

# Democracy in Myanmar and the Paradox of International Politics

Xiaolin Guo

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Tel. +46-841056953; Fax. +46-86403370  
Email: [info@isd.eu](mailto:info@isd.eu)

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The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute  
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies  
1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036  
Tel. +1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785  
E-mail: [caciz@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu](mailto:caciz@jhuadig.admin.jhu.edu)

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Bert Edström at: [bedstrom@isd.eu](mailto:bedstrom@isd.eu)

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## Executive Summary

Myanmar has been an international media flash point on and off, and a persistent point of contention in international relations since 1990, when the country held general elections in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won a majority of seats in the National Assembly or Constituent Assembly. The military, ruling under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), refused to hand over power as demanded by the winner, which duly provoked outcries from the international community. Nearly two decades on, the country's government remains in the hands of the military despite the popular desire for change, Aung San Suu Kyi continues to be under house arrest, and the NLD is seeing its influence as an alternative political force to the military government dwindle. The public protests that broke out in 2007, triggered by a sudden surge in the fuel price, faded in due course from international headlines as other global events took center stage. The road to democracy in Myanmar remains as challenging as ever, while the country in its isolation continues to struggle with poverty ensuing from long drawn-out economic stagnation and decades of negligence under repressive and unrepentant military rule, which has been compounded by limited foreign investment under international sanctions aimed at encouraging and facilitating democratic change in Myanmar.

In dealing with Myanmar, there is a general good-versus-bad analysis dominating international politics, and that has inadvertently prolonged the political standoff. Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 raised the issue of the urgency of humanitarian aid, prompting thinking outside of the box. However, ideologically charged objectives appear to hinder a review of international policy-making vis-à-vis Myanmar, which has instead placed an emphasis on sanctions. Contrasting this rigid policy-making stands the pragmatism guiding regional actors, namely, ASEAN (of which Myanmar is a member), China, and other countries that share land borders with Myanmar. The rift between the regional actors and the world powers (and

their allies in Asia) has, to a degree, reduced the potential impact of external influence on Myanmar. From time to time, calls for change in Myanmar are reiterated in international headlines. The question is *not* that Myanmar has not changed in the past two decades, but rather that the change taking place may not necessarily be viewed by the international community outside of the region as positive or as the kind of change desired. While it is fairly easy to demand change from the military government, the real challenge remains, that is, how to break the political deadlock and make any meaningful political transition tenable.

Attempts to employ sanctions as a way to bring about change in Myanmar mirrors post-Cold War international politics with a strong ideological base. The rhetoric of humanitarian intervention that came to dominate the play of international politics in the 1990s has encouraged and facilitated political change in selected countries around the world in the form of sanctions, and sometimes, military action. Myanmar has been a target of humanitarian intervention, albeit that military action has never been an option. Paradoxically, today's practice of intervention as underwritten by liberals and neo-conservatives alike shares, as indeed shown in the case of Myanmar, some common features with nineteenth-century colonialism (though the parallel is often overlooked), in that indigenous conditions essential to change are generally pronounced irrelevant, and at the same time, the capacity of foreign influence to re-shape the domestic politics of another country tends to be overestimated. In a way, ideology and geopolitics are now, like then (more than a century ago), part of a global game of doing "good deeds" in distant lands.

Revisiting political developments in Myanmar, this paper draws attention to the unintended consequences of a "politically correct" contemporary practice, raising questions *not* about the values of democracy per se, but rather about the practice of intervention in that very name, irrespective of indigenous conditions. Equally, it dwells *not* on the technicality of "humanitarian intervention" that falls within the purview of the UN mandate, but instead, the paper challenges the use of that concept as a foreign policy tool without giving sufficient consideration to its socio-economic consequences in another country. The paper argues that without taking into account its history, ethnic complexity, and socio-economic conditions, any policy-making toward

Myanmar is likely to remain irrelevant to what is going on inside the country. Finally, the relative fading of rhetoric concerning “building democracy” from foreign policy speeches in the new U.S. Administration under President Obama is eye-opening, and being watched closely by the international community to determine how the change will materialize in policy-making toward Myanmar.

## Myanmar in 2008 <sup>1</sup>

Less than a year after the street protests (mislabelled by the media as the “Saffron Revolution”) had captured the world’s attention, the tropical storm that wreaked havoc in the Ayeyarwardy Delta in May 2008 put Myanmar back into the international headlines. The doing of natural forces was by no means exceptional, in the sense that extreme weather nowadays has become increasingly a common phenomenon. But Cyclone Nargis happened to draw a different kind of attention. As relief materials began to trickle in from the countries that share land borders with Myanmar, an international row broke out over urgent relief efforts. The U.S. and some European governments pledged help; their offer would no doubt be welcome, given the extent of destruction inflicted upon the country and its population. Timing, however, could not have been more sensitive for the military rulers, as the country was scheduled to hold a referendum on a newly drafted Constitution in just a matter of days after the cyclone struck, and the military regime was determined to keep the event under control. The generally negative response from the international media to the announcement of the national referendum by the government of Myanmar three months earlier seemed to have given the military leaders reasons to be alarmed about unwanted interference in internal affairs; hence vindicating, from where they were standing, their reluctance to engage in speedy and unrestricted cooperation with international relief agencies. Western powers including the United States and the EU acted in concert, with some member states pushing for a UN resolution in order to force Myanmar to open its ports to foreign aid and threatening to invoke the UN “responsibility to protect” in the event of a failure to comply on the part of the military rulers.<sup>2</sup> Condemnations of the

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<sup>1</sup> Notes on URLs: All newspaper articles on current affairs were accessed on the same or the following day of their publication, and other documents cited in the text remained accessible at the time when the manuscript was submitted.

<sup>2</sup> The French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner’s proposal for a UN resolution to compel Myanmar to open its ports and accept foreign aid was opposed by Russia and

military government for their foot-dragging over humanitarian aid, meanwhile, mounted in the international media.

Post-cyclone relief was clearly politicized.<sup>3</sup> The standoff reflected essentially the ongoing clash between the West and the Myanmar military rulers ever since the latter re-imposed their rule in the wake of the popular uprising for democratic change in 1988. The point of contention has been the nature of the regime, contrasted in terms of democracy versus autocracy. To Western governments, democracy is a matter of principle, ideals, and conviction; it therefore serves as a key yardstick, by which problems in other countries outside the sphere of Europe and North America are to be identified and solved. The moral foundation of the democratic principles and ideals, with which the West identifies, accordingly prescribes rules for the management of international relations, and is sometimes taken as a license to intervene. Ascendant in the 1990s, interventionism has peaked in the present decade. In the given political atmosphere, state practices perceived contrary to the Western democratic model may be subject to criticism, condemnation, sanction, and, in extreme cases, military action, notwithstanding that certain exceptions to this practice do exist in accordance with the specific strategic objectives of the intervening powers.

These circumstances of international politics have, to a degree, impeded political development in Myanmar over the years, as the result of protracted standoff. Simultaneously, events in Myanmar have taken their own course irrespective of international pressure, as the country's rulers have, somewhat ironically, availed themselves of the current state of international isolation. Amid condemnations of the military rulers for their alleged slow response to international offers of post-cyclone relief, Myanmar adopted a new Constitution in a national referendum.<sup>4</sup> The event incidentally marked

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China, in addition to half a dozen non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this topic, see Derek Tonkin, "The Political Scene in Myanmar in the Wake of Cyclone Nargis," *Burma Perspectives* (June 24, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//bp%2024%20june%202008.pdf>>; see also Derek Tonkin, "The Impact of the Constitutional Referendum in Myanmar," *Burma Perspectives* (June 6, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//bp%206%20june%202008.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> It was held on May 10, 2008 as scheduled, with initial suspension in some of the worst cyclone-hit townships. At the end of the month, it was announced that the

(within five months) the twentieth anniversary of the 1988 democratic movement that effectively ended the rule of the Burman Socialist Program Party commanded by General Ne Win who had come to power in a coup toppling a civilian government in 1962.<sup>5</sup> A landmark change on the horizon is the general elections scheduled for 2010. The world order is meanwhile changing. The Russia-Georgia conflict that broke out in the summer 2008 and the subsequent diplomatic fallout have important implications for the management of international affairs. The importance of geopolitics – central to the Russia-Georgia conflict and its aftermath – seems to have pushed to the foreground the role of regional players in conflict resolution and the maintenance of regional prosperity, not just in Europe but also in Asia. This change is likely to have profound repercussions for the management of international affairs, and is thought-provoking for continued (albeit not concerted) international efforts to solve the long-lasting political deadlock in Myanmar.

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Constitution had been approved by a majority of votes (over 90 per cent) and hence promulgated. “Myanmar Ratified and Promulgates Constitution,” *The New Light of Myanmar* (May 30, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//305-1newsn.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> The military government that succeeded Ne Win abolished the Constitution promulgated in 1974. The Constitution adopted by the latest referendum is the third since the country’s independence.

## Democracy: A Point of Reference

The adoption of the country's third Constitution marked the completion of step four of the seven-step roadmap serving as a blueprint for democratic transition put forward by the Myanmar government in 2003. It was no doubt a move forward as far as the military rulers were concerned; in the eyes of those that hold different opinions toward change in Myanmar, however, the step was "a move away from democracy," as the Burma Campaign UK manager put it.<sup>6</sup> The clash between Western ideas of democracy and the military rule that disputed the result of the 1990 elections has made Myanmar a focus of international relations; at the center of which is Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy founded in 1988 and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who over the years has evolved into an icon of democracy in the Western media. For that reason, Western support for democracy in Myanmar has since become inseparable from the name of Aung San Suu Kyi, and by extension, the political party under her command (despite a prolonged period of house arrest separating her person from the NLD and Myanmar society at large). While there is no question that the NLD emerged victorious in the 1990 elections, the interpretation of what the election result meant seems to have been forgotten (see below), if not ignored; the lingering controversy and the protracted standoff between the NLD and the military government have further served to fuel the international debate on Myanmar politics.

In the 1990 elections, the NLD won over 80 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly. The victory was an indicator of deep public discontent and an expression of a strong desire for change among the populace. Overwhelmed by their resounding success and understandably eager to assume power, the NLD confronted the military rulers and demanded that they hand over power, but the latter insisted, instead, that the main purpose of the newly elected National Assembly was to draft a new Constitution to

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Kazmin, "Burma Constitution Vote Draws Fire," *Financial Times* (February 9, 2008), <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/7de93582-d73a-11dc-b09c-0000779fd2ac.html>>.

facilitate an eventual power transfer.<sup>7</sup> In the name of restoring law and order, the government arrested the NLD leaders and subsequently dissolved scores of political parties that had emerged in the wake of the 1988 popular uprising. The point of conflict between the NLD and the ruling SLORC was a gap in understanding between “international legitimacy” as secured by the NLD in the parliamentary elections and the “internal legitimacy” to exercise power in the given Myanmar conditions.<sup>8</sup> Equating elections with democracy and generally sympathetic to the pro-democracy movement, many in the international community responded with condemnation of the military government, with more sanctions (ensuing in 1988) to follow in the years to come. The widely understood support for sanctions by Aung San Suu Kyi personally and her unyielding position in the matter have since helped sustain and indeed encouraged further rounds of sanctions on Myanmar over many years of political standoff.<sup>9</sup>

Soon after the 1990 elections, the U.S. government reduced its diplomatic presence in Yangon to a Charge d’Affaires.<sup>10</sup> In 2003, the U.S. Congress passed the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act “to sanction the ruling Burmese military junta, to strengthen Burma’s democratic forces and support and recognize the National League of Democracy as the legitimate representative of the Burmese people, and for other purposes.”<sup>11</sup> The U.S. sanctions over the years have included a pre-existing arms embargo, further suspension of textile trade and other agreements, a ban on new investment

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the 1990 elections and the revolving controversies, see Derek Tonkin, “The 1990 Elections in Myanmar: Broken Promises or a Failure of Communication?” *Network Myanmar* (February 9, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images/1990%20elections.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup> See, David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), pp. 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> The circumstances surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi (and her political party)’s calling for international sanctions are not entirely clear. The military government has insisted that any meaningful dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi must be based on her renouncing international sanctions on the country, but her response has been vague. For a well-documented analysis on this matter, see Derek Tonkin, “‘We Did Not Ask for Sanctions’: NLD Declared Policy 2002-2008,” *Burma Perspectives* (December 9, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//bp091208.pdf>>.

<sup>10</sup> This was essentially the result of the Senate refusing to confirm a new ambassador as nominated by the President. The second nominee was rejected by Myanmar.

<sup>11</sup> The House of Representatives, “108<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session” (June 4, 2003), *The Orator.com*, <<http://www.theorator.com/bills108/hr2330.html>>.

and economic aid, in addition to visa restrictions imposed on senior officials and their relatives. The EU echoed the U.S. in both condemnations and sanctions (differing though in areas of trade and investment). Individual politicians, too, sought to make their own influence felt. Tony Blair, while in office, offered personal support to the UK-led campaign by discouraging British tourists from visiting Myanmar and spending money in the country.<sup>12</sup> In the given political atmosphere, Aung San Suu Kyi came to dominate policy-making in the West, in particular, in the United States. The former First Lady Laura Bush, for one, made the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi her priority interest in foreign affairs,<sup>13</sup> while her husband, George W. Bush, availed himself of presidential power (authorized by Congress) to award Aung San Suu Kyi the Congressional Medal, America's highest civilian honor; notably and coincidentally, the legislation was signed on the same occasion that the U.S. pledged relief to post-cyclone Myanmar.

In the years following the 1990 elections, the influence of Aung San Suu Kyi in the West has markedly ascended and surpassed that inside the country. The attention given by the Western media and governments to her person has reduced the many problems faced by Myanmar (i.e. endless civil war devastating the country since the end of WWII, prolonged poverty and increasing hardship endured by the ordinary population over the past decades, and so forth) to "only one story," that is, as put by a modern historian of Myanmar, "of Aung San Suu Kyi and her struggle against the ruling generals."<sup>14</sup> The Burma Lobby outside the country, with considerable sway over politicians in Western countries, has similarly pursued a campaign with one simple message: "The military government is bad, Aung San Suu Kyi is good."<sup>15</sup> This good versus bad narrative, while serving to sideline unorthodox views, has helped essentially focus and simplify policy-making

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<sup>12</sup> See, Derek Tonkin, "The Struggle to Engage Myanmar," *Burma Perspectives* (August 15, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//bp%2015%20august.pdf>>.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Beech, "Laura Bush's Burmese Crusade," *Time* (September 5, 2007), <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1659170,00.html>>; *CQ Transcripts Wire*, "First Lady Remarks on Cyclone in Burma, Says U.S. Will Increase Aid" *Washingtonpost.com* (May 5, 2008), <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/05/AR2008050501928\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/05/AR2008050501928_pf.html)>.

<sup>14</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 332.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

vis-à-vis Myanmar. As Gordon Brown, the present prime minister of Britain, harangued: “I want Aung San Suu Kyi to be not only released, but to be in power in Burma.”<sup>16</sup> Traveling back in time, such a sound-bite may indeed be susceptible to a comparison with the colonial past, wherein Burma politics was sanctioned according to the political needs in London.

Parallels between yesterday’s colonialism and today’s interventionism are not always apparent, but difficult to ignore. Nineteenth-century colonialism in Burma saw a rationalization of the state, which purportedly “freed” the country’s economy from dynastic restrictions on trade and commerce, and by doing so, “liberated” the populace from the oppressive traditions and exploitation by the indigenous ruling class.<sup>17</sup> The same European liberalism that had provided a moral justification for colonialism in the nineteenth century by creating “self-government” out of “an outdated form of oriental despotism,”<sup>18</sup> as the history of Myanmar has presented us, staged a comeback in the twentieth century and continues to prevail in the present century. In the contemporary setting, freedom and prosperity for the people in a faraway country like Myanmar are set to be realized, similarly, by way of a “rationalization of the state” (or “democratization” in the contemporary political language), and the forces to facilitate that change are, once more, not surprisingly, the Western powers.

Along with the euphoria following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, the Clinton administration (1992-2000) pursued a foreign policy that emphasized nation building abroad by way of humanitarian intervention. Tony Blair’s tenure as British prime minister (1997-2007) elevated humanitarian intervention to the level of a so-called “doctrine of the international community” (duly dubbed the “Blair Doctrine”), from which evolved the “responsibility to protect” based on Canadian initiatives.<sup>19</sup> The Kosovo War created a precedent, which in

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Tonkin, “The Struggle to Engage Myanmar” (August 15, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 66. By rationalization of the state, Taylor, borrowing a concept from J. S. Furniwall (1956), means the replacement of informal methods of rule with bureaucratic legal/rational rules as described by Max Weber.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>19</sup> See, Chris Abbott and John Sloboda, “The ‘Blair Doctrine’ and after: Five Years of Humanitarian Intervention,” *Open Democracy* (April 22, 2004), <[http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions\\_government/article\\_1857.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/article_1857.jsp)>.

retrospect had profound repercussions in international relations. The foreign policy of the Bush administration (2000-2008) went one step further and can be summarized as follows: “the US is prepared to go it alone, even if it puts noses out of joint in other countries – friend or foe.”<sup>20</sup> The war on Iraq divided opinion between the United States and the EU (the so-called “Old Europe” as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it), but the doctrine of “humanitarian intervention” to remove the dictator Saddam Hussein, in the end, helped politicians build their case, and sell to the public the invasion of Iraq led by the United States.

U.S. foreign policy during Bush’s second term in office comprised more ambitious goals, as indeed stated in his inaugural address, “to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”<sup>21</sup> The remaining members of the “axis of evil” listed by the White House prior to the Iraq War – namely, Iran and North Korea, both alleged to be practicing or sponsoring terrorism – were now re-assigned to a list of “outposts of tyranny” on which Myanmar was also included. These “weak and failing states,” as they were labeled, were thought to “serve as global pathways that facilitate the spread of pandemics, the movement of criminals and terrorists, and the proliferation of the world’s most dangerous weapons”; therefore, U.S. policy, as then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained it, sought to “help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system.”<sup>22</sup> Rhetoric aside, the U.S. solutions to these “weak and failing states” generally remained vague, as they very much would depend on whether the individual countries, at any particular point of time, could be perceived as posing a threat to the United States. While the threat of invasion has not been so apparent per se in the case of Myanmar, it

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Lister, “Analysis: Bush’s Foreign Policy,” *BBC News* (April 7, 2001), <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1265039.stm>>.

<sup>21</sup> The White House, “President Bush’s Second Inaugural Address,” *NPR.org* (January 20, 2005), <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172>>.

<sup>22</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “The Promise of Democratic Peace: Why Promoting Freedom Is the Only Realistic Path to Security,” *The Washington Post* (December 11, 2005), <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/09/AR2005120901711.html>>.

nonetheless remains a strategic reality for the country's military rulers,<sup>23</sup> for whom what happened in Afghanistan and Iraq may well serve as a constant reminder.

In reality, military action to remove the military rulers in Myanmar has hardly been a U.S. priority with its ongoing wars on at least two fronts in the present decade. On the other hand, sanctions have been consistently employed to encourage regime change, as it is believed, in this case, that economic sanctions can "adversely affect industries that directly benefit the military and deprive it of an important source of revenue."<sup>24</sup> Yet, the existing sanctions that have been in place for almost two decades now have not succeeded in removing the military from power. On the contrary, there is increasing evidence that the military has become strengthened in isolation, not just as an armed force, but also as a state actor. That the military continues to purge and blatantly sideline the NLD and its leaders in the ongoing political process indicates further external pressure having achieved little in bringing about the kind of political change in Myanmar that outside forces prefer to see.

Even though it was not the original intention of policy-makers, the general populace in Myanmar has suffered from the consequences of economic sanctions. The post-Nargis report released by the International Crisis Group (ICG) attributed the situation of Myanmar having received twenty times less assistance per capita than other least-developed countries, and the weakening of the forces for change, to the twenty years of sanctions.<sup>25</sup> In its recommendations, the ICG report appealed to Western governments for a review of economic sanctions that affect the livelihood of ordinary people and, in particular, vulnerable groups. Imperative as it may be for the sake of humanitarian aid, such a policy overhaul would mean moving down the

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<sup>23</sup> For perceptions of threat and influences on the military regime's defense planning and foreign policy, see Andrew Selth, "Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality," Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper (No. 17, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Independent Task Force, *Burma: Time for Change* (New York: Council on Foreign Affairs, 2003), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> International Crisis Group, "Burma/Myanmar after Nargis: Time to Normalise Aid Relations," Asia Report (No. 161, October 20, 2008), <[http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/burma\\_myanmar/161\\_burma\\_myanmar\\_after\\_nargis\\_\\_time\\_to\\_normalise\\_aid\\_relations.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/burma_myanmar/161_burma_myanmar_after_nargis__time_to_normalise_aid_relations.pdf)>.

ladder from the moral high ground, and this in itself presents no small challenge to the governments dedicated to a policy of sanctions aimed at punishing the bad. For the time being, it is more than plausible that many politicians will simply console themselves by reiterating that “Sanctions may not work, but at least we are on the right side.”<sup>26</sup> The Norwegian minister for environment and development, for instance, has recently signaled an intention to review policy toward Burma but conspicuously stopped short of calling off sanctions.<sup>27</sup> In this regard, abandoning the consistent policy of sanctions would appear to be a problem. Policy outcomes, however, have been much less a matter of concern.

The demonstrations in Yangon and other cities in August-September 2007 were an outburst of public discontent sparked primarily by a sudden rise in fuel prices, in addition to a general frustration over prolonged economic stagnation. Interestingly, the “Saffron Revolution” – the color, the image, and the whole symbolism – turned out to be more inspiring for Western audiences than the populace at large inside the country itself. The events, if anything, provided a high-profile opportunity for world leaders and celebrities alike to tout their values. As observed:

At the UN, where he had a longstanding speaking engagement, President George Bush made Burma a centrepiece of his speech and said that the “people’s desire for change is unmistakable.” Whereas in other circumstances Burma would have been at best a minor talking point at a few bilateral meetings, it now topped the agenda. Heads of government hurried to express concern and diplomats telephoned one another. The actor Jim Carrey even broadcast an appeal on YouTube to Ban Ki-Moon.<sup>28</sup>

The street protests joined by tens of thousands, monks and laymen alike, ended with dozens reported killed (31, according the UN Human Rights

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<sup>26</sup> ICG interview cited in *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> “Solheim vil ha ny Burma politick,” *Aftenposten.no*. (January 18, 2009), <<http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/uriks/article2873073.ece>>.

<sup>28</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (2007), pp. 349-50.

Rapporteur for Myanmar), many more injured, and thousands arrested. The outcome hardly came as a surprise, in view of what had happened in the country before. While the force used by the military was indisputably crushing and the way the public protests were handled remains deeply deplorable, there are lingering questions about the involvement of external actors availing themselves of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar to bolster their own existence. Whatever the intention – defying the military rulers, or demonstrating to the world the cruelty of the regime, or convincing the world of the resilience of the democratic movement – one could very well raise question marks over the roles of individuals and organizations that played a part in instigating such heroic action on the streets of Myanmar.<sup>29</sup> With ideology dominating the agenda, inconsistency between intention and consequence has not been given much attention in the thinking and the practice of intervention today.

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<sup>29</sup> It has been suggested that certain “clandestine sessions” on the Thai-Myanmar border and similar do-good “international paramilitary operations” have benefited from the rather generous funding for promoting democracy in Myanmar. See, George H. Wittman, “Happy New Year, Mr. Soros,” *The American Spectator* (December 31, 2007), <[http://www.spectator.org/dsp\\_article.asp?art\\_id=12489](http://www.spectator.org/dsp_article.asp?art_id=12489)>.

## Intervention and the Question of Legitimacy

Talk of humanitarian intervention increasingly dominated world politics in the last decade of the twentieth century. Instead of employing the hard rhetoric of the Cold War to legitimate policy as in the past, Western politicians today resorted to a softer register of keywords conveying basic values imbued with a high “feel-good” factor. In the name of democracy and human rights, humanitarian intervention has since taken the United States and allies to war in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Myanmar has similarly been the target of humanitarian intervention, albeit on a different scale and of lesser priority. All the same, “humanitarian intervention” is no stranger to Myanmar, or Burma (as the country used to be called).<sup>30</sup> The third Anglo-Burmese war at the end of the nineteenth century that effectively completed the British colonization of Burma (starting from the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824) was waged on the pretext of humanitarian intervention.<sup>31</sup> Fuelling the regime change – deposing the last Burman King Thibaw who was viewed by London as despotic and uncooperative – was the scheme to capture the “unopened market of Burma,” contemplated by Britain’s politicians of the time as a means of saving the country from an economic depression badly affecting industrial centers like Birmingham and Leeds.<sup>32</sup>

Neither the idea nor the practice of humanitarian intervention is new; to a great degree, its objectives have not changed much despite the time span. The advocacy of the “League of Democracies” today, which has united liberal

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<sup>30</sup> In 1989, the military government changed the name of the country to (the Union of) Myanmar. The opposition NLD regarded the change as illegitimate; the UN and many of its member nations accepted, whereas the United States and a few other countries have notably rejected the change. Suffice to say, as one long-time observer of Burma/Myanmar affairs has noted: “the use of either term is a surrogate indicator of political persuasion” (Steinberg, p. xi).

<sup>31</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (2007), pp. 158-162.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.

idealism and neoconservative realism in one, serves as a perfect illustration.<sup>33</sup> At the core of interventionist practice is the “strategic interest” (of non-territorial related ambitions) of Western powers. As the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair maintained in defense of his decision to take his country to war in Iraq: “The best defense of our security lies in the spread of our values.”<sup>34</sup> Echoing this line of argument, the former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in an interview about the situation in the Middle East with specific references to Iran and Syria, advised that one would miss the point if one were to “assume that democracy is just a matter of moral principles in the United States,” adding that: “It is certainly that. But it is also a matter of strategic interest; that’s when we’ve done best and that’s when we’ve created – helped to create circumstances that turned out to be secure and stable in an enduring sense.”<sup>35</sup> In the first decade of the twentieth-first century, the world saw this matter of the U.S strategic interest in the Middle East being tackled by waging war on Iraq. In Asia, the U.S. strategic interest is different, but activities to promote democracy there nonetheless prioritize U.S. interests. As stated in a report by the National Endowment for Democracy on its South Asia program:

Their activities are so designed and implemented as to be in consonance with the foreign policy and strategic objectives of the US Government in this region. It has been mainly active against those countries/areas and regimes which are perceived as unfavourable or detrimental to US interests and not against those considered essential to US interests. For example, while they have been active against the military regime in Myanmar, they were not equally active against the former Suharto regime

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<sup>33</sup> See, Jonathan Rauch, “Voting Bloc: In Geneva, the U.N.’s Successor May be Testing Its Wings,” *Reason Online*, March 22, 2004, <<http://www.reason.com/news/show/34607.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> Tony Blair, “Full Text: Tony Blair’s Speech,” *Guardian.co.uk* (March 5, 2004), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/mar/05/iraq.iraq>>.

<sup>35</sup> [Transcript], “Interview with Condoleezza Rice,” *Washingtonpost.com* (December 15, 2006), <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/15/AR2006121500529.html>>.

in Indonesia or against the damage caused to democracy in Pakistan by the military-intelligence establishment.<sup>36</sup>

Europeans may not necessarily share the strategic interest of their trans-Atlantic partner, but the commitment to democracy and human rights – often talked of as the cardinal principles of the West – bolsters the Western alliance. “Unlike tyranny,” it is said, “democracy by its very nature is never imposed.”<sup>37</sup> Such a claim, however, flies in the face of the way in which humanitarian intervention has been administered around the world. The reality is, when strategic interest becomes a key determinant in target selection for condemnation, sanction, or military action, “humanitarianism” may indeed constitute no more than a tactic to justify and build support for interference in the internal affairs of another sovereign country. At the peril of such highly selective targeting of humanitarian intervention, is a backlash in the form of rising nationalism spreading across the country targeted and beyond. The modern history of Myanmar, for one, is infused with nationalist sentiments prevalent prior to its independence as well as at present. Nationalism, in other words, intertwines with a host of problems; yet its impact on political development in the country has been largely overlooked in Western policy-making toward Myanmar.

Nationalism has been identified as the “overarching rationale that influenced all policies” in independent Myanmar.<sup>38</sup> The general resentment toward foreign domination in the economic sectors under colonial rule made socialism (in terms of state-ownership) particularly appealing to Burmese intellectuals and political elites after the country gained its independence, most illustrative being the Burmese Way to Socialism under Ne Win’s rule that lasted for nearly three decades, in spite of its economic failure. The pursuit of socialism went hand-in-hand with a non-alignment policy favored by the country’s leaders, designed to keep the independent Union of Myanmar free from foreign influence. During the long era of military rule,

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<sup>36</sup> See, B. Raman, “The USA’s National Endowment for Democracy (NED): An Update,” South Asia Analysis Group Papers (December 2, 2001), <<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers2/paper198.htm>>.

<sup>37</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “The Promise of Democratic Peace” (December 11, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (2001), p. 16.

nationalism and isolation have proved to be mutually empowering. The period under the SLORC and the succeeding State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has indeed seen a steady rise of nationalism as a means of rule. As a key component of the political culture that the country inherited from its colonial past, nationalism or nationalism-dominated politics, interacting directly with Western interventionism, has increasingly come to define legitimacy of rule in terms of anti-Western sentiment.

Central to the Myanmar impasse in the light of both international relations and domestic politics is the seemingly unending animosity between the *tatmadaw* (the military) and Aung San Suu Kyi. It is a matter that essentially concerns legitimacy of rule, opinions of which understandably differ between the international and domestic audiences. Two indigenous and Buddhist concepts dominating domestic politics in Myanmar are identified as *ana* and *awza*, standing for “authority” and “influence” separately; as a pair, these two terms are contrasting and also can be overlapping.<sup>39</sup> Between the *tatmadaw* and Aung San Suu Kyi, the contrasting concepts appear to exclude each other, in the sense that the former possesses *ana* but not *awza*, whereas the latter possesses *awza* but not *ana*, strictly in the context of domestic politics. The *awza* of Aung San Suu Kyi being the daughter of Aung San contributed to the victory of the NLD in the 1990 general elections, but her *ana*, that is, legitimacy to exercise power, has been contested by the regime. To Western audiences, the rejection by the military government of the NLD’s demand for handing over power is an issue of authoritarian rule versus democracy. Missing from this analysis of over-simplification is a key element of Myanmar politics, that is, cultural symbolism, the uses of which “reinforce regimes and provide legitimacy to government.”<sup>40</sup>

The *awza* that Aung San Suu Kyi enjoys in society naturally derives from her association with the name Aung San. The kinship, however, does not automatically confer *ana* onto her person. On the contrary, the *tatmadaw* propaganda machine has consistently discredited her political credentials by invoking her foreign connections, not just her marriage to a man of another “race” but also the unrelenting support from foreign countries that has boosted the image of Aung San Suu Kyi on the international stage. She has

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

been duly characterized by the regime as “a lackey of imperialists,” and the accusation consequently puts her concern as a politician for the interests of the country in doubt.<sup>41</sup> The Constitutional requirements for the qualifications of the President and Vice-Presidents seem to have eliminated any possibility for Aung San Suu Kyi to ever become head of state in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. This can hardly be acceptable to the U.S. and the EU (whose member states pursue a united foreign policy in this matter) governments, simply because the very person of Aung San Suu Kyi embodies democracy. The political symbolism of the West thus interacts inadvertently with the cultural symbolism of Myanmar politics, reinforcing, as a result, the nationalist rhetoric on the part of the unyielding *tatmadaw*.

Regardless of who is in possession of authority or influence, neither *ana* nor *awza* is inherently democratic. General Aung San is indisputably a character that can be credited with having possessed both *ana* and *awza* in the modern history of Myanmar. But his legacy can hardly be called democratic in the Western tradition, in view of his conviction of “one nation, one state, one party, one leader...” and his call for “no parliament opposition, no nonsense of individualism.”<sup>42</sup> This political insight, however, does not necessarily make him a lesser national hero in the eyes of the Myanmar people or in any way less creditable as a political leader who won the independence of Myanmar. On the contrary, it only serves to indicate how well Aung San understood at the time what it took to rule the country in the event of the British departure. Aung San was a nationalist, so was his comrade-in-arms General Ne Win who ousted the civilian government a decade after the country gained its independence; the SPDC in power today is no exception. For five out of the last six decades, post-independence Myanmar has been under military rule, the duration of which has no parallel in the modern world. This particularity of the Myanmar political system has its roots in the anti-colonialist movements that amalgamated a wide range of groups (middle class, working class, peasantry, ethnic minorities, and so on), each persistently fighting for its own interests, a situation which ultimately

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<sup>41</sup> Yin-Hlaing Kyaw, “The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Authoritarian Myanmar/Burma,” in Xiaolin Guo (ed.), *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2008), p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (2001), p. 279, and in Thant Myint-U (2007), p. 229.

compelled the leadership of the national armed forces to assert its self-assumed responsibility for the integration of the country, before gaining independence and during the civil war afterwards. In today's Myanmar, the *tatmadaw* is not just a combination of armed forces, but also the state itself.<sup>43</sup> All-out “regime change,” therefore, would mean the eradication of both the military establishment and the entire government apparatus, the outcome of which would be too dire to contemplate. By the same token, any functioning civilian government without the military support is hard to imagine.

No matter whether it is civilian or military, cultural symbolism has always been a component of the legitimacy of rule. Religion is particularly overriding. The Burmans, a majority of the country's population, are mostly Buddhist, and Buddhism traditionally served as a foundation of national identity. The revitalization of Buddhism under British rule was an important part of the nationalist movement for independence.<sup>44</sup> After independence, regime consolidation that had an anti-communist element reaffirmed Buddhism in national politics.<sup>45</sup> U Nu, Ne Win, and Than Shwe were/are all devoted Buddhists, and have all built pagodas while in office.<sup>46</sup> Less symbolic but nonetheless indispensable in political life is astrology, the power of which is revered by rulers and ruled alike, past and present. The royal chronicle *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the King of the Burma* is full of references to natural and supernatural signs as explanations of important historical events: during the last dynasty Konbaung (1752-1885), the court for reasons attributable to astrology frequently moved between the cultural centers of Shwebo, Ava,

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<sup>43</sup> As estimated, up to two thirds of cabinet ministerial positions are currently held by military or former military personnel, and the government sponsored Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) has penetrated all administrative levels down to that of the village. Li Chenyang and Chen Yin, “Yingxiang Miandian minzhuhua jinchengde zhuyao zhengzhi shili” [Main forces influencing democratization in Myanmar]. *Dangdai yatai* (No. 4, 2006), pp. 19-26. USDA membership is currently estimated at 24.6 million, and the association is expected by the government to play a crucial role in the democratic transition. *The New Light of Myanmar* (November 29, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//2911newsn.pdf>>.

<sup>44</sup> Zhao Jing, “Miandian guomin jiaoyu yundong de zaisikao” [Rethinking of national education movement], *Beida yatai yanjiu* (No. 8, March 2008), pp. 238-39.

<sup>45</sup> Robert H. Taylor, “Do States Make Nations?: The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited,” *South East Asia Research Paper* (Vol. 13, No. 13, 2005), p. 279.

<sup>46</sup> Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (2001), p. 45

Amarapura, and Mandalay.<sup>47</sup> It is widely believed that, following the advice of his astrologist, the current head of state Than Shwe, too, decided to relocate the government administrative capital further inland, 400 kilometers north of Yangon. Cultural symbolism as such, invariably obscured by democratic rhetoric in the political system of European tradition, is powerful in Myanmar politics. It has proven in the modern history of Myanmar to be a unifying as well as destructive force to nation building.

In addition to the greed and grievance of an economic nature, ethnicity has been one major challenge to nation building in Myanmar.<sup>48</sup> One third of the total population in the Union of Myanmar is composed of ethnic minorities (“national races” as they are officially referred to in English by the Myanmar government), speaking over 100 languages, distributed across the frontier areas (or “Shan States, the Frontier Areas and Backward Tracts” as designated by the British), in contrast to “Burma proper.” The historic Panglong Meeting in 1947 convened by Aung San together with ethnic leaders acknowledged the local autonomy of the frontier areas, and promised a share of decision-making power as well as economic assistance in exchange for their support to make the territorial integration of the Union of Burma viable. The deal, later ratified in the Union’s Constitution, also allowed the right of ethnic withdrawal from the Union after an initial ten-year period (though the special provision applied only to the Shan and Kayah states), a cause that was later taken up by certain nationality leaders when political grievances grew.<sup>49</sup> The country’s independence was embraced amid turmoil, and ethnic insurgencies played their part in the civil war that initially took hold among the Burman majority as well. To build national unity based on an imagined national identity, U Nu made an attempt to amend the Constitution designating Buddhism a national religion: the motion duly

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<sup>47</sup> Mao Rui, “Miandian qiandu jiqi yingxiang chulun” [Myanmar government moving its capital and explanations], *Beida yatai yanjiu* (No. 8, March 2008), pp. 168-183.

<sup>48</sup> See Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (Washington D.C.: East-West Center and Singapore: ISEAS publishing, 2007); also see Robert H. Taylor, “Do States Make Nations?”

<sup>49</sup> The “Federal Movement” led by the Shan elite encouraged U Nu to enter into negotiations with the representatives from the frontier areas in 1962, which effectively provided a pretext for the military coup and power seizure by Ne Win.

backfired.<sup>50</sup> Ethnic strife has since dominated Myanmar politics, and the ceasefire agreements reached between the government and some two dozen ethnic armed forces over the past two decades are yet to be consolidated and translated into long-lasting peace.<sup>51</sup> The newly promulgated Constitution prescribes a new framework of ethnic relations in a renewed attempt at nation building, reaffirming the local autonomy of, political participation by, and economic assistance to, the frontier areas. The 2010 elections are expected by the Myanmar people to see the fulfillment of these promises.

To the Western powers (represented by Washington and Brussels), political transformation in Myanmar is taken to simply involve Aung San Suu Kyi replacing the *tatmadaw*. Yet, the real challenges to Myanmar's democratic transition are far more complex, bringing into play elements of nationalism, personal influence, Buddhism, astrology, and last but not least, ethnicity. Only a very carefully struck balance between all these intertwining elements can bring stability to the country; and in turn, only stability can provide the necessary conditions for economic development conducive to a sustained, lasting peace. The colonial rule in the past created a "rationalization" of the state, and in due course, generated imbalances in society, the legacies of which have not been confronted until recently. The NLD victory in the 1990 elections articulated an overwhelming desire for change in the country at the time, but the capability of the political party imbued with the name democracy was yet to be tested. The past twenty years have seen the NLD pull out of the National Convention, assembled to lay down principles for the draft of the Constitution, and in due course become embroiled in infighting.<sup>52</sup> In addition to a lack of clear political strategies, its leadership has failed to secure, and is deemed to be unlikely to secure in the near future, widespread support from the large population of ethnic minorities.<sup>53</sup> What

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<sup>50</sup> Li Chenyang, "Miandian dulihou lijie zhengfu minzu zhengce de yanbian" [Development of ethnic minority policies in post-independence Myanmar] in *Yazhou minzu luntan*, edited by Fang Tie and Xiao Xian (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2003), pp. 127-140.

<sup>51</sup> See Martin Smith, *State of Strife* (2007).

<sup>52</sup> See Yin-Hlaing Kyaw, "The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Authoritarian Myanmar/Burma" (2008), pp. 91-102.

<sup>53</sup> Li Chenyang, Myanmar/Burma's Political Development and China-Myanmar Relations in the Aftermath of the 'Saffron Revolution,'" in Xiaolin Guo (ed.), *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives* (2008), p. 115.

the NLD can garner presently is moral support and overall sympathy from the West, and its leaders have been banking on Western support to gain access to the levers of power. However, the lesson to the NLD and equally to its Western supporters in this political game is the paradox that foreign support often proves to be counterproductive by reducing the legitimacy (of the NLD, in this case) to rule *within* the country, if one is familiar with the modern history of Myanmar and what is going on in the country today. The future of the NLD remains uncertain at the moment, as its leaders are yet to decide whether they will contest the elections – or indeed whether they will be allowed to participate in the up-coming elections.<sup>54</sup>

The present predicament that the NLD finds itself in is largely related to the role of Aung San Suu Kyi; the political impasse revolving around her person inadvertently becomes an obstacle to national reconciliation. Her silence, albeit if often enforced, over the past years has prompted doubts about her capacity to lead and about her remaining influence on the democratic movement within the country.<sup>55</sup> To a degree, her contentious relevance to the democratic movement has sent the NLD into disarray. Her strong personality and unyielding position have clearly frustrated the good offices of the UN Special Envoy, as Aung San Suu Kyi declined to grant Dr. Ibrahim Gambari an audience on his sixth trip to Myanmar in the summer 2008;<sup>56</sup> she did, however, meet with him on his following trip in the beginning of 2009, but the meeting achieved little progress in as far as reconciliation is concerned, as Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated the same preconditions for any possible dialogue with the military rulers.<sup>57</sup> All of this seems to have created a predicament for her supporters outside the country. Naturally, Western support for Aung San Suu Kyi has strategic concerns, in addition to elements of symbolic politics, counting on a democratically elected government headed

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<sup>54</sup> Wai Moe, "NLD Leaders Discuss Role in 2010 Election," *The Irrawaddy*, December 2, 2008, <[http://www.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=14734](http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=14734)>.

<sup>55</sup> Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, "Not Such a Hero After All," *Guardian.co.uk*, November 11, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/11/burma-aung-san-suu-kyi>.

<sup>56</sup> The Myanmar government newspaper recounted the repeated efforts by the UN delegates to reach Aung San Suu Kyi. *The New Light of Myanmar* Vol. XVI, No. 128 (August 24, 2008), pp. 6-8.

<sup>57</sup> Aung Hla Tun, "Myanmar's Suu Kyi Meets United Nations Envoy," *Reuters Newyaho.com* (February 2, 2009), <[http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20090202/wl\\_nm/us\\_myanmar\\_un/print](http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20090202/wl_nm/us_myanmar_un/print)>.

by Aung San Suu Kyi to be pro-West. This may well turn out to be merely wishful thinking, as democracies do not automatically align their interests and, moreover, it gets in the way of seeking solutions to the present Myanmar impasse. The Southeast Asian democracies (with maybe the exception of countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, and to some extent, Malaysia and Singapore) have clearly shunned what is perceived as an antagonistic Western approach in dealing with Myanmar; and India, for that matter, is likely to prioritize harmonious relations with its neighbor in accordance with its own strategic interest. Conversely, China, being a country that is not a multi-party democracy, pursues a policy toward Myanmar not particularly divergent from a number of its Asian neighbors.

A conventional understanding of China's position on Myanmar is based essentially on two assumptions that make perfect sense to observers from a distance, one being a potential impact of a democratic Myanmar on the Chinese political system, and the other relating to China's dependence on Myanmar's natural resources. Beyond the confines of ideology, however, there is a wisdom that neither a democratic nor an authoritarian Myanmar (or North Korea, for that matter) will have any bearing on the Chinese political system, which, regardless of whether it is communist or not, is itself a product of an ancient state, both Confucian and legalist in different periods during its very long history. Natural resources are no doubt important from an economic point of view, but border security and regional stability pose far bigger concerns for China. It is China's understanding that political stability can be achieved through economic development; hence, its involvement in economic development in Myanmar. Geo-proximity determines the unique relationship between China and Myanmar; and it is the relevance of geo-proximity that has prompted China as well as other Asian countries to assume increasing responsibility for regional security and development. The implications are not at all unfamiliar to what concerns the Western counterparts.

## Geopolitics Reshaping the Rules

The agenda of international politics is in constant flux. What happens elsewhere changes the focus of the world's major powers on problems in a particular region; likewise, events taking place in another part of the world can prompt policy adjustments among regional players with regard to regional affairs in relation to the world at large. August 8, 2008 (twenty years to the day that workers, civil servants, and students staged a general strike against the government of the Burma Socialist Programme Party led by U Sein Lwin who succeeded Ne Win as Party Chairman)<sup>58</sup> was a date on which two regional powers, China and Russia, came under the spotlight of international media, as Beijing unveiled the opening of the 29th International Olympic Games in a spectacular gala while, in a separate development, Moscow ordered a retaliatory strike on Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Caucasus conflict came to be viewed by some analysts as a defining moment of history,<sup>59</sup> which, in a manner of speaking, highlights the state of affairs in that the Western powers had, since the end of the Cold War, not been so challenged. The U.S. and EU governments alleged that Russia's behavior was an infringement upon a sovereign state (i.e. Georgia), but Russia called it an assertion of its right to self-defense, claiming that its peacekeeping troops had come under attack from the Georgian army, a military response incidentally judged by some international observers as by no means illegitimate.<sup>60</sup> Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Georgia,

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<sup>58</sup> The strike ended U Sein Lwin's tenure before the month was over; his successor Dr. Maung Maung was ousted by the army on September 19 in a putsch.

<sup>59</sup> Adrian Hamilton, "We Need an Old Approach for the New Global Politics," *Independent.co.uk* (August 28, 2008), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/adrian-hamilton/adrian-hamilton-we-need-an-old-approach-for-the-new-global-politics-910677.html>>.

<sup>60</sup> The account given by the German military attaché in Moscow has it that "the Russians had moved to strengthen their peacekeepers, deployed under a mandate from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to protect Russian citizens and to restore the status quo ante," and that "the deployment of air power by

President Bush warned Russia not to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; Russia did just that, regardless. After all, Russia had forewarned, not long before, that the recognition of Kosovo's unilateral independence by the major world powers would set "a terrible precedent."<sup>61</sup> Parallels are indeed inconvenient; like in many other areas of international relations, the failure to draw inconvenient parallels has inadvertently undercut the persuasive power of the key values that the West is keen on disseminating, including democracy in Myanmar. Regardless of which party was to blame for the war in the Caucasus this time, loud talk on both sides of the Atlantic stood in marked contrast to a general silence in other parts of the world; these governments were best described as "bemused by western moralising on Georgia," as Singapore's former UN ambassador put it.<sup>62</sup>

Some observers called the Caucasus crisis "the graveyard of America's unipolar world,"<sup>63</sup> and the beginning of "a new disorder."<sup>64</sup> The statements as such signaled a perception of change (if not already reality) in terms of power balance in international relations and the way the game of international politics is played. Along with this change, geopolitical spaces perceived as having been "intruded by the West" are likely to be restructured,<sup>65</sup> as regional actors are beginning to assume a more active role. While Russia is to be reckoned with in Europe (as well as its near abroad),

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Russia can be seen as militarily appropriate to the operation." DPA News Agency, "German Diplomat: Russian Response to Georgia Appropriate," *DW-World.de* (August 24, 2008), <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3590155,00.html?maca=en-rss-en-all-1573-xml-atom>>.

<sup>61</sup> Xinhua, "Putin: Recognition of Kosovo's Independence 'Terrible Precedence,'" *People's Daily Online* (February 23, 2008), <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90853/6359363.html>>.

<sup>62</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, "The West Is Strategically Wrong on Georgia," *Financial Times.com* (August 20, 2008), <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c65798bc-6ec6-11dd-a80a-0000779fd18c.html>>.

<sup>63</sup> Seumas Milne, "Georgia Is the Graveyard of America's Unipolar World," *Guardian.co.uk* (August 28, 2008), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/28/russia.usforeignpolicy>>.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, "China, Russia and the New World Disorder," *Los Angeles Times* (September 11, 2008), <<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-ash11-2008sep11,0,6733055.story>>.

<sup>65</sup> In his essay, "The West is Strategically Wrong on Georgia" (August 20, 2008), Kishore Mahbubani argues that as "a result of its overwhelming power, the west has intruded into the geopolitical spaces of other dormant countries" and that in the wake of the Russia-Georgia conflict, those spaces "are no longer dormant, especially in Asia."

China and India are to be reckoned with in Asia, and so are Brazil and Venezuela in Latin America. This new state of affairs would vindicate the prediction made by Deng Xiaoping close to 20 years ago, when China's reforms had suffered a major political setback as the result of cracking down on the student movement in June 1989. Assessing the international order in relation to domestic development amid international sanctions on China, Deng made the following judgment in March 1990:

The situation in which the United States and the Soviet Union dominated all international affairs is changing. Nevertheless, in future when the world becomes three-polar, four-polar or five-polar, the Soviet Union, no matter how weakened it may be and even if some of its republics withdraw from it, will still be one pole. In the so-called multi-polar world, China too will be a pole. We should not belittle our own importance: one way or another, China will be counted as a pole.<sup>66</sup>

Being counted as one pole, China has been called upon to play a role in bringing about political change in Myanmar. China, drawing lessons from the past,<sup>67</sup> regards the political standoff in Myanmar as the internal affair of that country; in this the Chinese government has been basically adhering to its non-interference policy. Viewing Myanmar's political stability as a matter of strictly regional interest, China has consistently treated the matter with warranted caution. In this regard, China's position largely concurs with that of the ASEAN countries, in particular, neighbors of Myanmar, including those outside ASEAN such as India. The Asian approach to Myanmar is stability first, in contrast to the Western rhetoric of "democracy first!" In view of the play of international politics vis-à-vis Myanmar, one may well

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<sup>66</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "The International Situation and Economic Problems," *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Selected works of Deng Xiaoping], Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), p. 353.

<sup>67</sup> For a troubled history of contemporary China-Myanmar relations, see Xiaolin Guo, *Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue*, Silk Road Paper (Washington and Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, March 2007), pp. 30-49.

argue that there is no international community as such, but only Western powers and regional actors pursuing different agendas.

If the Russia-Georgia conflict and the ensuing international debate have any bearing on Myanmar as an international concern, it underscores the importance of geopolitics and its increasing relevance to management of international relations. Russia's unyielding position on South Ossetia and Abkhazia is underpinned by strategic concern (aside from the historically entangled sentiments). Equally, geopolitics is something that the democratic West itself cannot ignore. The initial support for Georgia offered by the European leaders was hijacked, in a manner of speaking, by an overwhelming ideological agenda; the dismissal by Western politicians of credible reports about the war in Georgia available at the time has been attributed to the fear of "discredit[ing] their whole project for spreading democracy and recruiting allies among former Soviet republics."<sup>68</sup> Yet, a pro-West government like the one in Georgia can very well jeopardize Western interests.<sup>69</sup> When faced with geopolitical realities, the West – predominantly "Old Europe" – paused, and began to review the situation concerning its relationship with Russia. Three months after the event, contradicting accounts about the conflict in the Caucasus emerged, raising questions about Georgia's claims.<sup>70</sup> In due course, the European Union has launched a fact-finding mission to determine the causes of the war between Georgia and Russia.<sup>71</sup> The NATO summit toward the end of the year further delivered a blow to Georgia (together with Ukraine) in its attempt to seek speedy NATO membership,<sup>72</sup> though

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<sup>68</sup> Mary Dejevsky, "Why Did the West Ignore the Truth about the War in Georgia?" *Independent.co.uk* (November 12, 2008), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mary-dejevsky/mary-dejevsky-why-did-the-west-ignore-the-truth-about-the-war-in-georgia-1012234.html>>.

<sup>69</sup> The row between Russia and the Ukraine over gas supplies ensuing the New Year 2009 shows again how the legacy of the Soviet Union and the lingering Cold War sentiments can easily be exploited, wittingly or unwittingly, to create a quandary for "Old" as well as "New" Europe.

<sup>70</sup> See, C. J. Chivers and Ellen Barry, "Georgia Claims on Russia War Called into Question," *The New York Times* (November 7, 2008), <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/world/europe/07georgia.html?\\_r=1&hp&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/world/europe/07georgia.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin)>.

<sup>71</sup> CNN, "EU Probes Causes of Georgian Conflict," *CNN.com* (December 2, 2008), <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/12/02/georgia.eu.war/index.html>>.

<sup>72</sup> Vanessa Mock, "Setback for Georgia after Nato Rejection," *Independent.co.uk* (December 3, 2008), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/setback-for-georgia-after-nato-rejection-1049064.html>>.

Georgia may interpret it differently.<sup>73</sup> Instead, the NATO chief announced “conditional and graduated re-engagement” with Russia.<sup>74</sup> This policy modification would appear to be a victory of rationality over ideology, at the heart of which are the West’s concerns for its own strategic objectives.

In the matter of geopolitics, Myanmar is a concern for a number of Asian countries. The Asian regional mechanism of conflict management and economic cooperation was augmented in the 1990s, along with the expansion of ASEAN, and the subsequent formation of 10+1 and 10+3 economic cooperation. For historical reasons, the function of ASEAN has been constrained, from time to time, largely due to pressure from its Western allies.<sup>75</sup> The post-Nargis relief effort showed a more united ASEAN willing to deal with a regional crisis. The Tripartite Core Group (TCG) was put into place in May, two weeks after the cyclone struck. The group – comprising members from ASEAN, UN, and the government of the Union of Myanmar – first organized an international fund pledging conference in Yangon; then it conducted a survey in the cyclone-struck areas. Its first press release was published in late June and found the scenes on the ground standing “in contrast to the flood of reports in the immediate aftermath of the cyclone that criticized the Myanmar government’s response to the disaster.”<sup>76</sup> The fourth press release by the TCG a month later showed that “all of the disaster-affected communities have received relief assistance at least once.”<sup>77</sup> The same report also emphasized the “remaining challenges of sustaining the relief and advancing the support for early recovery in terms of livelihood and subsequently local level recovery on the ground.” Interestingly, none of the alternative views and urges for continued humanitarian aid reported by the

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<sup>73</sup> Mikheil Saakashvili, “Ask the Russians Why Georgia Hasn’t Been Stable,” *Independent.co.uk* (December 7, 2008), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/mikheil-saakashvili-ask-the-russians-why-georgia-hasnt-been-stable-1055540.html>>.

<sup>74</sup> BBC, “Nato ‘to Resume Ties with Russia,’” *BBC News* (December 3, 2008), <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7762021.stm>>.

<sup>75</sup> See, Jürgen Haacke, “ASEAN and the Situation in Myanmar/Burma,” in Xiaolin Guo (ed.), *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives* (2008), pp. 131-158.

<sup>76</sup> Leslie Koh, “Myanmar 8 Weeks on,” *The Straits Times* (June 29, 2008), <[http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/ST1Story\\_252806.html](http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/ST1Story_252806.html)>.

<sup>77</sup> Tripartite Core Group, “Cyclone Nargis Response Enters a New Phase in Relief and Early Recovery,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (July 30, 2008), <<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/EGUA-7H7LMG?OpenDocument>>.

TCG, with first-hand knowledge of the situation, were mentioned in international news headlines.

The post-cyclone relief efforts coordinated by the regional players are said to “herald a new era of regionalized ‘humanitarianism with Asian values,’”<sup>78</sup> which may in turn have a notable impact on the political development in Myanmar. Myanmar’s military government, entrenched during its prolonged isolation, seemed to have withstood outside political pressure. The wrangling over post-cyclone relief did little to weaken its position. The ceasefire agreements reached by the government with various ethnic armed forces beginning in the 1990s ended, except for pockets in the Thai borderlands, the all-out civil war that had devastated the country over a period of decades. By adopting the new Constitution, the government completed one more step on its “roadmap to democracy.” The NLD today is no longer a political rival. Further showing its confidence or maybe in part demonstrating its willingness to cooperate with the UN, the military government released its “longest-serving political prisoner” along with some nine thousand convicts in an amnesty in September 2008.<sup>79</sup> That seemingly obscure move, however, was followed by a more predictable action when lengthy prison sentences were handed down to dozens of dissidents in November.<sup>80</sup> The crackdown on opponents by the government is suggestive of an act of “clearing the way” in preparation for the general elections in 2010.<sup>81</sup> The biggest question remains though: how the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi is going to be handled as the country goes to the poll.

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<sup>78</sup> Ashley South, “Economic Crisis and Human Rights,” *The World Today.Org*, November 2008, pp. 16-17, <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/ashley-south-article.pdf>>.

<sup>79</sup> Amy Kazmin, “Burma’s Junta Frees Suu Kyi Aide,” *Financial Times.com* (September 23, 2008), <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/1d45e91a-8981-11dd-8371-0000779fd18c.html>>.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Buncombe, “Pro-Democracy Activists Sentenced in Burma,” *Independent.co.uk* (November 11, 2008), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/prodemocracy-activists-sentenced-in-burma-1011490.html>>. Joint Press Release, “UN Should Refer Burma to Int. Criminal Court,” *Scoop International News* (November 21, 2008), <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0811/Soo348.htm>>.

<sup>81</sup> As the paper went to print, news came that the military government granted amnesty to 6,313 prisoners including three members of NLD. Agencies, “Myanmar Detainees Get Amnesty,” *AlJazeera.Net* (February 22, 2009), <<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2009/02/200922262419891603.html>>.

The persistence of the “Myanmar issue” in international politics has, as discussed earlier, hinged on different attitudes toward Aung San Suu Kyi. For the West, any talk of a political process in the country must begin with the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. To the regional players, the West simply uses her as a “political tool,”<sup>82</sup> at the expense of finding a viable solution to Myanmar’s woes. Sensitive to the complexity of history and socio-economic reality in the country, the regional players share a general consensus that “internal legitimacy” is imperative for stability in the country, and stability must come first for any further political change to take place inside the country. Aung San Suu Kyi is popular largely because she carries with her name the legacy of Aung San, and her popularity, as a symbol of change, was decisive in helping the NLD to win victory in the 1990 elections.<sup>83</sup> Since then, her name has been associated with democracy in Myanmar, and for that reason, foreign support for her has been forthcoming. Half a century apart, the base of her influence and what she has been fighting for have turned out to be very different from that of her father, Aung San, who earned both personal influence and political authority in fighting for his country against foreign occupying powers. While it is indisputable that Aung San Suu Kyi has *awza*, her *ana* to lead the country remains in question. On this point, obviously, the regional players disagree with the Western powers’ insistence that Aung San Suu Kyi is the only solution to political progress in Myanmar. This rigidity on the part of politicians in the United States as well as in Europe often seems less of an outcome of miscommunication than the lack of genuine interest in finding a solution, which would explain the persistent

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<sup>82</sup> “Thai PM Says West Uses Myanmar’s Suu Kyi as Political Tool,” *Asia Observer* (August 25, 2008), <<http://www.asiaobserver.com/content/view/full/554998/123/>>. The Thai prime minister who made the comment later resigned in the midst of public protest that brought the country to a standstill in August-September, further closed its airports in November-December 2008, and in the end toppled his successor.

<sup>83</sup> In her public speech to a mass rally in Yangon on August 26, 1988, she invoked her father’s legacy, telling her audience that as her father’s daughter she “could not remain indifferent to all that was going on,” and calling the national crisis faced by the people of Burma “the second struggle for national independence.” Aung San Suu Kyi, “Speech to a Mass Rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda,” August 26, 1988, <<http://burmalibrary.org/docs3/Shwedagon-ocr.htm>>.

prominence of democracy and human rights rhetoric on the agenda of Western policy-making vis-à-vis Myanmar.<sup>84</sup>

The protracted isolation of Myanmar has gradually taken a toll on the pro-democracy movement inside and outside the country; exile communities in particular have found themselves increasingly frustrated over the political impasse.<sup>85</sup> The series of events in May 2008 – post-cyclone relief and the adoption of the new Constitution – once again indicated that the pressure of Western governments had only limited effect on the military government. The situation compelled the pro-democracy communities abroad to review their movement, and to explore alternative strategies. Some raised doubts about sanctions, and concluded that confrontational approaches had “added to a wall of hostility between the nations that limits Washington’s influence.”<sup>86</sup> Others, reflecting on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, questioned the credibility of George W. Bush as a human rights champion.<sup>87</sup> Reports of such sentiments surfaced in August 2008, coinciding with the U.S. President’s stopover in Bangkok en route to the opening of the Beijing Olympics. The role of China was naturally brought up again, but this time, the tone was quite different and there was no talk of sanctioning China; instead, both the founding editor of the Chiang Mai-based *The Irrawaddy* and the head of Burma Campaign UK spoke against provocation in efforts to bring China on board.<sup>88</sup> In a comment on an action taken by some pro-democracy groups to challenge the credentials of the Burmese government representatives in the United Nations, the opposition Prime Minister in Exile, Sein Win, conceded that “for various reasons, none of the neighboring countries of Burma were willing to side with the pro-democracy movement

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<sup>84</sup> The position of the United States toward Myanmar is said to have “remained rigid, because U.S. national interests in regard to Myanmar have been marginal.” Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (2001), p. 241.

<sup>85</sup> Yin-Hlaing Kyaw, “The State of the Pro-Democracy Movement in Authoritarian Myanmar/Burma,” in Xiaolin Guo (ed.), *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives* (2008), pp. 67-105.

<sup>86</sup> Seth Mydans, “Exiles Try to Rekindle Hopes for Change in Myanmar,” *The New York Times* (August 5, 2008), <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/06/world/asia/06myanmar.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rs>>.

<sup>87</sup> Pokpong Lawansiri, “Bush as Human Rights Champion?” *The Irrawaddy* (August 14, 2008), <[http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=13855](http://www.irrawaddy.org/opinion_story.php?art_id=13855)>.

<sup>88</sup> Amy Kazmin, “Beijing Holds Key to Change in Burma,” *Financial Times.com* (August 7, 2008), <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c84e1866-649f-11dd-af61-0000779fd18c.html>>.

and supports them in the United Nations.”<sup>89</sup> All these reflections on failures and expectations seemed to point at the importance of the regional players in Myanmar affairs.

What makes the role of regional players particularly indispensable is, first of all, the local knowledge crucial for conflict management in the region. In an interview following his visit to Myanmar in August 2008, the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General Ibrahim Gambari talked about an initiative from Indonesia “to have a small group of some countries who are closest neighbours to Myanmar and who have some [experience] of transition from a military to a democratic regime, and to whom the [Burmese] authorities are more likely to listen to,” including China and India.<sup>90</sup> The proposal said to have been encouraged by the UN Secretary-General seems to entail, so far, a concrete step toward a customized solution. The Southeast Asian experience and model of development can have significant bearing on long-term political change and stability in Myanmar.<sup>91</sup> China and India are important, as immediate neighbors; however, their roles in dealing with Myanmar can be complicated by their bilateral relations as well as their respective relations with other powers outside the region, and such relationships tend to have wider repercussions. Like their Southeast Asian

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<sup>89</sup> Lalit K Jha, “Gambari Should Be Tougher on Junta: PM in Exile,” *The Irrawaddy* (September 26, 2008), <[http://www.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art\\_id=14327](http://www.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=14327)>. For the attempt to unseat the government of the Union of Myanmar from the UN, see Derek Tonkin, “Myanmar and the UN Credentials Committee: Soap Opera or Serious Challenge?” *Burma Perspectives* (September 11, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images/bp%2011%20september%202008.pdf>>. For the UN decision on the matter, see, AP, “UN Rejects Request for Myanmar Junta's Seat,” *International Herald Tribune* (September 26, 2008), <<http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2008/09/26/news/UN-UN-General-Assembly-Myanmar.php>>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibrahim Gambari, “Taking a Deep Breath,” *The Irrawaddy* (September 22, 2008), <[http://www.irrawaddy.org/print\\_article.php?art\\_id=14293](http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=14293)>.

<sup>91</sup> The “seven-step road map to democracy” is characterized as “inspired by other more or less successful transitions from military rule to a civilian administration (Indonesia, South Korea, or even Chile).” See, Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagen, *Back to the Old Habits: Isolationism or the Self-Preservation of Burma's Military Regime* (Bangkok: Institute of Research on Contemporary South East Asia, December 2008), p. 31. Some scholars have suggested that the Indonesian model of state power Golkar could potentially offer an option for political development in Myanmar, allowing, as it does, the ruling military to play a dual role as a corporative state and in national defense. See, Li Chenyang, “Miandian Xinjunren zhengquan changqi cunzai de yuanyin tanxi” [Analysis of the new Myanmar military government and its sustainability], *Beida yatai yanjiu* (No. 8, March 2008), pp. 145-167.

partners, whether or not China and India decide to become involved in matters concerning Myanmar very much depends on the nature of the problem, and how their respective national interests are perceived. Therefore, it is naïve and also unrealistic to expect the regional players to act according to the will of the West – which is not part of the region and pursues very different interests.

## Concluding Remarks

In August-September 2007, street demonstrations in Yangon and other cities in Myanmar dominated international headlines. A year later, the world's attention turned elsewhere, and to events with much wider repercussions: the Russia-Georgia conflict followed by the financial turmoil unfolding on Wall Street. By comparison, Myanmar is less of an immediate concern to many in the international community, and thus remains as poorly understood as ever. Today, as filtered through the international media, the problems of Myanmar often appear to have all started in 1988, whereas the country's colonial history, nation building, ethnic minority rights, nationalism, and economic development have all been obscured by the talk of democracy. Under the shadow of ideologically charged objectives, the real problems that Myanmar faces remain largely irrelevant to the policy-making of the West.

For the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the road to independence took many decades, and the road to democracy has proven no less daunting a challenge. Nearly twenty years have elapsed since the last general elections in Myanmar. During the same span of time across the border in the east, China managed to lift hundreds of millions of its own population out of poverty, and went on to become one of the world's largest economies. Twenty years now after the Burmese Way to Socialism declared its bankruptcy, Myanmar is still on the UN list of least-developed nations. While the military government's poor performance is indisputably responsible for the stagnant economy in the country, there has been little evidence that international intervention (in the form of sanctions) has facilitated alleviation of the day-to-day misery endured by ordinary citizens. With the general elections in sight, political change inside Myanmar is taking place at last; but whether the international community is ready to presently accept the change remains a question in view of the negative press given to the new draft Constitution, the national referendum, and the announcement by the military government of the upcoming elections. For the Western powers, the answer to political change lies in getting rid of the

anti-Western government in Myanmar. But revolution and street protests have all been tried in Myanmar, and have failed to bring down the military government. Sanctions, too, for that matter, have proved largely ineffectual. National reconciliation is the only option. To achieve that goal, Myanmar needs to move on, and out of the present impasse.

Current Western thinking on political development emphasizes a single model of rule, similar to nineteenth-century social evolutionism that assumes human societies develop in uni-linear progression. Social evolutionism, as a social science theory, has, however, long been rejected as overly simplistic and Eurocentric (not to mention its intrinsic association with Marx and Engels). In post-colonial studies of human societies, cultural specifics are seen as providing explanations for a great variety of cultural practices, certain types of which, admittedly, may develop in similar ways under similar conditions, though with little evidence to support the claim that aspects of culture appear among *all* human societies in a regular sequence. By the same token, the notion that Western democracy offers an effective remedy for *all* political problems in *all* societies is fundamentally flawed, for it ignores the indigenous conditions in which the state interacts with society.

As far as political development in Myanmar is concerned, Western rhetoric of democracy has been employed to legitimize intervention. As an ideology, democracy has kept Western politicians (predominantly in Europe and North America) focused. But putting democracy on the table for the Myanmar people today does not instantly dispel their daily hardship. The brief period of civilian government immediately after the Union of Myanmar gained its independence and the concomitant chaos across the country serve as a historical and sobering reminder that the “Democracy Now!” demanded of the country provides no magic solution. The nations that have long practiced democracy need to ponder further on the virtue of advancing their own cause outside their geographic bounds. The notion of sovereignty was born with the nation state; it was part of the quest for domination (of resources and markets) that prompted the colonial powers to devise and draw boundaries between culturally diverse peoples in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The powers that enriched themselves through the practice of colonialism yesterday can hardly expect the citizens of their old colonies to take sovereignty lightly today. Touting democracy because it

represents an ideal does not automatically render intervention in the very name of democracy legitimate. As Shashi Tharoor, former UN Under-Secretary General, so penetratingly put it in his criticism of those who advocate a League of Democracies:

It is also specious to argue that collective action by a group of democracies (when the UN is unable to act) would enjoy international legitimacy. The legitimacy of democracies comes from the consent of the governed; when they act outside their own countries, no such legitimacy applies. The reason that decisions of the UN enjoy legitimacy across the world lies not in the democratic virtue of its members, but in its universality.<sup>92</sup>

Over the past decade, international interest in Myanmar has grown in an alarming disproportion to knowledge about the country. For the general public, support for democracy in Myanmar adds a “feel-good” factor to the existing well-to-do life style. For politicians, signing on to such a noble cause boosts their popularity, both as individuals and for their parties, in addition to demonstrating their own political importance.<sup>93</sup> However, neither media campaigns nor sanctions have achieved any significant result in inducing the change that the West would like to see in Myanmar. Without understanding the modern history of the country plagued by endless civil war and prolonged instability and without understanding the importance of national reconciliation to political integration and a sustainable peace that can truly improve the life for the common people, policy-making vis-à-vis Myanmar

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<sup>92</sup> Shashi Tharoor, “This Mini-League of Nations Would Cause Only Division,” *Guardian.co.uk* (May 27, 2008), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/27/unitednations.usa>>.

<sup>93</sup> The latest publicity campaign was a Norwegian initiative by which a letter, signed by 112 former presidents and prime ministers, and foreign ministers from 50 nations, urged the UN Secretary-General to press for the release of all political prisoners in Burma. Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights and Freedom Now for Immediate Release (December 3, 2008), <<http://www.freedom-now.org/documents/PressRelease-Letter.pdf>>. The motion was echoed by a petition signed by 241 members of parliament from Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Indonesia, *Network Myanmar* (December 8, 2008), <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images/aipmc%201.pdf>>.

will remain irrelevant to what is going on inside the country. However one may dislike the current situation in Myanmar, it is worth bearing in mind that the solution to the multiple problems afflicting the country over decades lies ultimately with its people and their government (headed by whomever). The national referendum that adopted the new Constitution has set the stage for change, and the 2010 elections will be a milestone in the political life of Myanmar. The event will also be a test of the intentions of different interested parties that claim to hold a stake in that political change. A benign, or hostile, international environment can facilitate, and equally, jeopardize, any foreseeable political transition in Myanmar, with direct consequences for the well-being of the country and its people in general.

Talk of the “international environment” naturally draws attention to the Western powers, in particular, the United States. Professing a move away from “rigid ideology,” the new Obama administration has opted for a foreign policy of “smart power based on a marriage of principle and pragmatism.”<sup>94</sup> What difference, if any, this change will make in the case of Myanmar remains to be seen.

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<sup>94</sup> David Osborne, “Clinton Announces Dawn of ‘Smart Power’”, *The Independent* (January 14, 2009), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/clinton-announces-dawn-of-smart-power-1334256.html>>.

## About the Author

Dr. Xiaolin Guo, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, is the author of *State and Ethnicity in China's Southwest* (Brill 2008), and editor of *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives* (ISDP, 2008). Her other publications cover the topics of China's economic reform, PRC ethnic minorities policy, and foreign relations.