Loans, two trillion dollars worth of stock had crumbled to dust, and three trillion dollars of GNP vanished.¹⁹ The financial crisis caused a precipitous decrease in ASEAN's international influence and function, battering ASEAN's confidence in self-handling the issues of the region. In order to receive aid from the International Monetary Fund, ASEAN had to accept tough conditions, undertaking economic restructuring and democratic reform according to the Western model, and

¹⁸ He Shengda and Li Chenyang, *Miandian: Lieguozhi*, p. 372.

¹⁹ *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 1998, quoted from *International Forum* (Volume 1, 1999, p. 42.

compromising on issues of democracy and human rights. In 1997, at the 4th Foreign Minister Meeting of ARF, the U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright likened Myanmar's leaders to Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein. On this occasion, ASEAN changed its tone of "tit-for-tat" with the West on the Myanmar issue and no member spoke out in defense of Myanmar. The statement thereafter noted that ASEAN would make efforts to flexibly engage with Myanmar to change the human rights conditions there, and should Myanmar's entry cause any trouble to ASEAN's relations with the developed world, ASEAN would suggest to the Myanmar government that it accommodate the demands of the international community as best it could. On the other hand, ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino tried also to put Myanmar's military government at ease by telling them not to equate ASEAN's suggestions as interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar. In March 1998 when he paid a visit to Myanmar, he remarked to the ruling generals: "You must understand that Europe is very important to us."²⁰

The financial crisis made ASEAN realize that its economic ties with the West were too important to undermine and that it was not in the interest of ASEAN to hold up the Myanmar issue as an obstacle at the expense of relations with the West. But if ASEAN kept pace with the West on the Myanmar issue, the organization's internal solidarity would definitely suffer, in addition to its image of self-governance. A basic principle is that ASEAN's integration cannot be realized without Myanmar. So even when ASEAN has been dissatisfied with the behavior of Myanmar, it has had to refrain from radical measures; instead ASEAN policies toward Myanmar reflect a love-hate relationship. The crackdown by the military regime on the anti-government protests in September 2007 was met with worldwide condemnation. On September 27th, the nine foreign ministers of ASEAN except that of Myanmar made a joint statement criticizing the junta's crackdown on peaceful protests by force.²¹ While the Myanmar situation calmed down with the intervention of the UN, ASEAN appeared to the public as a whole, first by rejecting the U.S. Senate's demand for the

²⁰ Zhong Zhixiang, *Miandin wenti yanjiu* [Studies on Myanmar issues] (Beijing: Junshi yiwu chubanshe, 2001), p. 313.

²¹ *Democratic Voice of Burma*, September 27, 2007, <http://burmese.dvb.no/news.php?id=>

suspension of Myanmar's membership of ASEAN, and second, abruptly cancelling, at the demand of Myanmar, UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari's briefing on the situation in Myanmar scheduled to be addressed at the 13th ASEAN Summit in Singapore on November 20, paving the way for a smooth signing of the ASEAN Charter at the summit.

Reasons Behind Policy Adjustments

The "Non-interference Principle" is the root cause for ASEAN's adjustments of its policy toward Myanmar/Burma

Since its founding, "non-interference" has been a cardinal principle of ASEAN, a bedrock to maintain and promote stability, solidarity, and prosperity.²² But with the development of ASEAN and a formation of "Greater ASEAN," formidable challenges have been posed to the principle especially with the occurrence of emergencies such as the financial crisis and the forest fires in Indonesia. ASEAN's decision-making and executive agencies remain loose, while its collective emergency mechanism is weak and slow to react. In 1997, when the financial meltdown occurred, ASEAN did not have in place powerful monetary or financial policies, and was thus incapable of taking effective joint control. Member countries were divided in regulating the market; as a result, they did not prevent the spread of the disaster, or even worse, deepened their mistrust of and estrangement from one other. A Thai official noted in public that "in observing the non-interference principle, ASEAN did nothing during the economic crisis."²³ Calls for reform within the organization increased. The former vice prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar, proposed a "constructive intervention" policy (renamed as "flexible intervention" by Thailand), which gained support from Thailand and the Philippines.²⁴ Although it was rejected by many member countries, some degree of flexible intervention on regional common issues was seen to serve the interests of the region in the long run. The 8th ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in December 1998 witnessed a consensus among

²² Wang Xiaomin, "Dongmeng bugansheneizheng yuanze de yanbian" [Evolution of ASEAN Non-Interference Principle], *Dongnanya* (2000, No. 2), p. 9.

²³ Guo Ping and Fang Yun, "Huiying yu tiaozhan: zouxiang 21 shiji de Dongmeng" [Challenges: ASEAN in the 21st century], *Southeast Asia*, *Dongnanya* (1999, No. 2), p. 45.

²⁴ Wang Xiaoming, "Dongmeng bugansheneizheng yuanze de yanbian," p. 12.

its members. A principle of “reinforcing mutual influence” was proposed, and communication and cooperation among members was encouraged. In October 2003, the 9th ASEAN Summit adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord—a blueprint for building an ASEAN community—which affirms the principle of “non-interference” and “consultation and consensus” and proposes “to react to new developments inside member countries of ASEAN,” and “to respond timely and effectively in a context of regional dynamics and harmony.”²⁵ On policy toward Myanmar, Thailand pointed out that the regional situation had changed dramatically and that many problems transcended boundaries and regional limits, arguing that if “non-interference” prevails, ASEAN’s economy, security, and interests as a whole will be harmed. And that ASEAN should adopt a policy collective intervention on Myanmar to avoid Myanmar’s implosion, which would have negative repercussions for the security of Thailand and other ASEAN countries.²⁶

Adjustment of ASEAN Policies in View of Slow Progress in Myanmar/Burma

The lack of evidence of progress toward democracy in Myanmar caused ASEAN to pay a high price. In 1997 ASEAN accepted Myanmar’s membership in spite of increasing pressure from the West; ASEAN’s principle of “non-interference,” however, was wielded by Myanmar to shield off criticisms from the international community and justify its own path. The junta has kept Aung San Suu Kyi under house detention for a long time, refusing to yield to demands for democratic transition, which has led to questions of the extent of ASEAN’s influence and leverage over Myanmar. The way that ASEAN has handled Myanmar as a member of a big family has proven to be a failure. Can ASEAN deal with its regional affairs? Many have expressed doubts over this. The discord among the member states, as a result, has constrained ASEAN’s further integration and impeded its relations with America and Europe. ASEAN’s Secretary-General has clarified that the slow progress toward democracy that Myanmar has made has damaged ASEAN’s reputation. Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid

²⁵ *Declaration of ASEAN Concord 2003*, signed on October 8, 2003, Bali, Indonesia, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/news.xinhuanet.com/2003-10/08>

²⁶ Lu Jianren, *Dongmeng de jintian yu mingtian*, p. 288.

Albar has also expressed great displeasure that ASEAN has been dragged down and held hostage by the military regime in Myanmar.

In 2005, the question whether Myanmar would assume the rotating chair of ASEAN entered the international spotlight. Subsequently, it was used by the West as an issue with which to exert leverage over ASEAN. In threatening to boycott the 2006 ASEAN Summit as scheduled to be chaired by Myanmar, divisions were created within ASEAN. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand supported Myanmar to take over as chairman of the ASEAN group of nations whilst other members objected. In the ensuing ARF in Laos in July, U.S. State Secretary Condoleezza Rice and Japan's foreign minister were notably absent. Following this, the EU questioned ASEAN on Myanmar's quality as a representative to the Euroasia Summit. All of which made it hard for ASEAN to withstand the pressure. A majority of members were firmly opposed to Myanmar's scheduled assumption of the chairmanship in 2006, with the exception of Vietnam and Laos.²⁷

According to the organization's practices, only when the country in turn to assume chairmanship of ASEAN applies for chairmanship and is approved by all members can the chair be moved to the next member. No country otherwise has the right to cancel another country's entitlement to assume the rotating chair. In case of an awkward situation where a boycott might be staged by the West, such as when Myanmar was due to assume the chair, ASEAN made every effort to lobby Myanmar to voluntarily give up the chair in the interest of "maintaining the solidarity and common interests."²⁸ This led to the military government's statement to give up its chairmanship at the 2006 ASEAN Meeting, which was the first time such a thing had occurred in the history of ASEAN. Also it represented the climax of the struggle between the West and ASEAN on the Myanmar issue. The game ended with ASEAN bowing to the West's demands, a compromise made by the collective body. On the part of ASEAN, the incident has reflected ASEAN's unwillingness to shoulder the burden of the Myanmar issue. On the side of the junta, strong nationalists as they are, their relinquishing of the chair was labeled "diplomacy humiliation" and was concealed from the

²⁷ *Lianhe Zaobao* (Singapore), April 11, 2004, <http://www.zaobao.com/News/20050411-31306.html>

²⁸ *Ibid.*, July 28, 2005, <http://www.zaobao.com/News/20050728-31306.html>

public. They also expressed their disappointment with ASEAN who they deemed had abandoned them at a critical point. Bilateral relations between Myanmar and ASEAN fell precipitously. The Myanmar military government kept silent and continued to be vague on its democracy reform, reflecting a sullen rejection of ASEAN. In March 2006, Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar paid a visit to Myanmar as a special envoy at the behest of ASEAN; in the event he met neither General Than Shwe nor leaders of the opposition parties such as Aung San Suu Kyi. The visit was characterized as “a complete failure. In order to save face, Sepcial Envoy Albar had to wrap up his visit ahead of the schedule.”²⁹

Tendencies

In regard to Myanmar's slow democracy progress and the unpredictability of ASEAN's Myanmar policy, and in light of the concern that the Myanmar issue was negatively affecting ASEAN, a high-level seminar on the Myanmar issue was initiated in Kuala Lumpur at the end of November 2004 with the participation of ruling and opposition parties from Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines. At this meeting, the establishment of the “ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Caucus for Democracy in Myanmar” was announced.³⁰ Participants agreed that Myanmar's membership should be suspended if Myanmar continued to drag its feet on democratic reforms. Similar organizations were founded in Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore just months later. Parliament members submitted bills to their parliaments, urging their governments to abandon the “non-interference” principle and force Myanmar to take action on implementing democracy. And all of a sudden, voices of “ASEAN expels Myanmar” and “Myanmar stripped off ASEAN” came to be heard.

Notwithstanding the developments outlined above, Myanmar will not relinquish its membership of ASEAN. Moreover, creating a “greater ASEAN” cannot be realized without Myanmar. The points made below out-

²⁹ Larry Jagan, “Drawing China and Russia to contend with the Western Countries: Myanmar wants to withdraw from ASEAN,” *Asian Times*, April 13, 2006, <http://www.asiantimes.com/News/shanstatenews>

³⁰ *Lianhe Zaobao*, November 28, 2004, <http://www.zaobao.com/news.asiaone.com/News/20041128-43506.html>

line some of the factors underlying the interdependency of ASEAN and Myanmar.

First, ASEAN has emphasized many times since it made the decision to accept Myanmar's membership that Myanmar is a "family member." If ASEAN gives ground in acquiescing to the West and imposes sanctions or forces Myanmar to leave the association, ASEAN's image and cohesion would suffer, which in consequence would be severely detrimental to ASEAN's development momentum and integration.

Second, ASEAN holds misgivings about the prospects and effects of bringing about democratic reform in Myanmar through external interference. As pointed out by Ong Keng Yong, Myanmar is home to 135 ethnic groups. The Myanmar issue must be resolved within Myanmar; otherwise, the complicated and volatile ethnic issue could well raise the scenario of another Yugoslavia reoccurring if the military regime is brought to an abrupt end.³¹

Third, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are strongly opposed to amending the "non-interference" principle. At the 12th ASEAN Summit in January 2007, Thailand proposed to amend the principle with a view to enhancing ASEAN's efficiency in dealing with regional affairs, which was rejected by Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. It is to be predicted that if ASEAN forcibly intervened in Myanmar's affairs, strong objections would be voiced by Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which could possibly (in a worst case scenario) lead to the dismemberment of the association.

Lastly, ASEAN members share complementary economies with Myanmar. Myanmar is rich in natural resources with most waiting to be developed. It has the potential to become the major supplier of most ASEAN countries in oil, gas, timber, and minerals. Myanmar is less developed in industry with nearly all production and consumption materials imported except for crops. Now Myanmar has a population of 55.4 million,³² ranking as the 4th most populous in Southeast Asia. With the proceeding of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), zero-tariff goods have increased in type and quantity.

³¹ He Shengda and Li Chenyang, *Miandian*, p. 375.

³² Myanmar National Television Station, July 11, 2006, <http://www.mrtv3.net.mm/newpaper/1107newsm.pdf>

Myanmar is thus bound to become an important export market for ASEAN countries. In this respect, ASEAN will not readily relinquish such a huge potential market. Accordingly, the strengthening of economic ties with Myanmar will be the long term strategy of ASEAN countries.

In sum, the future of ASEAN's Myanmar policy is likely to be predicated more on the basis of "non-interference" rather than following the West's dictates of taking radical measures such as imposing sanctions or expelling Myanmar from ASEAN; within the organization, ASEAN will likely take more "silent actions" to involve itself in the internal politics of Myanmar with a view to guiding Myanmar onto the path of democracy through persuasion. One thing is certain. Even if the actual policies might vary, ASEAN will stick to two premises: Myanmar within the family; and Myanmar's smooth self-transition.

Conclusion

From the perspective of ASEAN, the organization will neither echo the West nor isolate Myanmar out of its concern for maintaining solidarity and development, grasping instead the leadership role in regional affairs; from the perspective of Myanmar, the ruling junta, amid growing domestic and international opposition, will not leave ASEAN. However, as Myanmar gains a rising geo-political significance, it has become the focus of power struggles. Pressing Myanmar to change its regime is an important step for the U.S. in its global democratic plan, and is also a prelude for its democratic program in Asia. Constrained by its relationship with the U.S. and Europe for historical and current political reasons, it is hard for ASEAN to obtain a free hand in dealing with the Myanmar issue.

For a certain period in the future, Myanmar will be an unpredictable factor in the future path of ASEAN. On November 20, 2007, the 13th ASEAN Summit was held in Singapore. Ten country leaders signed the ASEAN Charter at the summit, signaling a milestone in ASEAN integration. Heated discussion took place on the principles of the charter, which concluded with the reaffirmation of the principles of "non-interference" and "consensus." Notwithstanding the latter, the charter has also noticeably put forward ideals such as "the respect, protection and promotion of human rights and freedom" as well as affirming its objection "against any regime changes in un-

democratic form or in violation of constitutions.” It was decided furthermore to establish an “ASEAN Human Rights Committee” to monitor the human rights conditions of ASEAN members. During the summit, however, U.S. and EU representatives persisted in creating difficulties for ASEAN. In line with this hard stance, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo told Myanmar Premier Thein Sein: “If the Myanmar military government does not make real progress in democratic reforms and release Aung San Suu Kyi, the parliament of the Philippines will not ratify the ASEAN Charter.”³³

In the future, ASEAN might be expected to uphold its policy of non-interference with internal affairs as a basic principle and to adopt a more flexible stance on specific problems. Due to the diversity of conditions among member countries, disagreements might sustain for a certain period of time on the issue of Myanmar; and in any case it takes time for countries to reach consensus. The great debate is whether ASEAN will stick to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs among the ASEAN member countries. Some member countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar will continue to uphold the principle of non-interference, while other member countries, for example, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines want to make adjustments to this principle, in accordance with the changing situation. A plausible scenario is that the strength of both sides will increase and the conflict will become more and more intense.

Furthermore, it will be a big challenge for ASEAN to coordinate the stances of the great powers—the United States, European Union, Japan, China, and India—on Myanmar. The sanctions of the West have a very limited influence on democracy and the human rights situation in Myanmar, and are not of any help to the ultimate solution of the Myanmar issue. In this regard, the active engagement of ASEAN in the issue has the potential for more effective results.

In prospect, the announcement of the ASEAN Charter could be conducive to resolving the Myanmar issue to some degree, but the outlook cannot be overestimated. It will take time and the seizing of opportunities to achieve win-win results. The Myanmar issue has affected ASEAN’s development in

³³ *Lianhe Zaobao*, November 20, 2007,

<http://www.zaobao.com/news.asiaone.com/News/20071120-32840.html>

its entirety, its profile in the international community, and its relations with the West. In its effort to solve the issue within the framework of the grouping, ASEAN is faced with a dilemma that it does not want to see Myanmar leave the regional organization or develop close relations with such powers as China, India, and Japan. Under the circumstances, ASEAN has no choice but to bear the embarrassment and find a satisfactory solution. Such a situation will likely persist for a certain period of time to come. What impact the Myanmar issue will have on the future integration of Myanmar into the regional organization, and what new dynamics will shape ASEAN's Myanmar policy, are questions desirous of further attention and discussion.

VII. Democracy in Myanmar/Burma: The Role of the West

Johan Alvin

Introduction

The events of September 2007, when thousands of monks took to the streets of Yangon to protest against the Myanmar government, and which were broadcast by the media throughout the world, form the background to this paper. Following the monks' marches—that later on came to include not only monks but also civilians—was a violent crackdown by the authorities using military force to restore order to the former capital of Yangon.

The protests and marches were prompted by the drastic increase in price for fuel that occurred on August 15, which severely affected the lives of the country's ordinary citizens in an already troubled situation.¹

The wider world was probably at first puzzled by the number of monks that gathered to protest the regime's latest action—which initially drew little response in the way of countermeasures by the government. As the masses continued to grow without interference by the government or the military, a sense of hope started to spread, especially in the West where hopes were raised that the sanctions imposed would finally produce the desired results, for a swift change of power in Myanmar, following a popular uprising.

Any hopes of an uprising succeeding in overthrowing the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) were unmistakably shattered on September 25 as the military junta sent armed troops onto the streets of Yangon to disperse the crowds. By September 27, the crowds were gone and the only

¹ The Government of Myanmar increased the fuel price by up to 500 %, causing other commodities such as food and transport to go up in price as well.

people left on the streets were soldiers on patrol. Thirty-one citizens were later declared dead as a result of the military's violent suppression.²

Early in the proceedings, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon dispatched his special envoy, Ibrahim Gambari, to find a solution to the crisis and to help initiate a dialogue between the SPDC and main opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Initially it seemed as though Gambari had succeeded in achieving a dialogue, as Labor Minister Aung Gyi was appointed liaison minister to mediate with Aung San Suu Kyi.

Aung San Suu Kyi and Aung Gyi met on a couple of occasions following the former's acceptance of the terms of engagement set by the Senior-General of the SPDC, Than Shwe. The West interpreted this first assignment and acceptance of a dialogue as a cautious sign that the government was potentially willing to negotiate with the opposition and perhaps even prepared to produce real change. However, no tangible results have been produced and it seems as though dialogue has stalled.

During the time of the dialogue, the government has maintained its position that the work on the Roadmap to democracy remains intact. This means that, even though a stated goal of the dialogue, the negotiation of the new constitution will not be brought up for discussion.

What implications do the events and developments of last autumn have for Western policies and strategies for working toward democratization in Myanmar? Are there other factors that can be used as tools and opportunities in striving for political change in the Myanmar issue? What is the outlook for a constructive improvement of the situation and how can the West work toward achieving this?

² The Government of Myanmar claimed that 15 people died on the streets following the army's crackdown. The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, through an independent investigation found the number to be 31. See United Nations General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Sixth Session, *Human Rights Situations that Require the Council's Attention*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, mandated by resolution S-5/1 adopted by the Human Rights Council at its fifth Special Session. A/HRC/6/14, December 7, 2007.

The September 2007 Protests

Last Hope for Rapid Change

Myanmar is the poorest country in Southeast Asia with a GDP per capita of US \$239, compared with the second poorest Cambodia, US \$591.³ Despite the existence of vast natural riches, the country has held the status of Least Developed Country since 1987, and has been under direct or indirect military rule since 1962. The military has created a state within a state and maintains tight control over the country. Ordinary citizens are suffering from an economic malaise caused by erroneous economic policies, or sometimes even the lack of policies, and are struggling to make ends meet with about 25 per cent of the population living below the poverty line.⁴

A rapid change that would serve to better the everyday situation of ordinary citizens is thus desired. However, in light of the developments of the Roadmap to democracy and the new constitution, hopes for such a rapid change would seem rather slim. If the government proceeds with its roadmap, the new constitution will likely be in place within a year or two⁵, with the consequence that the SPDC's rule would be further consolidated; this because the likelihood of rapid regime change will have lessened even further.

Lack of Leadership within the Opposition

During the protests in September in Yangon the metaphor of a snowball rolling down a hill could be used: the number of protestors on the streets increased but the protests eventually lost momentum and came to a halt.⁶ Thus in spite of an impressive build-up in the number of demonstrators during the first days of peaceful marches, no leading figures stepped forward

³ Estimates by the IMF, see *World Economic Outlook Database* (October 2007), <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2007/02/weodata/index.aspx>.

⁴ For a more thorough look on the Myanmar economy, see Christopher Len and Johan Alvin, *Burma/Myanmar's Ailments: Searching for the Right Remedy*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper (March 2007).

⁵ Despite the recent call for a referendum on the constitution, it is most likely that the SPDC will push ahead with its roadmap even if the result would turn out to be negative.

⁶ For an extensive review of the protests, see United Nations General Assembly, *Human Rights Situations that Require the Council's Attention*.

to effectively use the momentum created by the protesting masses. To be sure, there were mixed factors—the army being foremost among them—, but nonetheless, there seemed as though there was no deeper thought or planning behind the protests. The question arises of why this was the case.

The question doubtlessly has many answers, but to name a few, one needs to acknowledge the role of the SPDC and its intelligence units in intimidating and disrupting dissidents from organizing events. It was abundantly clear that when the military moved in they met with only limited and relatively unorganized resistance. Even though Myanmar's much feared military intelligence under Khin Nyunt's leadership today has been replaced by a much less competent intelligence cadre due to internal power struggles within the SPDC, there should be no doubt that it and its related organizations are still capable of incarcerating people and harassing individuals and their respective families.

The SPDC Prevails

The outcome of the protests in September and their violent and quick suppression must by all means represent a clear “victory” for the SPDC and the military (*Tatmadaw*) since they have shown that they continue to control the country, including the former capital Yangon. The clampdown came at a cost, though. Whatever vestiges of confidence and trust the military and the SPDC might have had among the population effectively evaporated as a result of the repressive actions taken by the *Tatmadaw*. The disdain for the killings of civilians was not only felt by civilians and monks; reports also indicated that there was some resistance within the military to obeying orders to use violence against protesters. Some went as far as refusing to open fire and to question the legitimacy of those orders.⁷

Also, in allowing the monks to approach the heavily guarded house of Aung San Suu Kyi, the confused actions of the soldiers guarding her house were laid bare. One might wonder if they had anticipated another ending to the marches than what was to come, and perhaps that was why they allowed the protesters to reach Aung San Suu Kyi's home and also let her address the monks on the scene. The scene was cabled out and served to fan hopes across

⁷ Larry Jagan, “Cracks emerge in Myanmar military unity”, *Asia Times Online*, October 2, 2007, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IJ02Ae01.html.

the world that finally the moment had come where the military's rule would crumble in the face of popular demands and mistrust.

Cracks within the Government

Often the picture of the *Tatmadaw* in the West is of a unitary force that commands unquestioned loyalty and unity from its soldiers and officers. This is of course not an accurate picture of any army in any part of the world, reality being inevitably more complex. But the *Tatmadaw* has a reputation of being a tightly knit organization where cadets are fostered to cherish the idea of the *Tatmadaw* as the nation's savior in times of trouble. It is suffice to read *The New Light of Myanmar*, the government mouthpiece, to get an update on the numerous principles and causes that the cadets have to memorize which are often cited by senior officers in speeches. This picture has perhaps not always been true, but in the eyes of the outside world it has been persistent. One of the reasons is, of course, the very limited amount of information available on actual conditions within the army *per se*. The enormous amount of negative publicity generated by the clampdown not only disaffected the civilian population, but also many within the army who reportedly disapproved of the senior leaderships' orders on how to handle the situation.⁸

Apparently, the events in September did not only create cracks within the *Tatmadaw*, but also within the SPDC. According to unconfirmed reports there have been different opinions within the senior leadership over a number of issues for some time, but the protests served to deepen the cracks that already existed. Senior General Than Shwe was reportedly behind orders to fire upon the protesters with the second in command, General Maung Aye, not approving of such a course of action.⁹

It appears therefore as though there are opposing views on how to handle situations like what occurred in September, even among the top leadership. The military is not as battle-hardened and disciplined as it was in 1988, which could be a source of these opposing views, as a less disciplined army cannot be trusted to complete the tasks ordered of it. In spite of this, there remain regiments and battalions that exhibit the same discipline as has been

⁸ Personal interview of resident UN official.

⁹ Jagan, "Cracks emerge in Myanmar military unity."

witnessed in the past; for example most recently we saw them being called into Yangon in September when the commanders apparently did not trust regiments already in place. The declining professionalism related to the way the army has expanded is an increasing problem for Myanmar and its rulers. Given the large number of new recruits—as ordered by the top leadership—and the inadequate funding, professionalism and discipline has declined due to corruption and nepotism.

Implications that might arise from these reported cracks could lead to a more conciliatory approach toward the general public in the future, in order not to ignite the same kind of protests that erupted in September.

Referendum on the New Constitution

The announcement that a referendum on the constitution was going to be held came as somewhat of a surprise. What was especially remarkable was that the leadership gave a firm timetable, which the government had been reluctant to do in the past. Perhaps the SPDC are worried that unless they do so more unrest will break out, and that they are not completely sure of their ability to control future disturbances.

The effect of the announcement has been that Gambari's mission as special envoy seems to have lost most of its momentum. With the date set for the referendum and the clear signal that the SPDC are set on following the Roadmap to democracy, there is little more for Gambari to achieve. Any further dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi will also likely be less believable, and if it will take place, nothing of substance is likely to come out of it.

Once More Dancing the "Junta Jive"

Once the marches had gone on for a number of days, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was quick to dispatch his special envoy to Yangon and Naypyidaw in order to try and facilitate dialogue between the main opposition (i.e. Aung San Suu Kyi) and the SPDC. Senior General Than Shwe agreed to enter into a dialogue on certain conditions restricting Aung San Suu Kyi, conditions she later accepted.¹⁰ The SPDC named Labor Minister Aung Gyi as liaison officer responsible for interacting with Aung

¹⁰ Mark Tran, "Aung San Suu Kyi agrees to talks with Burma junta", *guardian.co.uk*, November 8, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/08/burma.marktran>.

San Suu Kyi. The two met on a number of occasions, but there has been no tangible outcome. On January 18, 2008 the Security Council expressed its regret over the lack of progress in the talks, a clear sign of the UN's frustration and inability to influence the leaders of Myanmar.

When agreeing to enter into talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, the SPDC leadership also sharply declined Gambari's offer to act as a third party, saying that the leadership will never, under no circumstances, allow external meddling in internal affairs.¹¹ The snubbing of Gambari sends a clear signal that the UN only has a modest role to play in this situation at the moment, at least publicly.

Once again the world finds itself watching how the SPDC seemingly grants a minor concession—the tripartite talks including liaison officer Aung Gyi, Aung San Suu Kyi, and UN Special Envoy Ibrahim Gambari—only to quickly return to the state of “normalcy” found in Myanmar: that is the agonizingly slow progress made in the Roadmap to democracy.

The question of what will now happen remains a difficult one. Anyone who has recently visited the country knows that nothing has changed for the better since September. Many of the reasons for the protests thus remain and they could erupt once again if there is a spark to ignite the prevailing atmosphere of discontent. Any further deterioration of living conditions could produce renewed unrest. The fact that the government has publicly announced that the referendum on the constitution will be held in May might serve to placate popular discontent and so avoid new protests.

There have been speculations that the opposition will use the Olympic Games in Beijing to put pressure on the Myanmar government. By launching new protests during the Games it would put pressure on the Chinese government to in turn put pressure on the Government of Myanmar to implement reforms or even, in an extreme scenario, to step down. This argument identifies China as a very influential neighbor which has the means of directly affecting Myanmar's policy and actions—this assumption is debatable, however. While the Chinese surely exert a large influence over

¹¹ Larry Jagan, “Mixed messages from Myanmar's junta”, *Asia Times Online*, November 13 2007, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IK13Ae01.html.

Naypyidaw, there is a strong mutual dependence at the strategic level that lessens Myanmar's direct dependence on Beijing.

Both major outbreaks of protests that have occurred over the last two decades have been caused by dramatic economic changes, a fact that is quite revealing. The political arena seems less captivating for Myanmar's citizens; at least it has served as less of a direct source of major protests. This should probably not be interpreted as a public disregard for politics, rather it shows a troubled situation where making ends meet is the overhanging problem and the majority of the population cannot afford the luxury of becoming more involved in political matters.

The 1988 uprising was, in part, due to the currency demonetization by Ne Win that affected a large swathe of the population. Again, in August 2007 (leading up to the September protests) economic hardships were imposed on the population as the price of fuel went up, causing many other commodities to go up in price as well.

What Outcome of Potential New Protests?

It is of course difficult to determine what outcomes would be most likely in a situation of new protests, especially in Myanmar where the same logic does not always apply as in the Western hemisphere. But there are a number of rather obvious scenarios that could evolve from new protests.

- Most *unlikely* is that we will see renewed protest of about the same magnitude as in September and that the opposition topples the government. The reason why this scenario should be deemed unlikely is that the opposition is too weakened morally after the September crackdown and too unorganized, and also because the surrounding macro-political environment does not find itself on common ground and will thus not be able to speak with a common voice toward the Government of Myanmar.
- Still unlikely but more realistic is that large protests would cause a renewed crackdown which, in turn, would create cracks within the *Tatmadaw* and a new leadership would emerge; in other words an "internal revolution" within the *Tatmadaw*. However, despite signs of

internal dissatisfaction in the most recent clampdown, the likelihood of the above scenario occurring should not be overstated.¹²

- What is more likely (less so after the announcement of the referendum however) is that there might be new protests and that they will be put down with the same results as in September.
- Most likely, should the scenario be deemed whereby the situation remains at a status quo, there will be no new protests and the SPDC will continue implementing the Roadmap. The Roadmap to democracy seems cemented and there appears no will at all from the SPDC to change course. The announcement on the referendum only serves to reinforce this view

Roadmap to Democracy

The seven-stage Roadmap to democracy, which was introduced in 2003 by the now ousted prime minister, Khin Nyunt, describes how the government sees the emergence of democracy in Myanmar. The steps include the following;

1. Reconvening of the National Convention
2. Step-by-step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic state
3. Drafting of a new constitution
4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum
5. Holding of free and fair elections
6. Convening of Hluttaws
7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation

Implications of the Roadmap to Democracy

The new constitution will, according to leaks from the constitution being drafted, serve to safeguard the political and economic influence of the

¹² A large number of deserters were however reported after the crackdown. Personal interview with a senior UN official, Yangon, November 2007.

Tatmadaw.¹³ It will require the head of state, the defense minister, and the prime minister to possess a military background. Furthermore, the constitution will require these persons not to have connections to any foreign country, either by relations or by other connections. This will effectively rule out Aung San Suu Kyi from ever holding a senior position in a future civilian government under the new constitution.

The military will set its own budget without the influence of the civilian government. The head of state will also be empowered to impose a state of emergency and enforce emergency rule over the country for an undisclosed time period, thereby creating a virtual dictatorship.

The conclusion is that the SPDC is seeking to perpetuate military influence and power in the political future of Myanmar. There seems to be little room for opposition views in the Roadmap to democracy, and that is the main source of criticism from the West: that the NLD and other opposition parties, who won a majority of the votes in the 1990 elections, have not been able to voice their agendas or been able to influence the Roadmap process.

Western Approaches toward the Roadmap to Democracy

One of the main points of criticism stemming from the West regarding the Government of Myanmar's democratization plans is regarding the legitimacy of the process. With heavy restrictions on the participants of the National Convention, Western proponents argue that the legitimacy of the Roadmap to democracy has been severely damaged, even to the point of calling the whole process a failure. It is in this way seen to represent only the military's goals and ambitions, disregarding those of the majority of the population and the opposition. The opposition NLD left the National Convention in protest over not being able to push through its agenda.

With the National Convention being questioned, the whole Roadmap to democracy becomes challenged and illegitimate. Both the UN and the U.S. as well as the EU have urged for the Government of Myanmar to include the opposition in the National Convention, but the government refuses to do so,

¹³ Seth Mydans, "Myanmar Constitution Guidelines Ensure Military Power", *The New York Times*, September 4, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/04/world/asia/04myanmar.html>.

claiming that it would slow the process, adding that the NLD had the chance to participate but opted not to do so.¹⁴

Current Western Strategies for Change in Myanmar/Burma

Historical Approach

During the Cold War Burma was of little interest to the West and the Soviet Union. To all extents and purposes, Burma was a closed and withdrawn country that made little noise and attracted little attention. The countries that formed ASEAN at that time were a shield against further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Western governments were not so concerned with domestic policies and human rights abuses in those ASEAN countries.

At around the same time as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, Burma's BSPP was also heading for demise due to the poor politics waged. After the disbandment of the government, anarchy followed suit until the army restored order to the streets. In doing so, the *Tatmadaw*, in a bloodbath, killed thousands of civilians, and even though there was no extensive coverage like in September 2007, the massacres received international attention and placed the country on the map.

After the electoral unrest of 1990 and the ensuing chaos and crackdown, the West has implemented more and more sanctions and restrictions on Myanmar, outraged by the human rights abuses and the military's abuse of power. This change in focus was also a result of the fact that communist expansion in the aftermath of the Cold War no longer loomed large, so allowing Western governments with more political space to focus on human rights and democracy.

While the U.S. has been more consistent in its policies, the EU has been, quite naturally given its set-up, more divided. The lack of consensus and consistency has hampered the EU's combined effort to promote change in

¹⁴ The NLD backed out of the National Convention in 1995, stating that it was merely a rigged process by the SPDC with no real democratic possibilities for the participants to affect the outcome.

Myanmar with its many members finding it difficult to unite behind one message.¹⁵

Sanctions and Diplomatic Isolation

The United States has traditionally been in the forefront when discussing sanctions and a tougher stance toward Myanmar. Its sanctions and isolation policy is, and has been, tougher than that of the EU, and not having an ambassador in Yangon, the embassy is run by a Chargé d'Affairs, thus sending a clear signal of the frosty diplomatic climate between the two countries. After the latest protests, President George W. Bush called for tougher sanctions and restrictions against Myanmar and its leadership.

The EU has largely followed suit in U.S. efforts to impose sanctions in order to force the leaders of Myanmar into changing their policies. After September, 2007 the strategies of the U.S. and EU seem largely to have been focused on seeking to further tighten the sanctions and supporting the UN, i.e. Gambari's mission.

What Can Be Done to Influence the Situation in Myanmar/Burma?

There is a deep frustration within the West over the way things are playing out in the capital Naypyidaw in Myanmar. None of the currently used Western strategies seem to have achieved any of their goals, but the real political will to develop alternative strategies is also missing.

In the short term perspective, there is probably no effective quick-fix measure that could be undertaken to achieve the desired result, i.e. a silver bullet solution is lacking. This is of course not in line with the political ambitions and ideals of Western governments, but nonetheless it is a harsh and definite reality. A long-term approach would seem to offer the only realistic alternative that needs to be developed in order to have a sustainable impact on the political and socio-economic situation in Myanmar. One such approach is the possibility of engaging ASEAN and increasing cooperation in particular between the EU and ASEAN in light of the new ASEAN Charter.

¹⁵ Zunetta Liddell, "International policies towards Burma: Western governments, NGOs and multilateral institutions," in *Challenges to democratization in Burma: Perspectives on multilateral and bilateral responses* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2001), pp. 131–82.

The U.S. would, given the circumstances, likely benefit more from engaging further with China and India over the Myanmar issue. This is a topic that will be developed further below.

The likelihood of the West effectively influencing the way the Roadmap and the constitution process is progressing is somewhat unlikely. But a new possibility has perhaps emerged, albeit requiring a long-term commitment and patience in order to bring about change.

ASEAN Charter and the New ASEAN

The ASEAN Charter produced in November 2007 represents a big challenge as well as an opportunity for the ASEAN countries. Facing tough competition from the surrounding mega-economies and large powers such as China, India, and Japan, the smaller Southeast Asian nations are struggling to stay competitive in the longer term. The region has also, to some extent, matured, and while instability is still a common thing in many of the ten countries, the last decade has certainly produced drastic changes. The atmosphere in the region has changed along with economic and political developments from an emphasis on the well-being of the state, to a slightly higher emphasis on the well-being of citizens. This change will offer new challenges to the region's leaders, for if the ASEAN governments are genuine in their development plans for the region, human rights considerations will force them to find new methods of achieving economic growth and political stability without relying on the exploitation of cheap and unsafe labor.

With the Charter, ASEAN countries have produced a vision of where the association sees itself in the coming future. It will necessitate that many tough political decisions be taken, that governments mitigate their strategic interests, and that they adopt a sincere understanding of the region's outlook in the future to come. This change opens the door for closer cooperation between ASEAN and the West, foremost the EU. Many of the obstacles the association is now facing are the same that the EU has faced, and is still facing, since the inception of the European Community. The protection of human rights and the focus on the citizen instead of the state is an established "mode of thinking" in Europe that could, along with integration tools acquired over the years by the EU, provide a significant opportunity for

increasing cooperation and understanding between the organizations by exchanging not only the lessons learned but also an exchange of personnel. Other benefits to be found include economic cooperation and political support which could mutually benefit the two organizations.

ASEAN Charter

The ASEAN Charter aims among other things to foster an “ASEAN Spirit,” increase regional security, promote a single market, and create a human rights body. If the Charter is ratified by all the member states, ASEAN will face a monumental task given the wide disparities among the countries regarding the state of their economies and political systems.

With the Charter, the ASEAN countries have staked out a course for a very difficult journey. A journey that probably will be necessary if the association is to be effective in the future. Especially considering the strengthening of China and India and the increased competitiveness in Eastern and South-eastern Asia, a strengthened ASEAN is indeed of utmost importance for the long term well-being of the member countries.

Notwithstanding the external pressure, there are a vast number of difficulties involved with the Charter. The ten countries that make up ASEAN display different political systems and varying levels of political maturity; their economies are equally different and differ in terms of integration in the world economy. Given the sometimes differing strategic economic and political interests, many analysts are skeptical of the Charter being able to provide real and lasting change. What is more, the member states of ASEAN have not one or two but three different religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—which serve to further complicate integration.

ASEAN–EU Collaboration to Affect Myanmar/Burma Processes

In the light of Western strategies having failed to find a solution to the political problem in Myanmar, the EU should reevaluate its current strategy of sanctions and isolation and focus more on long term strategies. A focus on strengthening bonds with ASEAN countries could serve as a way for the EU to act via proxy and so affect the situation in Myanmar. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) could be used as a starting point for the deepening of collaboration between the two organizations. Future and deepened EU–

ASEAN cooperation will provide new contact surfaces and make possible increased and better exchanges of experiences and lessons learned.

An Indonesian initiative of taking on the responsibility to train the Myanmar army, the *Tatmadaw*, is an interesting alternative that should be considered for the sake of establishing a higher level of professionalism within the *Tatmadaw*.¹⁶ Certainly, there are arguments to be made over the appropriateness of having the Armed Forces of Indonesia—Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI)—educate the *Tatmadaw*, the TNI itself having been under much criticism over alleged and also proven human rights abuses in Indonesia.

Notwithstanding reservations concerning the above, the Indonesian initiative stands out as an interesting one. No doubt the *Tatmadaw* is in need of a higher degree of professionalism than what is currently the situation, and considering the atrocities committed by the *Tatmadaw* in September, it would probably be unlikely that any Western military would offer International Military Education and Training (IMET) to the *Tatmadaw* due to the political sensitivity involved. It would however be less sensitive for the military of a Southeast Asian country to conduct such training, and it would also be in their interest given the objective of the ASEAN Charter to increase regional cooperation. Indonesia has itself undergone similar changes as the ones Myanmar is currently aspiring to via its Roadmap and could, given the right support from both regional and international actors, be of great use for Myanmar. The foreign minister of Indonesia has on several occasions reiterated the importance to the region that Myanmar acts credibly in the implementation of the Roadmap.¹⁷

Training the trainers—that is training the TNI who in turn will conduct training for the *Tatmadaw*—would mean the EU acting via proxy with ASEAN as the respective channel or medium of influence, and should be seen as an alternative long-term option.

¹⁶ “Indonesia Offers Myanmar Military Cooperation”, *Tempo Interactive*, 16 February 2007, <http://www.tempointeraktif.com/hg/nasional/2007/02/16/brk,20070216-93407.uk.html>.

¹⁷ Ahmad Pahtoni, “Indonesia Urges Burma to Do More on Democracy”, *The Irrawaddy*, January 8, 2008, http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9880.

There may be questions and considerations as to why the EU should not act directly with the Government of Myanmar if it wishes to influence the country. One of the reasons is because the West—in the eyes of the generals in Myanmar—probably has little if no trust with the government. It is unlikely that the military leaders of Myanmar would want to cooperate with the West or that they would trust the West, especially given the reality that they can rely quite substantially on China to provide their needs in world political affairs and economic affairs without too many demands for rapid political change.

Military IMET-training, be it through Indonesia or another ASEAN partner which, in turn, would hold close ties with the West, is one way to via proxy affect the mentality and professionalism of the Myanmar military elite. Another way of establishing contact via proxy is to increase the level of exchanges of technocrats, that is economists and governmental-level workers, and increase their professionalism. If the EU and ASEAN could increase such exchanges, not only would the individual countries in ASEAN benefit, but they could also pass on their knowledge to Myanmar. This would provide gains for ASEAN as a regional organization, elevating the competences within it, but also, it would strengthen the bonds between the EU and ASEAN, bonds that could be mutually beneficial given the potential trade gains. Strengthening regional cooperation organizations also offers a balance to the number of emerging powers, something that would likely benefit world politics, providing a healthy pluralism.

The U.S. Working Closer with China and India

While the EU and ASEAN can relatively easily find common ground to work from, the U.S. has much more common ground with China and India. All three being world powers with large populations and influence and the responsibilities that follow from being great powers, they could, given the precondition of political will, bring their influence to bear in affecting the Myanmar issue.

The fact that all three are major powers with strategic interests in the region would likely facilitate their collaboration as they all have much the same issues to consider, even though the U.S. is still the world's only real

superpower. Likewise it is essential that they contribute so as to enable a positive external environment beneficial for Myanmar to develop in.

Myanmar/Burma: Twenty Years of Collective Failure

The last twenty years, if not longer, Burma/Myanmar has not followed the general trend in Southeast Asia regarding political and economic development. Surely, like Rudyard Kipling said, “This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any land you know about...”¹⁸ The general trend in Southeast Asia after the end of the Cold War has been a liberalization of economies and a move toward democratic reforms. Most of Myanmar’s neighbors have come a long way since 1990, with an increased involvement in the globalized economy and a more open society with democracy in various forms. While they have become more democratic with notable exceptions, there is disagreement on calling them fully democratized according to Western standards. In spite of this, the West maintains bilateral as well as multilateral connections with them and adopts a rather more pragmatic approach to them than it does Myanmar.

Myanmar, however, to use the metaphor, stands out as an infected patient that we dare not handle for fear of being infected by the political bad-will connected to the country. Even worse, politicians seeking engagement with the generals in Naypyidaw could be, and have been, labeled as supporters of the mismanagement of the country and lose out on important domestic political points.

But who will cure the ill patient if we dare not even discuss the problem and other options that are currently at hand? As one American diplomat said, “it’s not that we don’t cooperate with undemocratic states elsewhere, but Myanmar has become too symbolic.”¹⁹ Indeed, the Myanmar issue, as it is often portrayed, could be seen as a case of good *versus* evil. The depiction of a beautiful Nobel peace prize laureate (Aung San Suu Kyi) *versus* the stubborn and grim-faced evil generals who abuse their own people is indeed conducive

¹⁸ Rudyard Kipling, *Letters from the East* (1898), as quoted in J.-L. Gao, “Quiet Flows the Ayeyarwady”, http://www.mukto-mona.com/new_site/mukto-mona/Articles/len/ayeyarwadyr.pdf.

¹⁹ Personal interview of a senior U.S. diplomat, November 2007.

to a simplified good-bad dichotomy where choosing sides is not overly difficult.

But why has Burma/Myanmar not followed the same path as its neighbors? Here history will give us numerous reasons, too many and too intricate to be explained in detail in this paper, but it is easily concluded that there is no sole scapegoat. Rather, it is a collective failure of not only the country's leaders but its Asian neighbors and Western policies that together have led to today's entrenched situation.

Change through Continuity

As collective failures have brought us to this point, it should also be, in all fairness, a collective responsibility to find a way out of the seemingly intractable stalemate that currently prevails in Myanmar.

Finding a cure for something that has evolved over decades to what has become today's troubled situation, will require an equally long-term solution. Accordingly, it should be realized that it is impossible the country will become developed and democratized overnight. It needs to be remembered that Myanmar is in fact a Least Developed Country with poor infrastructure and a poorly educated population with many more grave and complicating problems. Increasing development through regional development projects/programs like the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) would probably serve the regional economies well. As previously stated, the major protests that have occurred over the last two decades have not been triggered by political changes, or more accurately the lack thereof, but instead economic hardship has proven to be the immediate trigger. While political awareness and engagement is desired, it is difficult to demand or expect this from people that are struggling to find food to put on their tables. There is unfortunately no silver bullet remedy to cure the ills of Myanmar; rather the action needed must be tempered by realistic and practical goals, which means that all actors, both international and domestic, need to work toward gradual change in the country by adopting a long-term and holistic perspective of what needs to be done and what means are available.

Sanctions

The West is facing a difficult dilemma regarding the punitive measures in place aimed at targeting the regime of Myanmar. While sanctions are easy to adopt, they are more difficult to remove. But the West needs to find new ways of approaching the issue of Myanmar and the sanctions are seriously complicating such efforts. There is a highly moral aspect to this, for if the United States and EU would remove the sanctions without any concessions by the Government of Myanmar, it will signal an acceptance of the current state of affairs in Myanmar. Keeping them on the other hand will make it difficult if not impossible to work with the government, and would continue to fail to benefit the citizens of Myanmar.

In a rather interesting article in the *International Herald Tribune* following the events in September, 2007, the foreign ministers of Britain and France, even though still promoting much of the existing European policy on Myanmar, identified the importance of a “package deal.” That is, the EU has only a limited role to play and that the large part of the democratization work needs to be undertaken by the Myanmar population, something that certainly holds true. But, most notably, they identified that “the military must play an important part in a future democratic Burma.”²⁰ This is hopefully a view that they will give voice to when ministers of the European Union gather and debate the Myanmar issue. Certainly they will denounce the military dictatorship, and indeed they should, but no matter what ideological perspective one might have, failing to identify the importance of the *Tatmadaw* in Myanmar political society, no matter how awkward the thought to a Westerner, will prove mistaken in the long run given the long and important influence of the military in Burmese history. Also, it might hopefully serve to make possible a disruption of the isolation imposed on Myanmar. If identifying the military as an important player in internal Myanmar politics, keeping a dialogue or communication channel open with the military becomes important. As Timo Kivomäki has noted, “in order to influence your ‘enemy’, you have to communicate with him.”²¹

20 Bernard Kouchner and David Miliband, “Keeping the momentum on Burma”, *International Herald Tribune*, October 14, 2007.

21 Timo Kivimäki, “European Policies vis-à-vis the ‘Burma/Myanmar Issue’: An Analysis of

Long time Myanmar scholar David Steinberg wrote that there is a need to find “a way to deal with Burma that involves neither confrontation nor appeasement, but rather engagement.”²² Notwithstanding that this statement is almost ten years old, it still holds true. The West has not to date found a way of escaping the sanctions corner it has painted itself into. The approach of engagement is truly difficult as it will come in for criticism by proponents who claim that not enough pressure and criticism is being applied on the Government of Myanmar to undertake change, and argue that failing to do so is instead offering a silent approval of the regime’s mismanagement. At the same time, proponents for a more lenient approach will be equally critical of the perceived excessive condemnation that the West directs at the leaders of Myanmar. The engagement policy requires political courage and a moral compass in order to be able to work for long term sustainable positive change in Myanmar.

Conclusion

This paper argues for a more cohesive and longer term strategy from Western powers on the Myanmar issue in order to break the stalemate that currently hampers development toward democratization. A critical re-evaluation of the sanctions and isolation policy directed at promoting change currently in place should be undertaken, and the ambition should be to find a way of engaging the Government of Myanmar without becoming complicit in a negative process. The goal should be to develop a long-term sustainable strategy that promotes change through continuity.

Considering the long time failures of Western powers to build a trust base and achieve their stated goals in Myanmar, working directly with Myanmar will be difficult given the lack of trust between concerned parties. The West, and especially the EU, should approach ASEAN and seek to deepen the already existing cooperation. This in light of the ASEAN Charter, produced in late 2007, which is outlining a development of the association resembling that of the EU. This development, if undertaken by the ASEAN countries,

Arguments for Two Main Strategy Alternatives,” *Dialogue and Cooperation*, No. 1 (2007) p. 15.

22 David Steinberg, “Talk to Burma’s Generals,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 September 1999.

will make possible a deepened collaboration between the two regional organizations based on common ground.

In the shorter term, a status quo in the direction of the Government of Myanmar's policy is likely. The government's commitment to the Roadmap to democracy as the only permissible path to democracy remains solid, and with the surprising announcement of the referendum to be held in May this year, it seems even more committed to carrying out its planned Roadmap. With the implications of the Roadmap, the West should seek to address the challenge of finding common ground to effectively work for an improved situation in Myanmar. Notwithstanding the fact that the solution to the country's problem ultimately lies with its own politicians and population, a surrounding political environment conducive to producing lasting change is desperately needed, and this requires the West and Asian powers to seek common reference points from which to work from.

The U.S., China, and India, as the world's three most populous countries, and all extremely influential in Asian politics, should deepen collaboration on the Myanmar issue. This will likely prove more troublesome and create more friction than EU-ASEAN collaboration due to diverging interests in many aspects. However, without these three powers reaching an understanding and compromise, a viable strategic environment to the regional setting in which the solution to the Myanmar issue in part is to be found, will likely be impossible.

In sum, deepened collaboration between ASEAN-EU, and the trio of great powers, China, India, and the U.S., would prove fruitful in achieving long term goals regarding the democratization of Myanmar, and also serve to increase the understanding between Asia and the West.

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