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Myanmar and ASEAN: New Beginnings, New Directions?

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Executive Summary

- Myanmar has followed a neutralist foreign policy with multilateral overtones since independence. This can be traced from the pronouncement by General Aung San on the importance of forming partnerships with emerging nation-states of the region, in what he termed a 'United States of Indochina' in the midst of geopolitical uncertainties. This neutralist policy was continued by Burma's first prime minister U Nu, who balanced his country's survival needs strategically between the United States and China, and espoused non-alignment as part of this strategic neutrality.
- Under the socialist rule of General Ne Win, the practice of neutralism became overshadowed by increasingly isolationist policies which led the country towards economic and political decline. Under the military rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, isolation under sanctions pushed Myanmar to closer alignment with China. Even so, nascent efforts to diversify partnerships can be found in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' push for multilateral engagements by re-joining the Non-Aligned Movement (which Burma had left in 1979) and applying for admission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- ASEAN's policy of constructive engagement towards Myanmar gave rise to differing expectations on the part of the military junta and from ASEAN. Despite the mismatch in expectations, ASEAN continued to monitor developments in Myanmar and encourage its peaceful transition towards democracy, and Myanmar remained cognizant of its ASEAN commitments. ASEAN was appreciative of Myanmar's offer to defer its rotational turn to chair ASEAN in 2006, but issued a very strongly worded statement on Myanmar regarding the suppression of the 2007 Saffron Revolution.
- ASEAN's coordinating role in responding to humanitarian needs after the disastrous Cyclone Nargis in 2008 proved a turning point in paving the way towards the enlightened self-interest by the Union Solidary and Development Party (USDP) to initiate political and economic reforms in 2011. These reforms gave impetus to a new beginning for Myanmar's role in ASEAN, starting with Myanmar taking up its deferred turn to chair ASEAN in 2014. The political reforms also facilitated the re-entry into politics of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In the general elections of November 2015, the NLD received a resounding mandate to take over responsibilities of the state.
- The NLD government, with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at the helm, has reiterated continuity with non-alignment in the conduct of foreign policy. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has also referred to the vision of her father General Aung San as an inspiration for Myanmar's ASEAN direction. Moreover, she has brought in strategic nuances in balancing Myanmar's relations with major partners such as the USA and China, and in emphasizing the importance of ASEAN's rules-based principles in bilateral and multilateral partnerships. This new beginning

for Myanmar in regional and international affairs also signals a new direction for the country's neutralist foreign policy.

Introduction

Myanmar is emerging on the Asian, and indeed the international, scene. As regards foreign policy, its overarching objective is to maintain friendly relations with all countries. This admirable objective also reflects the hard truth of having to take geopolitical realities into account. In addition comes the desire to find a useful role for Myanmar in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and otherwise on the world scene.

In the mid-1990s, Myanmar – under the military junta and amidst international sanctions – made a successful push to join ASEAN, and was admitted into the Association’s fold on 23 July 1997. However, national security and stability concerns overrode all other concerns regarding the country’s relations with neighbours and countries in the region and the international community, and affected Myanmar’s effective participation in ASEAN and other multilateral processes. This preoccupation with its own domestic issues and concerns has characterized the country’s foreign – and ASEAN – policy direction until recently.

A move to diversify external partnerships and thus open up to the world began under the civilianized administration of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) that started the transition process in Myanmar in 2011. However, apart from securing agreement from fellow ASEAN members that Myanmar would resume the deferred rotational chairmanship in 2014, the country’s foreign policy did not evolve to a more proactive stance, integrating economic, environmental and social priorities. On the other hand, Myanmar did manage to allay concerns whether regional commitments would be sublimated to national interests by maintaining ASEAN centrality in bridging tensions between China and claimant ASEAN member states over competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. In November 2015, Myanmar took a dramatic step forward towards democratization with the landmark elections that ushered in the National League for Democracy (NLD) as the first democratically elected administration in decades.

Against this backdrop of Myanmar’s evolving political transformation, this paper traces the evolution of Myanmar’s attitudes towards internationalism and/or regionalism, and the beginnings of the ASEAN dimension of its foreign policy.

The paper starts by discussing the origins of the country’s neutralist-multilateralist foreign policy direction. First, the early vision of General Aung San on the importance of multilateral partnerships in what he perceived as a ‘dangerous international environment’ indicated the seeds of a neutralist foreign policy that was carried further by Burma’s first prime minister U Nu. The multilateral aspect of this neutralist foreign policy is further discussed here in connection with the push factors of strategic alignment under international sanctions, and the motivation to join ASEAN. However, expectations regarding ASEAN membership were mismatched, and the resultant tensions are explained in a section on the ups and downs of membership. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief assessment of the future trajectory of Myanmar’s ASEAN policy, based on the premise that the conduct of foreign policy invariably

reflects national interests and it is in Myanmar's national interest to take on a larger role in ASEAN.

The Early Vision of a United States of Indochina: Seeds of Neutrality

Even before the country gained full independence from the British, Burma's 'father of independence' General Aung San had envisaged in 1946 that Burma, together with 'French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia' might someday form part of a 'United States of Indo-China', working together for peace and progress, based on ethnic, strategic and economic 'points of affinity' (Aung San 1946/2013 :71). In his view, an independent Burma would need to 'cooperate and form friendships with other nations for mutual or multilateral interests of defence or economics' (ibid: 70). Indeed, he could have been talking about ASEAN.

U Nu, who became the first Prime Minister of an independent Burma, continued this principle of maintaining friendly relations with other nations, albeit through the prism of a policy of strict neutrality. In practice, however, that meant neutrality in the shadow of China (Steinberg and Hongwei Fan 2012: xviii).¹ This may have been partially motivated by the traditional view that Burma's largest neighbour, China, posed more of a threat than did the far-off USA – which was then covertly supporting the remnant Chinese Kuomintang troops along the Burma–China border, and which the Chinese were pursuing. In such a situation, Burma, in the words of U Nu, was like 'a tender gourd among the cactuses' (U Nu 1951: 98–102). U Nu sought to distance the country from Cold War confrontations, saying 'we cannot allow ourselves to be absorbed into any power bloc.' This was reflected in his approach to regionalism, propounding the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence together with Indonesia's Soekarno and India's Nehru at the Asia–Africa Conference in 1953 which gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement.

Still, when relations with the USA deteriorated after the 1988 military coup that also changed (one year later) the country's name to Myanmar, the junta had little choice but to seek some sort of strategic alignment with China. This can be ascribed, at least partially, to the single-minded focus of US policy towards Myanmar, consistently calling for regime change and/or reform. Increasingly isolated by the international community, and paranoid about its image, the USA's labelling of Myanmar as 'an outpost of tyranny' contrasted unfavourably with China's more nuanced style of diplomacy (Steinberg 2010).²

This approach of quiet diplomacy, adopted by ASEAN in its negotiations on sensitive issues, may also have been a persuasive factor in Myanmar's quest for membership. The following section examines first the push factors leading to Myanmar's quest for ASEAN membership, the mismatch of expectations that coloured Myanmar's ASEAN interactions until 2008, and the realities that contributed to Myanmar's gradual opening thereafter.

¹See also Thomson (1957) who noted, 'Fear of antagonizing China has also been at least partially responsible for Burma's policy of neutralism'.

²Steinberg refers to a statement made on 18 January 2005 by then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as 'presumptive'.

From Neutrality to Isolation and ‘Strategic Alignments’

In the context of Burma’s strict neutrality stance in the Cold War years, the government of U Nu managed to resolve serious security issues facing the newly independent Burma: the Kuomintang question, the presence of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops in Burma, and border demarcation. (Steinberg and Hongwei Fan 2012: 28–51).

The policy of neutrality was continued after the 1962 coup by U Nu’s commander-in-chief Ne Win, and the subsequent entrenchment of the Burma Socialist Programme Party through the 1970s. General Ne Win did not alter U Nu’s foreign policy principles: he even declared a policy of strict neutrality in international relations, coupled with an ‘independent and active’ foreign policy. While this was showcased as Burma taking a more active role in international affairs, it belied the reality of increasingly isolationist actions and flirting with the East European bloc and China. A surprising twist in 1979, however, seemed to indicate that Burma did in fact intend to stick the principle of strict neutrality at all costs. Notwithstanding its status (or perhaps to underscore this as one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Burma declaring its intention – accompanied by the act – of leaving the NAM at the 1979 NAM Summit in Havana. Burma left as a protest against the NAM’s failure to adhere to its founding principles, but interpretations differ here. Foreign Ministry sources recount that whole incident could be attributed to the distance and difficulty of communicating updates and decisions back and forth around the globe. The time distance, and the need to relay communications from Havana via the Burmese consulate in New York, has been given as one of the causes that delayed an eleventh-hour change of mind by General Ne Win to remain in NAM. General Ne Win purportedly reacted negatively when an update from Havana caught him in a bad mood after health problems had forced him to break off a journey to the UK to attend the funeral of Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma, with whom General Ne Win had enjoyed a close friendship.³ Bertil Linter explains Burma’s NAM departure via the prism of the country’s complex relationship with China: up to 1978, China had supported the Burma Communist Party (BCP), and Burma’s walkout from the Havana Summit in 1979 was, in a way, intended to induce China to further reduce its support for the BCP. (See Lintner 1992: 6–7.)

With its NAM links severed, Burma still continued to put up its ‘active and independent’ front internationally, even as it retreated further into a cocoon imposed by deteriorating economic conditions. After the bloody suppression, in 1988, of a popular movement for democracy and change, isolation of a different sort arose from the reactions of the international community. This led the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to seek strategic alignment with China in the post-1988 years, and created the impression that Myanmar was effectively becoming a province of China.

Myanmar’s top diplomats tried to counter this by seeking to rejoin the NAM and to join regional groupings such as ASEAN. The quest for ASEAN membership apparently happened with the acquiescence of China, which may have influenced the dynamics of Myanmar’s relations

³ Personal interviews.

with other ASEAN members and its own position in the grouping as well as ASEAN's relations with the West.

In the wake of the 1988 coup, Myanmar under the SLORC started efforts to rejoin the NAM via Yugoslavia, which had hosted the first NAM Summit in 1961 in Belgrade and which hosted the 9th NAM Summit in 1989. In fact, Myanmar's re-admission to NAM ended up being facilitated by Indonesia, which hosted the 10th NAM Summit in 1992. This gave the impetus for Myanmar to seek a more focused regional orientation with a group of countries that practised a realistic policy of political and economic survival by not taking sides and by engaging with all friendly partners. This grouping was ASEAN, which had admitted a communist country, Vietnam, into its ranks in 1995 after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and the 'Doi Moi' economic reforms towards a market economy had facilitated Vietnam's rapprochement with the ASEAN members.

Historical ties with Indonesia and the inspiration provided by Vietnam's economic opening served as motivating factors for Myanmar to pursue a policy of identifying with Southeast Asia geopolitically.

After Myanmar's NAM accession, Myanmar's Foreign Minister U Ohn Gyaw informally approached his Thai, Indonesian and Bruneian counterparts on Myanmar's behalf to apply for ASEAN membership. Indeed, U Ohn Gyaw attended the 27th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), the annual meeting of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, in 1994 as a guest of the host government Thailand. This was the first time that foreign ministers from all the ten Southeast Asian countries at the time were present at an ASEAN meeting. The following year, U Ohn Gyaw attended the 28th AMM in Brunei, also as a guest of the host government. At the 28th AMM, Myanmar signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in Southeast Asia, and applied for observer status in ASEAN. The TAC is a key political document for ASEAN to which all aspiring members or partners must first accede before deepening relations with the grouping. Myanmar's application for observer status was granted at the 29th AMM in 1996, under Indonesia's chairmanship, and was probably aided by the SLORC's release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in July 1995.⁴ After a year of preparation, Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN together with Laos on 23 July 1995. Cambodia was to have been admitted together with Myanmar and Laos, but a special meeting of the ASEAN foreign ministers decided to defer Cambodia's membership until its internal political situation stabilized.⁵

⁴ She had been placed under house arrest since 1989, and the July 1995 release was a significant announcement. However, the military junta placed her under house arrest a second time in 2000, and again in 2003 (after a short release in 2002), thereafter extending the term of arrest until a complete release in November 2010 after the general elections. For a chronology of Aung San Suu Kyi's detentions, see:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/11/13/burma-chronology-aung-san-suu-kyis-detention>

⁵ In July and August 1997, factional fighting broke out in Cambodia, leading to Prince Ranariddh's ouster as First Prime Minister by Hun Sen, the Second Prime Minister. Hun Sen effectively took control of the government as Prime Minister.

Thus, just as Myanmar under the SLORC had sought more strategic alignment with China for its initial political survival, a move towards diversifying regional partnerships can be seen in Myanmar's move for ASEAN membership and its deliberate identification or alignment with the geopolitical location of Southeast Asia.

This move for closer alignment with the ASEAN principles and objectives via membership indicates the rationale for Myanmar's ASEAN policy. By declaring its intent to join ASEAN, Myanmar highlighted that the country's interests and future lie in the region, with ASEAN. On the part of ASEAN, this was also an indication of how Myanmar's membership would serve the Association's interests as regards regional security and stability. Taking a page from Vietnam, Myanmar, too, felt that the demonstration effect of ASEAN's newly industrialized economies could assist the country's economic development (and thus confer a certain measure of legitimacy to the military government). Myanmar was also attracted to ASEAN's emphasis on informal diplomacy as a means to resolve sensitive issues in a practical manner. However, these early expectations were to fall victim to larger realities.

Expectations and Realities of ASEAN Membership

Domestic expectations

The previous section has indicated the role of U Ohn Gyaw, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs of Myanmar, in initiating and shepherding the move for ASEAN membership. As U Ohn Gyaw was a civilian career diplomat, he was probably motivated and encouraged by ASEAN's 'constructive engagement' platform for dialogue with Myanmar's military regime, and by his own interest as foreign minister in seeking to regain some recognition for his country's international role.

Starting soon after his appointment as Foreign Minister in September 1991, U Ohn Gyaw conceptualized a five-step plan of 'damage control' to the country's battered image after the 1988 coup, with the aim of bringing Myanmar back into the regional and international mainstream, and, through international exposure, of persuading some hard-line junta members to relax their intense focus on regime security.⁶ Beginning by participating actively in international forums on emerging topics of global concern such as the environment and human rights, and braving international scorn, U Ohn Gyaw built up working relationships with counterparts in the ASEAN member countries. Recognizing the potential for additional exposure on the policy track and think-tank front, he established the Myanmar Institute for Strategic and International Studies (Myanmar-ISIS) as a loose inter-ministerial body in 1992, and also pushed for establishing a National Commission on Environmental Affairs, under the Foreign Minister's purview.⁷ This was the first time that the country's foreign policy started looking at

⁶ This is drawn from my personal experience as the foreign minister's assistant from November 1991 to June 1993.

⁷ The Myanmar ISIS later came to play second fiddle to the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) under the Directorate of Defense Services Intelligence, also known as MI or Military Intelligence. It started slowly emerging from its moribund state only in the post-2011 years. As the National Commission on Environmental Affairs, the military

non-traditional security issues even before the term became popular. He then worked on using personal diplomacy channels to re-enter the NAM, which was achieved in 1992 under Indonesia's chairmanship. However, U Ohn Gyaw's main objective was to indicate clearly where, at least in terms of foreign policy, Myanmar's interests lay: and that was with Southeast Asia, an important geopolitical statement, identifying with ASEAN.

These moves were conceived at the Foreign Ministry level and carried out by a team of career Foreign Service officers. However, the junta's approval was necessary to carry out the actual policy moves. U Ohn Gyaw consulted General Khin Nyunt, First Secretary of the SLORC, who himself took a personal interest in making his mark on foreign relations. In turn, General Khin Nyunt facilitated the internal consultations that led to agreement by SLORC's supremo Senior General Than Shwe. In retrospect, U Ohn Gyaw's plan may have seemed idealistic but nevertheless succeeded in its aim of regaining NAM membership and getting admitted into ASEAN. Still, U Ohn Gyaw – with his civilian status – could not have foreseen the depth of the junta's insecurity over the popularity of democracy icon Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, at home and abroad, and General Khin Nyunt's own quest for a greater political role. The junta announced that U Ohn Gyaw was 'allowed to retire' in November 1998, after an observation he made to a foreign news agency on the improbability of change happening as long as the focus was on security.⁸ This is a telling instance of how the junta conflated regime security with state security.

Regional expectations

At the regional level, Myanmar's ASEAN membership owes much to the organization's 'constructive engagement' stance. This can be interpreted an extension of how ASEAN deals with interstate conflict(s) in the region. The constructive engagement policy was first mooted by the Thai government as ASEAN's diplomatic approach specifically towards Myanmar. In 1998, then Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan called for 'flexible engagement' that would allow peer pressure and 'friendly advice', but this term never really caught on – neither did ASEAN's preference for using 'enhanced interactions' in its dealings with Myanmar (see Chalermpanupap 2010).

The term 'constructive engagement' thus stuck for ASEAN's quiet diplomacy with Myanmar. The exercise had its tests, however, most prominently in 2007 over the Saffron Revolution and the 2008 Cyclone Nargis. ASEAN used atypically strong language in a formal statement issued by Singapore, then ASEAN Chair, in September 2007, expressing revulsion at the manner in which the military junta suppressed peaceful protests of the Saffron Revolution. (Yeo 2007; see also Thuzar 2011: 73). Less than a year later, ASEAN, initially criticized for being slow in responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by Cyclone Nargis in May 2008, served as a bridge between Myanmar and the international community. This led Myanmar to place its trust in

government later subsumed it into the Ministry of Agriculture, because U Ohn Gyaw's successors cared less about the environment as a topic for foreign policy.

⁸ Personal conversations, December 1998.

ASEAN to coordinate the international aid effort, including allowing humanitarian workers to operate in the country regardless of nationality (Thuzar 2011: 71–76). The Cyclone Nargis response thus provided a catalyst moment for ASEAN to work out constructive outcomes for Myanmar, despite repeated frustrations over the seeming failure of its earlier expectations as to its constructive engagement policy towards Myanmar. This was due largely to a mismatch in expectations at the domestic and regional levels concerning the outcomes of constructive engagement.

Expectation mismatches and the limits of non-interference

The motivation, understanding and commitment of U Ohn Gyaw and his team negotiating Myanmar's ASEAN membership were sincere: they believed membership and participating in ASEAN processes would give greater exposure and experience to government officials and facilitate the further opening up of the country. This would in turn encourage and support internal processes for national reconciliation and political transition. However, at the time, Myanmar was under a military regime. The Foreign Minister – a civilian career diplomat – was characterized as the junta's songbird for the mouthpiece role he was largely cast to play. While U Ohn Gyaw had hoped that ASEAN's demonstration effect would help expose and open up the junta to new ways of effecting political transition in Myanmar, the SLORC had other expectations, including the intention of using ASEAN membership as a shield against the West, which in the junta's view had been making 'unfair' allegations. The SLORC had a one-sided view of how ASEAN functions, and the symbiotic nature of interactions among its members. In essence, ASEAN functions like a village community where the individual households are expected to respect the community and observe the rules, and in turn the collective community assists and protects households in time of need. However, instead of shaping up as an example of opening up through ASEAN, Myanmar was proving to be more of a liability.

Myanmar's participation in ASEAN and related key meetings was thus affected by its internal situation, the international community's response to how the country's military leadership dealt with it, and Myanmar's subsequent reactions. In this way, Myanmar's domestic affairs also affected how ASEAN responded to the situation, which in turn led to criticisms of ASEAN's principle of non-interference and the futility of ASEAN seeking to effect some sort of change or opening up in Myanmar. To understand the constraints of ASEAN's approach, it is worth taking a closer look at this principle of non-interference.

A cardinal principle of ASEAN is sovereign equality. Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter lists the principles which govern how ASEAN and its member states shall act and interact. Non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states is number 5 among the 14 principles specified in Article 2. This principle has created the perception that intervention or interference in any form is not welcome among ASEAN member states. That was the case with Myanmar under the military junta.

However, non-interference does not stop ASEAN members from expressing concerns, reservations or even criticism when and where necessary. Of course, in line with the general

approach of the organization, this is all done quietly. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, who was foreign minister at the time of Myanmar's admission, stated as much in his address to the 31st ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 1998, reflecting that discussion of a member's internal matters was done quietly, '... befitting a community of friends bonded in cooperation and ever mindful of the fact that fractious relations undermine the capacity of ASEAN to work together on issues critical to our collective being' (Abdullah 1998, para. 10)

ASEAN followed this approach with Myanmar. Since 2001 ASEAN has operated with a collective position on Myanmar, mainly through the joint communiqués of the annual foreign ministers' meetings,⁹ and, at times, through ASEAN Summit statements. The intention was to urge Myanmar to step up the pace of national reconciliation and dialogue among all concerned parties and thus bring the country onto the path of democratic rule. This has been highlighted in the specific paragraphs on Myanmar included in the annual Joint Communiqués, starting with the Joint Communiqué of the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in July 2003 in Phnom Penh (ASEAN 2003a: para 18). This was in response to the Depayin incident on 30 May 2003 (which the ASEAN document refers to as 'the incident of 30 May 2003') where a junta-sponsored mob killed supporters of the National League for Democracy accompanying a convoy for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's campaign trip. The Joint Communiqué paragraphs on Myanmar contain language urging national reconciliation and dialogue towards a peaceful transition to democracy, including working with the UN Special Rapporteurs. The text each year also reflects the current situation or recent developments in Myanmar as briefed by the Myanmar foreign minister. For example, the Joint Communiqué of the 38th AMM in 2005 in Vientiane mentions Myanmar's decision to defer taking up its rotational ASEAN chairmanship turn for 2006 (ASEAN 2005: para 70). A notable exception is when the 45th AMM Joint Communiqué was not issued under Cambodia's chairmanship in 2012. However, the Chairman's Statement of the 20th ASEAN Summit in April 2012 devoted seven paragraphs to developments in Myanmar (ASEAN 2012: paras 84–90), commending the free and fair nature of the April 2012 by-elections, in which the NLD gained all but one of the 48 vacant seats in Myanmar's parliament. Starting with the 46th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2013, the annual Joint Communiqués no longer carry paragraphs reporting on developments in Myanmar.

The Joint Communiqué paragraphs on Myanmar have traced ASEAN's difficult dealings with Myanmar under the military government, and have included calls for Myanmar to release those in detention, among them, at that time, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. However, ASEAN did not support sanctions as a means to bring about change in Myanmar but instead supported the efforts of the United Nations in encouraging Myanmar to work towards constructive outcomes for all. Whenever a positive step has been made, ASEAN has also issued statements of support. Thus, ASEAN supported the implementation of the military government's seven-stage roadmap to democracy. The first mention of this can be found in the ASEAN Leaders' statement of 2003

⁹ The joint communiqués are issued at the end of the annual ASEAN foreign ministers meetings, as a public record of the ministers' discussions. The topics of discussion are wide-ranging, and cover developments in ASEAN and regions beyond. The texts of joint communiqués are discussed and negotiated internally among the senior officials and ministers of the ten ASEAN members. Thus, the paragraphs on Myanmar are usually drafted and finalized with the participation and agreement of the representatives of Myanmar.

(ASEAN 2003b: para 25). ASEAN also encouraged Myanmar to keep fellow members informed of the progress as well as setbacks in implementing various measures in the roadmap. Hence, an update by the Myanmar representative on the situation in the country became a regular agenda item for high-level ASEAN meetings, especially among the foreign ministers, and at the ASEAN Summit working dinners or retreats. The Joint Communiqué paragraphs on Myanmar illustrate these briefings and their outcomes.

Myanmar was not the only ASEAN member state to invoke non-interference in its internal affairs. Other members have used the principle, some even threatening to walk out if a sensitive issue should be raised. However, as the Myanmar experience illustrates, ASEAN usually arranges for the member concerned to brief counterparts in a private, informal setting rather than bring it up for discussion in plenary. Bilateral issues are not taken up at ASEAN meetings, unless one party should wish to bring it up. This was the case for the bilateral dispute between Thailand and Cambodia in 2008 over jurisdiction of the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple. The International Court of Justice had ruled in 1962 that the temple site itself fell within Cambodia's jurisdiction, but was silent on the surrounding areas (International Court of Justice 1962). The 2008 dispute occurred when Cambodia proposed for the temple to be listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site as part of Hun Sen's election campaign. (See Head 2008.)

Working Towards Change

There have also been instances where the member state concerned has welcomed ASEAN's assistance, as well as that of the international community. Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have provided some assistance to the Philippines in Mindanao, on invitation. As mentioned above, an opportunity presented itself for Myanmar in connection with the humanitarian crisis in the wake of the 2008 Cyclone Nargis. ASEAN-led coordination of humanitarian assistance demonstrated impressively how member states could work together to assist a fellow member. ASEAN's response to Nargis is now cited by many as marking the beginning of the organization's 'disaster diplomacy' which led to Myanmar's cautious opening up, learning from the experience of new avenues for working together with external partners.

Indeed, ASEAN's role in facilitating the humanitarian and rehabilitation work of various multilateral and regional agencies in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis presented a window of opportunity to alter the attitude of the Myanmar authorities towards change and for building capacities for change in the country. But it was not all plain sailing. ASEAN was initially criticized for being slow in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar caused by the cyclone – even though individual ASEAN members had offered disaster relief assistance and aid supplies to the Myanmar government as early as 5 May 2008, only two days after the cyclone. This is largely attributed to the fact the assistance from neighbouring and ASEAN countries came without a political agenda. The criticism came from frustrated members of the international community including the USA, France and the UK, whose offers of assistance had been rebuffed by the generals in Naypyitaw. Surin Pitsuwan, serving as ASEAN Secretary-General at the time, admitted that such criticism was to some extent valid:

I do not have any defence for that. But I think the international community also realises we have a lot of sensitivities to work around, to the point where all international agencies have come to accept the fact that if it has to be an ASEAN-led vehicle or structure or architecture. They would be happy and willing to work with us and rally behind us. (Quoted in Chachavalpongpun and Thuzar 2009: 42)

To this end, ASEAN convened a special meeting of foreign ministers almost two weeks after the cyclone. This approach did have its merits. When faced with a stark choice of demonstrating what ASEAN meant (or not) to Myanmar, the Myanmar government accepted the coordinating role of ASEAN. This proved critical to the humanitarian response. Myanmar agreed that ASEAN would lead and coordinate the international aid effort through a tripartite mechanism. This signalled a member's commitment to the association, and a different intent from that expressed in November 2007 at the 13th ASEAN Summit when, with the 'revulsion' expressed by ASEAN Foreign Ministers in September 2007 fresh in memory, Myanmar's then Prime Minister U Thein Sein said that the country could manage its own affairs with the UN (instead of through ASEAN).

During the Nargis response, the Tri-partite Core Group (TCG), consisting of ASEAN, the UN and the Myanmar government (the latter also chaired it), proved able to resolve problems and reconcile different interests to considerable extent. Some took inspiration in building on this unprecedented working mechanism to boost Naypyitaw's comfort level with ASEAN mechanisms and with the international community. This took on new relevance after the transfer of power from the military leadership of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to a civilianized – albeit military-backed – administration led by the SPDC's former prime minister, U Thein Sein.

The Beginnings of New Beginnings

The 2010 general elections were significant for Myanmar, even though they were far from being fair or inclusive.¹⁰ They can be viewed as a 'first elections' that established a base for the subsequent conduct of national-level politics. The military leadership's motivation for holding elections and then stepping down after transferring power to its more or less anointed successor indicated a certain level of confidence in their own current position in the polity, but also a canny recognition that ASEAN's and the international community's interest in Myanmar's roadmap for democracy could be used to further legitimacy. Indeed, the reforms that the U Thein Sein administration initiated in political, administrative, economic and social areas soon after assuming governmental responsibility can be said to have been introduced with that intent. What was unprecedented – and therefore unexpected – was the extent of the reforms that led effectively to the re-entry of the National League for Democracy (NLD) into the political

¹⁰ The National League for Democracy boycotted the 2010 elections, causing a splinter group – the National Democratic Force – to compete in the elections separately, while Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest.

process and the continued freedom of movement and speech accorded to Aung San Suu Kyi after her house arrest ended on 13 November 2010.

The steps the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government took towards a larger role in ASEAN soon became evident. At the 18th ASEAN Summit held in Indonesia on 8–9 May 2011, only months after the USDP government had taken office, Myanmar put in its bid to host and chair the ASEAN Summit in 2014. Myanmar had been due to chair the ASEAN Summit – following the alphabetical rotation of chairmanship – in 2006, but had agreed to defer its turn so as to ‘focus on national reconciliation’ and the transition to democracy. After the deferment of Myanmar’s turn was announced in July 2005, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers had agreed that once Myanmar was prepared to take its turn as the ASEAN Chair, it could do so. The U Thein Sein administration announced its bid on the grounds of that offer.

ASEAN Summits are held twice a year in the country holding the chair for that year. The second Summit each year is followed by the East Asia Summit, and individual summits with the Plus Three countries: China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Summits are preceded by meetings of senior officials and ministers. As ASEAN Chair, Myanmar would also convene the ASEAN Regional Forum and Post-Ministerial Conferences with ASEAN Dialogue Partners, in addition to the Community Council meetings and key ASEAN meetings, like those of the member states’ ministers of foreign affairs and of the economy.

Since joining ASEAN in 1997, Myanmar had participated in various meetings and forums, ranging from summits to technical working groups. Myanmar had also hosted and chaired several ASEAN ministerial meetings since 1999. Thus, considerable competence had been developed in hosting and chairing ASEAN meetings, including organizational skills at various levels as well as an understanding of ASEAN’s institutions and cooperation mechanisms. What Myanmar now needed to prove was its ability to lead regional priority-setting and maintain the organization’s central role in balancing regional priorities with Myanmar’s significant bilateral relations with China, especially on such sensitive issues as the competing territorial claims in the South China Sea, where China expected its will to prevail.

With the 2014 chairmanship, Myanmar managed to address some gaps in the steep learning curve of leading key ASEAN meetings in its Chairmanship year. These learning gaps had been partly due to two factors: 1) Myanmar’s participation in ASEAN had been largely driven at the senior government level, whereas communications with working-level officials as well as the general public had been limited in scope and depth; and 2) providing secretariat support for ASEAN meetings had mostly been an externally led process, with the ASEAN Secretariat assisting with report writing and meeting preparations. With the 2014 chairmanship, all that changed. Myanmar’s ASEAN year was widely publicized and discussed. The Foreign Ministry convened several public forums to share and discuss information on important topics for ASEAN. Having hosted and organized ministerial-level ASEAN meetings since 1999, Myanmar certainly did not lack capacity to manage the meeting logistics. There was also no lack of support and assistance from fellow ASEAN members as well as ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners.

Moreover, Myanmar officials managed to hold their own in managing the tensions generated over the South China Sea.

U Aung Htoo, Deputy Director-General of ASEAN at the time of Myanmar's ASEAN year, has observed that the ASEAN Chair role presented Myanmar with the opportunity to exercise its 'independent and active foreign policy in a manner that would not have been possible under past authoritarian regimes'.¹¹ Myanmar had had the benefit of learning from how past ASEAN Chairs – in particular Brunei in 2013 and Cambodia 2012 – had dealt with the issue under their respective chairmanship. Essentially, the negative publicity surrounding the failure to issue the annual joint communiqué of the ASEAN foreign ministers in 2012 under Cambodia's chairmanship had forced Brunei, as 2013 Chair, to run a tightly managed year of key ASEAN meetings. There were concerns that Myanmar's significant economic and strategic relations with China might lead to its buckling under the weight of bilateral pressure, as had been the case with Cambodia in 2012. These concerns were allayed in the end, with Myanmar proving its ability to maintain the centrality of ASEAN. The statement on the South China Sea issued in May 2014 by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers contained what was then considered stronger language than ASEAN had used previously.

The focus in ensuring that Myanmar's ASEAN debut proceeded smoothly did not come without costs. Each ASEAN Chair likes to put its mark on the outcome documents issued at summits during its year of chairmanship. Myanmar's assumption of ASEAN Chair duties in 2014 meant that much of the focus on landmark declarations and outcomes would be reserved for the following year of 2015, when ASEAN would announce the accomplishment of its ASEAN Community project under Malaysia's chairmanship. Still, the Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post 2015 Vision issued at the 25th ASEAN Summit in November 2014 laid the groundwork for developing the ASEAN 2025 Vision document in the following year; and under Myanmar's chairmanship, commitments to strengthen the role and functions of the ASEAN Secretariat led to increased contributions to the Secretariat's operational budget.

Turning Point in 2015 – New Directions

Landmark elections in Myanmar in November 2015 saw the NLD sweep the majority of seats in parliament to form a government and take the democratic transition forward. Myanmar is now headed by the NLD government with *de facto* leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a dual representational role as State Counsellor and Foreign Minister. This presents new opportunities for Myanmar to assume a greater role in ASEAN and international affairs.

¹¹ U Aung Htoo made this observation as a panellist at the Second Experts Talk Show, 'Moving into Myanmar's ASEAN Year' held on 22–23 November 2013 in Yangon, jointly organized by the Hans Siedel Foundation and Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His observation is reflected in the fourth paragraph of the Talk Show report; see <http://www.hss.de/southeastasia/en/myanmar/news-events/2013/moving-into-myanmars-asean-year-an-experts-talk-show-on-asean-and-myanmar-jointly-organized-by-the-hsf-and-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-of-myanmar.html>

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has reiterated continuity with the policy of non-alignment as regards foreign affairs, observing that it has been successful since the time of the country's independence. At the joint press conference following the visit of the Thai foreign minister, she also referred to her father's vision of a United States of Indochina as an inspiration for Myanmar's ASEAN direction.¹² ASEAN's traction in Myanmar's foreign policy led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is evident. For the first time in decades, the precedence of a Burmese leader visiting China as a first stop has been broken. In her capacity as foreign minister, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi accompanied President Htin Kyaw on his first official visit, which was to neighbouring Laos, the ASEAN Chair for 2016. Laos and Myanmar had been admitted to ASEAN together in 1997. In her capacity as State Counsellor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has visited Thailand and China, the two countries with which Myanmar shares the longest part of its land borders.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's ASEAN role is becoming a main pillar of her implementation of foreign policy. She made her ASEAN debut at the 49th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Laos, which was held amidst ongoing tensions over China's angry reaction to the decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague which awarded the Philippines in its case against China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Her emphasis on the importance of upholding ASEAN's rules-based principles in pursuing the ASEAN Community goals, and the solemn dignity with which she shared her own experiences of dealing with 'bullies', have established Myanmar as an actor whose voice will carry some weight in ASEAN's future deliberations. She has also met with leaders of the USA and China in ASEAN and bilateral settings, most recently at the series of ASEAN Summit and key meetings with Dialogue Partners held in Vientiane, 6–8 September 2016. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi attended these ASEAN Summits in her capacity as State Counsellor, representing the government of Myanmar. Her nuanced balancing of relations with the USA and China indicates that Myanmar will use both bilateral and the ASEAN platforms in managing relations with major powers.

How will Myanmar's ASEAN and international roles affect and achieve synergies with moving forward the political and social transitions in the country? It is still too early to say with certainty how tensions can be resolved between the military leadership, the opposition USDP, ethnic ceasefire groups, and the emerging institutions of democracy. The NLD government has been taking steps to establish proper mechanisms for continued political dialogue with ceasefire groups. Similar talks are underway with the business community and civil society.

Active participation in ASEAN and in other regional and international forums requires a certain linking or alignment of domestic priorities and plans with regional or international commitments. Achieving domestic consensus presents a challenge different from that of accomplishing a consensus outcome at the ASEAN level. However, the two processes are linked,

¹² Aung San Suu Kyi (2016, May 9). 'Way back in 1947, my father talked about the possibility of such an Association' [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgA2YBP7gU8>

The video file is a news report by RFA Burmese on the question and answer segment of the Joint Press Briefing by the Foreign Ministers of Myanmar and Thailand, on the occasion of the Thai Foreign Minister's visit to Myanmar, 9 May 2016. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's mention of her father's vision appears at 0:14.

especially as regards identifying issues of common interest where stakeholders can work together.

As to how ASEAN – collectively as well as its individual members – may exercise ‘soft power’ to help Myanmar build capacities for change, there are some emerging indicators. The new government in Myanmar has signalled its willingness to work with the UN and other interested ASEAN Dialogue Partners, where relevant, in collaborative partnerships for the country’s transition process. An example can be found in the recent formation of the high-level commission – to be chaired by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan – to deal with the human rights situation in Rakhine State. The respective peace and reconciliation experiences of ASEAN countries like Indonesia and the Philippines can also serve as inputs to this process, whether bilaterally or through the offices of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation.

Moreover, employing the same kind of consultative mechanism among local stakeholders and international partners that assisted the post-Nargis recovery, Myanmar’s new ASEAN policy can open up further opportunities for building capacities for change, through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration or in strategic areas where ASEAN countries can be of assistance – like economic reforms, social development (education, rural development and poverty reduction, health), building human capacities, and strengthening institutions.

The legacy of Myanmar’s ASEAN policy will live on as the catalyst for the process of opening up and creating a brighter, more sustainable future for the people of Myanmar. Learning from past experiences, new directions and initiatives can help to rally different groups in the country and the region together around the common objective of helping Myanmar to move forward in a meaningful and constructive way towards national reconciliation and political transition. This, of course, must be premised on the commitment of all parties and partners concerned.

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