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ASEAN and Burma/Myanmar: Past and Prologue

The political awakening of Burma/Myanmar is one of the most important, and positive, developments in South-east Asian and global affairs. One of the major stakeholders in Burma/Myanmar's path to political and economic reform is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the region's premier cooperative regional institution. What role has ASEAN played – and what role can it play in the future – in promoting the return of Burma/Myanmar to the international community?¹

ASEAN's "Constructive Engagement" Policy: 1988– 1998

It is fair to say that ASEAN has had a mixed record when it comes to promoting change in Burma/Myanmar. Its policy on Burma/Myanmar has evolved through three stages. The first was its policy of "Constructive Engagement," which lasted from 1988 to 1998. During this phase, ASEAN's approach was governed by a strict adherence to its non-interference doctrine. Yet, much of the so-called engagement was economic dealings by individual ASEAN members with the government in Burma/Myanmar. Political persuasion and dialogue to promote political change was hardly evident, at least publicly. Some differences did surface within ASEAN about the merits, especially when it came to offering full membership to Burma/Myanmar in ASEAN, but ASEAN went ahead and admitted Burma/Myanmar in 1997. Growing Chinese influence was cited as the main rationale for admitting

Burma/Myanmar over Western objections. However, whether the policy really yielded dividends can be debated. When opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 1995, ASEAN ministers promptly credited the constructive engagement policy for her release. But Suu Kyi herself remarked:

The question is: for whom has it been constructive? Was it constructive for the forces of democracy? Was it constructive for the Burmese people in general? Was it constructive for a limited business community? Or was it constructive for SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council]?²

The Asian Financial Crisis and "Flexible Engagement": 1997-2008

A major turning point in ASEAN's policy towards Burma/Myanmar came in 1997 in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. The crisis led to a gradual but important shift in ASEAN's overall noninterference doctrine, not just in relation to Burma/Myanmar, but to ASEAN's overall approach to regional problem solving. A major advocate of the shift was the then Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, who became the ASEAN Secretary-General in 2008. Surin coined the term "Flexible Engagement" (partly borrowed from Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim for his idea of "Constructive Intervention," before he was ousted from power). Post-Asian financial crisis through 2008, ASEAN after some initial hesitation, did start to discuss political reforms with Burma/

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Myanmar. In 2000, on the margins of the APEC summit, the Sultan of Brunei convened a meeting of ASEAN heads of governments and proposed that ASEAN, when it meets in Singapore the following week, should discuss the Burma/Myanmar issue. In Singapore on the sidelines of the 4th ASEAN Informal Summit in November 2000, Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong set aside 30 minutes during which Burma/Myanmar's president was asked to give a progress report on his country's political situation.

The release of Aung San Suu Kyi in September 2001 led Surin to insist that "everyone has tried to disown it [his idea of flexible engagement], but it has survived."³ Suu Kyi was re-arrested less than two years later. Responding to her arrest, then ASEAN secretary-general Ong Keng Yong said, "We should let the Burma/Myanmar authorities come and use ASEAN channels to tell us what is happening." At the same time, Ong noted that "you cannot go in and tell your family member 'you cannot do this, you cannot do that.'" On June 16, 2003, ASEAN foreign ministers pressed Yangon to release Suu Kyi.

In July 2003, Malaysian leader Mahathir Mohammed warned that Burma/Myanmar could face expulsion from ASEAN if Suu Kyi was not released soon. Then, in June 2004, Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda stated that it was not ASEAN's "approach to apply sanctions in order to get results, but to continue to talk with them as part of the ASEAN family."⁴

In 2005, ASEAN faced an important test of its policy toward Yangon when Burma/Myanmar was slated to become chair of the regional grouping in 2006. Some argued that allowing Yangon to chair ASEAN in 2006 may help to spur political reform in the country. In the end, however, ASEAN succumbed to the international outcry and Burma/Myanmar did not become the ASEAN chair.

In September 2005, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak conceded that "the policy of constructive engagement has shown some dividends, but not as much as we had hoped." Nevertheless, ASEAN would not change its policy fundamentally. "I think we have to continue to pursue this and hopefully things get better ... we're still trying," said Najib. However, in March 2006, Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo stated that "we will have to distance ourselves a bit [from Burma/Myanmar] if it is not possible for them to engage us in a way which we find necessary to defend them internationally." This suggested that ASEAN was now realizing it had a serious image problem. Yeo conceded that ASEAN's efforts had little impact on Yangon, so long as China and India kept their 'gates' open to Burma/Myanmar. At the same time, he argued that "it is in our interest [that] we stay engaged with Burma/Myanmar, that our own gate to Burma/Myanmar is open."

ASEAN's response to the uprising against the Burmese military junta by Buddhist monks in August-September 2007 (the Saffron Uprising) was more radical in tone. A

statement issued by the grouping's Foreign Ministers at the UN headquarters in New York "expressed their revulsion ... over reports that the demonstrations in Burma/Myanmar are being suppressed by violent force and that there has been a number of fatalities." The statement "strongly urged Burma/Myanmar to exercise utmost restraint and seek a political solution." Moreover, the Foreign Ministers "called upon Burma/Myanmar to resume its efforts at national reconciliation with all parties concerned, and work towards a peaceful transition to democracy."⁵ However, there was no threat of sanctions or call for the suspension of Burma/Myanmar from ASEAN membership.

Putting "Flexible Engagement" into Practice: 2008–Present

The third phase in ASEAN's policy towards Burma/Myanmar was triggered by a natural calamity – Cyclone Nargis – a devastating storm that struck the Ayeyawaddy Delta and southern Yangon district in May 2008. The Burma/Myanmar government initially refused to accept international aid because of the potential impact a large-scale foreign presence might have on its domestic political situation. In response, some Western countries, notably France, called for forcible "humanitarian" intervention but ASEAN rejected this call. As George Yeo, who was then the Chair of ASEAN Standing Committee put it, "it doesn't make sense for us to work on the basis of forcing aid on Burma/Myanmar because that would bring unnecessary complications and will lead to more suffering for the Burma/Myanmar people."

In the end, ASEAN offered to act as a conduit for international aid, an offer that was acceptable to both Burma/Myanmar and the international community. A key role in shaping this policy and carrying it out was played by the newly anointed ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan, who saw a chance to put his "flexible engagement" doctrine into practice. As he would later put it, during the operation, ASEAN was "baptized – not by fire, but by a cyclone."⁶

Assessing ASEAN's Burma/Myanmar Policy Shift

Why did ASEAN shift its policy towards Burma/Myanmar from what critics saw as willful indifference under the policy of "constructive engagement" to voicing concerns and talking to the regime about the need for political reforms? There are three main reasons behind ASEAN's shift: 1) the Burma/Myanmar policy was costing ASEAN dearly in terms of its international image; 2) frustration with the slow pace of reform in Burma/Myanmar; 3) growing Chinese influence in the country despite Burma/Myanmar's membership in ASEAN. A fourth factor could be the attitude of the new democratic government in Indonesia which supported political reform in Burma/Myanmar and was not shy to talk openly about it.

A good deal has changed in Burma/Myanmar in the past two years, although it can hardly be called a dem-

ocratic revolution as yet. The government oversaw the adoption of a new constitution whose drafting was boycotted by the main opposition National League for Democracy, and which would preserve a significant role for the military in the government, including a virtual monopoly over top government positions and guaranteed representation in the legislature. But subsequent events, which saw the release of Aung San Kyi, dialogues between her and the Burma/Myanmar President Thein Sein, release of a large number of political prisoners, and Suu Kyi and her party's overwhelming triumph in the April 2012 by election, are hopeful developments towards a significant turning point for Burma/Myanmar.

Overall, ASEAN should take some, but not too much credit for the recent reforms in Burma/Myanmar. Since the early 2000s, after realizing the failure and reputation costs resulting from its "constructive engagement" policy, ASEAN gradually came to encourage Burma/Myanmar to step up reform. In ASEAN, Burma/Myanmar has had a framework for defining and pursuing its foreign policy which is an alternative to either self-destructive isolationism or an unsavory dependence on China. But while one should not dismiss ASEAN's role in shaping Burma/Myanmar's foreign policy choices, it is hard to prove that ASEAN has had a major impact in shaping Burma/Myanmar's domestic developments. Why the reforms in Burma/Myanmar are happening now is a matter of continuing speculation and debate. Some argue that sanctions played a role. There is some truth to this theory, but ASEAN can hardly take credit since it had opposed sanctions. The reforms in Burma/Myanmar are being largely driven by domestic calculations and factors. A sense of growing frustration with the status quo, a desire for positive change among the Burma/Myanmar elite, including sections within the armed forces to break the country's isolation and catch up with its neighbors and the world at large, and the personal image and approach of the current president are all factors. A real reason behind reforms could also be a calculated sense of regime security on the part of the military, which felt it could afford to step back a bit after having enacted a constitution that entrenches its hold on power for the long term. But relying on a new constitutional framework to legitimize continued military dominance can also have long-term unintended consequences, which may well put Burma/Myanmar on the path to genuine transformation.

Now that reforms are underway, ASEAN stands to make a real contribution to the democratization of Burma/Myanmar and its return to the international community. As a long-standing regional body, ASEAN gives the reformists in Burma/Myanmar vital diplomatic cover with which to reorient Yangon's domestic and foreign policy. ASEAN's policy towards Burma/Myanmar should have the following objectives:

1. Keep Burma/Myanmar on track with reform and ensure that there will be no backsliding through a combination of vigilance, persuasion, and diplomatic

efforts.

2. Ensure that Burma/Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2014 is successful and enhances the country's reformist credentials.
3. Promote democracy and human rights in the region as a whole so that Southeast Asia does not have another situation like Burma/Myanmar's long brush with military rule.
4. Lobby for the right kind of international assistance to Burma/Myanmar which promotes sustainable development without turning it into an aid-dependent nation. In this respect, helping with capacity building to absorb and utilize aid would be especially crucial.

In the past, ASEAN's "constructive engagement" policy helped legitimize the country's dictatorship. One can only hope that ASEAN's role now would help to legitimize Burma/Myanmar's reformists and put the country firmly on the path to democratic transformation.

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1. Background material including many of the quotes used in this article can be found in Amitav Acharya, *Constructing A Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2009).
2. 'Aung San Suu Kyi questions ASEAN's stance', *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 31 July 1995.
3. Author's interview with Surin Pitsuwan, Singapore, 27 September 2001.
4. *The Jakarta Post*, 29 June 2004.
5. "Southeast Asian Nations Express 'Revulsion' at Burma/Myanmar's Violent Repression of Demonstrations," Ottawa, Canada, 27 September 2007, available at http://www.indonesia-ottawa.org/information/details.php?type=news_copy&id=4765.
6. "Message from ASEAN Secretary-General," in Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Moe Thuzer, eds. *Burma/Myanmar: Life After Nargis* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), vii.

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