

# Dealing With Myanmar

## A Unity of Divided Interests

Xiaolin Guo

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June 2008



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# Dealing with Myanmar: A Unity of Divided Interests\*

Xiaolin Guo

As the world was holding its breath in anticipation of the upcoming national referendum on the draft constitution in Myanmar (scheduled on May 10, 2008), a powerful tropical storm by the name of Nargis swept across the southern part of the country, submerging much of the Ayeyarwardy Delta and ravaging coastal Yangon. The force of nature not only devastated the lives of many people as a vast expanse of farmland became inundated and millions of houses were flattened, but the cyclone also produced in its aftermath fresh ripples in international relations. As the death toll climbed and the scale of devastation continued to unfold, international media attention quickly focused on humanitarian aid to the country. Speculation arose about whether the military government would accept international relief, and whether the referendum would be put on hold in the wake of the natural disaster.<sup>1</sup> U.S. President George Bush offered to send naval units to help with relief, and pledged to do more “if the ruling generals opened the door to the US.”<sup>2</sup> Notably slow in response, the military government nevertheless announced that international aid would be welcome.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by international pressure on Myanmar to lift visa requirements for

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\* This paper was prepared for presentation at the Xiamen University International Academic Seminar “Interactions between Southeast Asia and China at the Turn of the 21st Century: With Special Reference to Myanmar,” May 26-27, 2008.

<sup>1</sup> “Burma under pressure to let outside world help after cyclone kills hundreds,” *The Independent*, May 5, 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burma-under-pressure-to-let-outside-world-help-after-cyclone-kills-hundreds-821130.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> “US navy stands by with Burma aid,” *Financial Times*, May 6, 2008 <[http://www.ft.com/cms/s/53bfe2ba-1b96-11dd-9e58-0000779fd2ac,Authorised=false.html?\\_i\\_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2Fo%2F53bfe2ba-1b96-11dd-9e58-0000779fd2ac.html&\\_i\\_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fworld%2Fasiapacific](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/53bfe2ba-1b96-11dd-9e58-0000779fd2ac,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2Fo%2F53bfe2ba-1b96-11dd-9e58-0000779fd2ac.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fworld%2Fasiapacific)>.

<sup>3</sup> “Burma disaster: the wind of change,” *The Independent*, May 6, 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/burma-disaster-the-wind-of-change-821590.html>>.

NGOs and foreign aid workers.<sup>4</sup> The French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner championed a UN resolution “compelling Burma to accept outside aid”; the move was opposed by two members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China.<sup>5</sup>

While declaring the two divisions of Yangon and Ayeyarwardy as disaster zones, the military government was determined to press ahead with the national referendum as scheduled, with the exception of postponing it for two weeks in the worst hit townships.<sup>6</sup> Western governments and the UN agencies stressed the priority of humanitarian aid, thereby inadvertently generating media headlines implying that the UN had actually urged the Myanmar authorities to delay the upcoming referendum.<sup>7</sup> Against the backdrop of a natural disaster and international relief, political interference resurfaced,<sup>8</sup> except that, this time, Asian countries remained conspicuously silent amid the widespread criticism of the military government in the international media. Among the first to pledge and deliver relief aid were the neighboring countries, namely, Thailand, China, India, and Bangladesh, followed by Singapore, Indonesia, and several European countries. In contrast to many incidents that had previously drawn international attention, no ASEAN government came forth to criticize the government of Myanmar—neither for the tardiness of its relief effort, nor for deciding to

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<sup>4</sup> “Aid agencies face battle to reach victims of the cyclone,” *The Independence*, May 7, 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/aid-agencies-face-battle-to-reach-victims-of-the-cyclone-822139.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> “World wrestles with Burma aid issue,” *BBC News*, May 9, 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7392662.stm>>.

<sup>6</sup> “Miandian xuanbu jiang ruqi juxing xinxianfa cao’an quanmin gongjue” [Myanmar announces it will hold national referendum on draft constitution as scheduled], *Xinhua*, May 6, 2008 <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-05/06/content\\_8116849.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-05/06/content_8116849.htm)>.

<sup>7</sup> “Aid agencies face battle to reach victims of the cyclone,” *The Independence*, May 7, 2008 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/aid-agencies-face-battle-to-reach-victims-of-the-cyclone-822139.html>>; “UN urges Burma to delay referendum,” *Financial Times*, May 8, 2008 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/441854dc-1cd1-11dd-82ae-000077b07658.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of culture of intervention, see Xiaolin Guo, “The Myanmar/Burma Impasse and Practice of Intervention,” In Xiaolin Guo, ed., *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2008), pp. 9-33.

proceed with the national referendum on the country's constitution.<sup>9</sup> On May 10, the referendum went ahead seemingly unhindered with the world watching in disbelief (if not dismay) as the international community continued to wrangle over relief efforts in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

The natural disaster and the subsequent issue of disaster relief created a forum for a renewed analysis of international relations vis-à-vis Myanmar, a persistent point of contention since the country's last general election in 1990. Over the past two decades, the world has seen the military government become increasingly isolated, and there has been much suffering on the part of the people of Myanmar; this is, in part, a consequence of sanctions imposed by Western governments.<sup>10</sup> As far as wishing for political change in Myanmar is concerned, the international community seems united, but in regard to how change should be pursued and embraced, views are divided. This paper seeks to address differences in international reactions to the political situation in Myanmar and the conditions underlying these differences. Generally speaking, there is a sharp contrast between the West (i.e. U.S. and EU) and Asian countries (China and ASEAN). The divide is underpinned by geography and ideology, and has duly resulted in differences in policy-making toward Myanmar by the actors inside and outside the region. These differences have, in turn, complicated international efforts in matters of supporting the democratic movement in Myanmar and offering humanitarian aid.

### **Views Apart**

What has been characterized as the "Saffron Revolution," witnessed in the cities of Myanmar in August-September 2007, attracted huge international media attention. In response to the suppression of the public protests by the military government, the U.S. and EU issued a strong condemnation together with a new round of sanctions. The policy of sanctions—which has been in place since the military regained control of the country in the wake

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<sup>9</sup> Indonesia had voiced strong criticism of Myanmar's draft constitution earlier, but refrained from putting any pressure on Myanmar during the post-cyclone relief.

"Myanmar welcomes international assistance for cyclone victims," *Xinhua*, May 10, 2008 <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/10/content\\_8138670.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/10/content_8138670.htm)>.

<sup>10</sup> This is a point of contention. Whereas research has repeatedly shown that sanctions are ineffective in bringing down the military government and exert a negative impact on the population, many politicians have yet to be convinced.

of the 1990 election—is pursued with bipartisan backing by the U.S. government and favored by a majority of EU member states. It is a matter of principle—albeit applied selectively—for democratic countries to deal with an undemocratically elected and hence illegitimate government. In line with this principle, the military currently ruling the Union of Myanmar is branded one of the world’s “outposts of tyranny,” and is accordingly subject to political isolation and economic sanctions.<sup>11</sup> When the military announced that it would hold a national referendum on a draft constitution in May 2008 and general elections in 2010, Western governments and media reacted with resolute dismissal, calling the move “little more than a sham to allow the junta to retain power.”<sup>12</sup>

To the same events of public protests on the streets of Yangon in 2007 which were suppressed by the military government, China reacted differently. In its initial reaction, the Chinese government called on relevant parties in Myanmar to exercise restraint and properly handle the problem, so as not to let tensions escalate.<sup>13</sup> In attempting to reassure the international community, China insisted that the situation in Myanmar posed no threat to international or regional peace and security; deflecting international interference, China further told the international community that “the future of Myanmar lies in the hands of its own people and the Government through dialogue and consultation.”<sup>14</sup> In line with its enthusiastic support for the good offices role of the UN envoy, China “resolutely opposed” sanctions against Myanmar in the UN Security Council, and called on the international community to play a *constructive* role to facilitate national conciliation and democratic development in the country.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the Western

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<sup>11</sup> For more on sanction as a principle, 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. 67-71.

<sup>12</sup> “Myanmar junta to hold elections in 2010,” *Financial Times*, February 10, 2008, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/7de93582-d73a-11dc-b09c-0000779fd2ac.html>> accessed 2008-02-10.

<sup>13</sup> “China urges restraint from all parties in Myanmar,” *People’s Daily*, October 3, 2007 <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/6276346.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> “Situation in Myanmar poses no treat to peace, security: China says,” *People’s Daily*, October 6, 2007 <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/6277263.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> “China opposes sanctions against Myanmar,” *Xinhua*, October 9, 2007 <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/09/content\\_6161204.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/09/content_6161204.htm)>; “Lianheguo anlihui tongguo Miandian wenti zhuxi shengming [UN Security Council passes



reaction, China welcomed the announcement by the military government to hold a referendum on the draft constitution, calling the development “a significant step toward a transition of state power from military to civil government.”<sup>16</sup>

Like China, ASEAN fully supported the good offices role of the UN envoy in the aftermath of the “Saffron Revolution.” Like China, ASEAN has dealt with the military government through “constructive engagement,” which entails, by and large, quiet diplomacy. Furthermore, like China, ASEAN has opposed sanctions against Myanmar, while steadily expanding economic cooperation with the country. On many occasions, however, ASEAN has openly voiced criticism—mild or harsh—of the military government, whenever the issue of Myanmar has come under the spotlight of international affairs. Over the issue of the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi imposed by the military government (following the Depayin incident in 2003 in which pro-democracy activists clashed with pro-government elements), a proposal was raised within ASEAN to expel Myanmar from the regional organization. After the U.S. government labeled Myanmar an “outpost of tyranny” in 2005, ASEAN member states—yielding to the demand by the U.S. and EU—exerted pressure upon Myanmar and effectively left its government with no choice but to surrender its ASEAN chairmanship in 2006. At the APEC meeting in 2005, a proposal to have the UN Security Council discuss the issue of Myanmar was put forward among ASEAN members. The harshest criticism from ASEAN to date was its Chairman’s statement issued on September 27, 2007, in reaction to the military crackdown on the public protests in Yangon and other cities.<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding all that, whatever statement is issued in the name of ASEAN, a united front often appears hard to come by.

The policy of the U.S. and EU toward Myanmar has a clear ideological base, whereas regional actors like ASEAN and China are more preoccupied with

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Chairman’s statement on Myanmar], *Xinhua*, October 12, 2007

<[http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/12/content\\_6869033.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/12/content_6869033.htm)>.

<sup>16</sup> “Myanmar to hold national referendum in May and general election in 2010,” *People’s Daily*, February 10, 2008,

<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90777/90851/6352588.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Haacke, “ASEAN and the Situation in Myanmar/Burma,” in Xiaolin Guo, ed., *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives*, pp. 134–39.

concerns of a more substantial nature, namely, domestic development and national security, in their policy-making vis-à-vis Myanmar. Political isolation combined with economic sanctions, as pursued by the West, and constructive engagement in tandem with economic cooperation as practiced by Asian countries, underscore the differences in dealing with the military regime, giving the impression that the Asian countries back the regime. Cultural elements of international politics seldom enter the public debate. For both China and ASEAN, Myanmar is first and foremost a neighbor, and in handling the country's problems, they invariably subscribe to the Asian norm of not interfering in the domestic affairs of another country. This policy-making framework differs markedly from the European pro-intervention tradition with its roots in the missionary practice that believes firmly in doing "good deeds" in distant countries and always aspires to hold the moral high ground in international affairs. Neither the European nor the Asian approach, however, can be called altruist. One can only say that the interests of one differ tremendously from that of the other. The clash of interests between the international and regional actors has largely made coordinated efforts impossible. Alignment of divided interests for the sake of achieving a common goal (if there is one) relies on understanding not just problems in Myanmar, but also what solutions to these problems mean to the relevant parties.

### **Culture and Politics**

Many foreign observers of China affairs are fascinated by the Chinese expression *guanxi* (often being translated into English as "relations" or "relationship," sometimes "connections"), a term that became popular in English writings about China at the start of China's economic reforms launched at the end of the 1970s. As a characterization of social relations, *guanxi* drew attention because it represents, in a sense, a discursive regime shift separating Deng's China—opting to practice a market economy—from Mao's China, which is associated with orthodox socialism. In China studies, *guanxi* is a vogue word, sometimes used with economic connotations (as in business sectors), whereas at other times, it is seen as possessing political dimensions (i.e. with reference to the function of government from the

highest to the lowest level).<sup>18</sup> While there has been considerable theorizing of the terminology and associated phenomena, very few users of the term seem to have really grasped the essence of *guanxi* in a Chinese context, which is often unarticulated. The ways China and ASEAN deal with Myanmar, discussed in this paper, show different norms of “relationship.” The difference, needless to say, interacts with and complicates international relations.

*Paukphaw* is a term used to speak of a special kind of relationship, characteristic of traditional relations between China and Myanmar. It means “brotherhood” and refers to people of common origin living on the two sides of the national border: Yunnan in the east and northeastern highland Myanmar in the west. The history of cross-border relations is a troubled one, with the imperial rule of China (over a succession of dynasties) having repeatedly advanced and retreated in the region. Modern times have continued to witness ups and downs in cross-border relations.<sup>19</sup> The democratic Union of Burma was among the first non-socialist countries to recognize the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after 1949, and this made it possible to smoothly and promptly settle many outstanding border disputes between the two countries after the founding of the PRC. The Burmese Way to Socialism under the rule of Ne Win in the 1960s clashed with Chinese socialism based on the Chinese Communist Party’s interpretation of Marxism. Consequently, the ruling political parties of the PRC and the Union of Burma found themselves literally at war with each other. During the ideological conflict, the *paukphaw* helped mobilize resistance forces on the border; after the war ended, the *paukphaw* reshaped the political landscape on the border. The current economic development in Yunnan (as part of China’s plan to develop its western region) and across the border in

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<sup>18</sup> A pioneer study of *guanxi* is Mayfair Yang’s book entitled: *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relations in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). For a revisit to *guanxi* studies, see *Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture, and the Changing Nature of Guanxi*, edited by Thomas Gold, Doug Guthrie, and David Wank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Xiaolin Guo, *Towards Resolution: China in the Myanmar Issue*, pp. 30-49.

Myanmar's northeastern borderlands has again come to highlight the usefulness of *paukphaw*.<sup>20</sup>

Given the historical and existing neighborly relationship between the two countries, China does have a special role to play in regard to Myanmar. At the same time, however, because of this very special relationship, China is subject to a number of constraints in matters of influencing change in Myanmar, and such constraints remain insufficiently understood in international politics. In the wake of the "Saffron Revolution," voices were heard calling for China to play a bigger role in finding a solution to the standoff in Myanmar. Some perceived silence and inaction on the part of the Chinese government as endorsement of the behavior of the military rulers in Myanmar, and advocated sanctions on China to pressure its government into bringing about change in Myanmar. Others, equally frustrated, cited the example of the Six-Party Talks that facilitated dialogue regarding the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, hoping China could do the same in Myanmar. In either case, the capacity of China to push for political change in Myanmar has been grossly exaggerated.

In dealing with Myanmar, China is consistent in conforming to its existing framework for the management of foreign relations—that is, adhering to the Five Principles of Co-existence formulated in the 1950s and reaffirmed in the 1980s, benefiting directly the normalization of bilateral relations between the PRC and the Union of Myanmar in those two politically volatile periods. There have been suggestions that China's constraints in dealing with Myanmar rest in four general areas: the troubled history between the two countries; China's on-going domestic development that relies on natural resources from Myanmar; the status quo of border security; and the impact of democratization in Myanmar on China itself.<sup>21</sup> The last point clearly has an ideological bearing and is understandably perceived as a given by Western observers. The Chinese may, however, see it differently. The disagreement

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<sup>20</sup> See Martin Smith, "Ethnic Challenges and Border Politics in Myanmar/Burma," in Xiaolin Guo, ed., *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives*, pp. 37-63.

<sup>21</sup> "China faces a tricky balancing act in Burma," *Financial Times*, October 17, 2007 <[http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/9ef6773a-7cb8-11dc-ae20000779fd2ac,dwp\\_uuid=6a365390-7032-11dc-a6d1-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/9ef6773a-7cb8-11dc-ae20000779fd2ac,dwp_uuid=6a365390-7032-11dc-a6d1-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick_check=1)>.

lies with an understanding of the nature of China-Myanmar relations—present and future—that are based on geopolitics rather than ideology.

China shares a 2,000-kilometer border with Myanmar, and Myanmar holds the key passage for China to reach the Indian Ocean. For economic development and national security, the position of Myanmar is crucial.<sup>22</sup> Naturally, such importance determines China's policy toward Myanmar. "A friendly neighbor" is how China repeatedly refers to Myanmar. By being "a friendly neighbor" itself, China refrains from interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar. The political struggle between the military government and the opposition NLD (National League for Democracy) is regarded by the Chinese government as an internal affair. By virtue of being on its doorstep, the Chinese government is compelled to do what it can to deflect international interference in Myanmar. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has come to Myanmar's rescue on a number of occasions, by repeatedly opposing motions to put the issue of Myanmar under the purview of the UN Security Council. Most recently, China's action (together with Russia) succeeded in blocking an attempt to seek a UN resolution compelling Myanmar to yield to international pressure and open up to foreign aid before the scheduled national referendum.<sup>23</sup> Last but not least, China remains crucial for maintaining the currently still fragile peace on Myanmar's northeastern border. Therefore, as argued by some Chinese scholars, political change in Myanmar and ideological differences between China and Myanmar are unlikely to have any significant impact on cross-border relations in the given "friendly neighbor" framework.<sup>24</sup>

By and large, the "friendly neighbor" relationship between China and Myanmar is *reciprocal* and befitting of the *paukphaw* characterization. In maintaining this relationship, the size of either country does not really make a difference. For that reason, Chinese scholars reject the patron-client analogy of China-Myanmar relations.<sup>25</sup> The nature of China-Myanmar

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<sup>22</sup> Chenyang Li, "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*, pp. 107-128.

<sup>23</sup> "World wrestles with Burma aid issue," BBC News, May 9, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Chenyang Li, "Myanmar/Burma's Political Development and China-Myanmar Relations in the aftermath of the 'Saffron Revolution'".

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

relations largely bespeaks the limited capacity of China to effect political change in Myanmar. Likewise, there is little that China can do to prevent political change from taking place in Myanmar.

The relationship between ASEAN and Myanmar is different, and may be best described as *symbiotic*. As a regional organization created to promote regional identity, security, and economic cooperation, ASEAN is united by common as well as divided interests. In dealing with Myanmar, ASEAN has been “walking on two legs”—seeking to influence political change in the country on the one leg, and maintaining economic cooperation with the country on the other. This situation underlines the dilemma of ASEAN in keeping a balance between international politics of interference and its principles of non-interference signed by all member states, and, secondly, balancing its economic dependence on the West with its responsibilities to the region and the regional organization. ASEAN may have taken a brave step to accept Myanmar as a member in 1997, despite strong opposition from the U.S. and EU. But the ensuing financial crisis that wrecked the Southeast Asian economy made ASEAN vulnerable to Western pressures, as the organization found itself accepting financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund with conditions attached to promote democracy and human rights.<sup>26</sup> As some have perceptively observed, Myanmar has over the years been made into a test case by Western governments (in particular, the U.S.) to see how far Southeast Asia will comply with Western values in international diplomacy.<sup>27</sup>

A further difficulty in ASEAN’s relationship with Myanmar lies in the perception by ASEAN of the influence exerted by other regional actors like China and India, both countries having special historical relationships with Myanmar and currently possessing considerable economic power. Competition for influence in the region has motivated ASEAN’s determination to keep Myanmar within the organization, notwithstanding voices occasionally heard calling for Myanmar’s expulsion. This very factor also obliges ASEAN to lean on Western powers. The pressure from the

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<sup>26</sup> Jianwen Qu, “ASEAN’s Policy to Myanmar/Burma: Changes, Reasons, and Tendencies,” in Xiaolin Guo, ed., *Myanmar/Burma: Challenges and Perspectives*, pp. 168-169.

<sup>27</sup> Haacke, “ASEAN and the Situation in Myanmar/Burma,” p. 133.

West on how to handle regional affairs is increasingly testing the viability of the organizational principles of ASEAN and its credibility as a regional organization. The predicament of ASEAN may be seen in the following: its viability hinges on the cohesion of the regional organization, but its susceptibility to pressure from outside the region remains a main source of internal tension. Because of this predicament, ASEAN is seen sometimes acting as a shield, and at other times a transmitter. The shift back and forth impinges upon the vitality of ASEAN as a regional organization.

In the eyes of the West, ASEAN has always been perceived as too weak in dealing with Myanmar, namely for not being able to exert a positive influence on the military government in accelerating political transition. The weight of expectation upon ASEAN to align itself with Western interests in handling the Myanmar issue seems unreasonable, given that Myanmar is part of the ASEAN collective, and its interests ought to be protected by the regional organization, in the same way as it protects other members. As far as understanding the relationship between ASEAN and Myanmar is concerned, one may indeed draw an analogy between ASEAN as a regional organization and a village: it is essentially a closed community, inside which each component (household) manages its own affairs. The village leadership is rotated on a fixed office term, responsible for the overall welfare of the community; the community draws up its own charter (or covenant) that prescribes rights and duties of all members. As much as the village community expects the individual members to respect the commons and observe the rules, the individuals can count on the collective body to protect them from any external infringements. This village community analogy generalizes the essence of a *symbiotic* relationship. The function and wellbeing of the collective body are built and exercised according to the principle of non-interference. When this community function is undermined, cracks within may appear.

ASEAN is known to be fraught with internal conflict. However, it cannot be said that ASEAN is not united by default. Its member states are united as far as fundamental concerns in regard to regional development are concerned; otherwise, a regional organization like this could not have existed in the first place. The weakness of ASEAN is largely due to its internal tension caused, in turn, by external pressure under which ASEAN must adopt a policy (in

dealing with Myanmar, for instance) contradictory to the fundamental principle of the regional organization. Ever since the current ASEAN Chairman sought to elevate the importance of the UN while highlighting the roles of China and India in finding solutions to the Myanmar problems in the aftermath of the “Saffron Revolution,”<sup>28</sup> the role of ASEAN in talk about influencing political change in Myanmar would appear to be dwindling.<sup>29</sup> It is not that ASEAN is not important, but rather that the regional organization does not seem to carry much political weight in international politics at the present moment. The role of ASEAN was tested again in the post-cyclone relief effort. Although the member states distinctly refrained from the kind of criticism that Western governments openly voiced over the Myanmar government’s mismanagement of disaster relief, ASEAN seemed not to engage in any proactive action to take the lead in the relief efforts until China had rebuffed Western attempts to raise the plight of 1.5 million victims of Cyclone Nargis at the United Nations Security Council.<sup>30</sup>

Because of the priority put on regional stability and economic development, the symbiotic relationship is likely to remain the foundation of ASEAN’s policy toward Myanmar, which is based primarily on non-interference and quiet diplomacy.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, however, external forces—ASEAN’s relations with other regional powers (in particular, India and China) and separately with the U.S. and EU, and interaction between these external forces—will inevitably serve to add unpredictable elements to ASEAN policy toward Myanmar in the future.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-148.

<sup>29</sup> At the conference “Between Isolation and Internationalization: The State of Burma” held at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm, May 8-9, 2008, a participant from one of the ASEAN states raised the matter of the “less talked about” role of ASEAN vis-à-vis Myanmar.

<sup>30</sup> “Asian nations join in Burma ‘mercy coalition,’” *Financial Times*, May 13, 2008 <[http://www.ft.com/cms/s/f4bafd1c-20dc-11dd-ae66-000077b07658,Authorised=false.html?\\_i\\_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Ff4bafd1c-20dc-11dd-ae66-000077b07658.html&\\_i\\_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fworld%2Fasiapacific](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/f4bafd1c-20dc-11dd-ae66-000077b07658,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Ff4bafd1c-20dc-11dd-ae66-000077b07658.html&_i_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fworld%2Fasiapacific)>

<sup>31</sup> Jianwen Qu, “ASEAN’s Policy to Myanmar/Burma: Changes, Reasons, and Tendencies,” p. 175.



### **Alignment of Interests**

In dealing with Myanmar today, the divide between regional and international actors is becoming increasingly salient and visibly apparent, with Western governments continuing to demand democratic change in Myanmar while keeping sanctions in place, and with a majority of Asian countries consistently opposing sanctions while upholding the non-interference principle in their policy-making vis-à-vis Myanmar. The divide may indeed be seen to have hampered international efforts, as the effect of the economic sanctions imposed by the Western governments is offset by the economic cooperation pursued by the Asian countries. Myanmar is, meanwhile, moving at a pace of its own choosing (following presumably the route laid out according to the so-called seven-step roadmap). The result of the national referendum on the draft constitution, which was announced on state television five days after votes had been cast, confirmed that the constitution had been ratified.<sup>32</sup> This result was hardly unexpected. But how the West will deal with the situation henceforth, in order to have a role in political change in Myanmar, is no small challenge. This is especially the case as ranging from the name of the country to the draft constitution, the West has so far chosen to either reject or put a negative spin on any changes initiated by the military government.

The battle over values was repeated during the post-cyclone relief efforts. As introduced in the beginning of this paper, the natural disaster that struck a week prior to the national referendum on the country's draft constitution became highly politicized by both the military government of Myanmar and the West (the international media, the U.S., and some of the European governments).<sup>33</sup> The former, highly paranoid and deeply suspicious, chose to block the entry of international aid workers, presumably as self-protection from what it had perceived as Western interference in the upcoming national referendum on the country's constitution; the latter directed sharp criticism at the military government for being slow to respond and obstructing relief efforts, while demanding a waiver of visa requirements for international aid workers. As a consequence of action on both sides, the relief effort was

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<sup>32</sup> "Myanmar new constitution ratified," *Xinhua*, May 15, 2008

<[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/15/content\\_8176920.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/15/content_8176920.htm)>.

<sup>33</sup> See also "After cyclone Nargis: the politics of humanitarian relief," May 7, 2008 <<http://networkmyanmar.org/images//nb.pdf>>.

seriously hampered. On the part of the international community (except for the neighboring countries of Myanmar), the weakness of the state—in terms of bureaucratic function at all levels—under the command of the military government has been grossly overlooked. This reality in Myanmar is a serious matter, to which talk of moral values hardly presents a solution; nor can the problem be solved by the politicizing of the kind engaged in by the international media in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. Understandably, Western governments are disinclined to work with the military government for good reasons, but without cooperation from the body that controls all resources in the country and functions—however ironic this may sound—far more effectively than any other alternative body present, even efforts such as humanitarian aid cannot be carried out in any effective manner.

Politicizing post-cyclone relief is part of the commonly seen ideological spin, consistent with policy-making in the West. Like the policy of political isolation and economic sanctions, bearing an overtone of moral superiority, the politicizing of post-cyclone relief is ultimately a reflection of the self-righteous attitude toward whatever is going on in the world, largely perceived in terms of “us” versus “them.” Policy-making influenced by such simplistic perceptions of the world in binary underscored by a self-assured moral superiority inevitably favors imposition of sanctions as a tool in managing international relations, as has been repeatedly shown in the case of Myanmar. Such a radical approach is seldom about “them” out there in Myanmar, but largely about “us” over here in the West. Calls for “taking a tough look at scrapping Burma sanctions” by one long-time observer of international affairs and Myanmar issues reminds us how “our” values—in other words, “feeling good”—are upheld at the expense of the reality faced by others in their day-to-day struggle to make ends meet.<sup>34</sup>

Imposing sanctions as a principle of policy-making is problematic. Because of the high moral ground underpinning the policy, it is difficult for anyone to speak against it, or admit the failure of it; it is equally difficult for the one who imposes sanctions to lift them without “losing face” (or to be perceived as sacrificing one’s principles). This is a self-imposed dilemma, and resolving

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<sup>34</sup> See Derek Tonkin, “Take a tough look at scrapping Burma sanctions,” *Financial Times*, May 13, 2008 <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/o/7e4acffo-2086-11dd-80b4-000077bo7658.html>>.

it requires a new vision of world politics. Presently, one can hardly dispute that ideology plays a major role in Western policy-making and has turned the management of complex international relations into decisions revolving around single issues (be they “human rights” or “democracy”). Because of such ideologically charged objectives, policy adjustment has been almost impossible, despite the prolonged standoff in Myanmar. In the current play of international politics revolving around Myanmar, we are witnessing a kind of radicalism, the presence of which very few care to admit. Thinking “outside the box,” one is tempted to invoke a celebrated essay written by the Chinese philosopher and liberal thinker Hu Shi, some 90 years ago, entitled: “Study More Problems, Talk Less of Isms.”<sup>35</sup> The historical parallel drawn here calls for self-reflective thinking of a kind urgently needed in the West today.

Pursuing symbolic politics may be gratifying in a moral sense, but can hardly bring any effective solutions to the actual problems on the ground. One may hope that the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, and especially the need for humanitarian aid crucial to the day-to-day lives of ordinary people in Myanmar, has come to present a window of opportunity for the West to adjust its policy. For the first time, one European country (albeit outside the EU) government voiced criticism against sanctions.<sup>36</sup> Recognition of the failure of sanctions would amount to a first step of policy adjustment in Europe. Quiet diplomacy offers solutions to various problems for the benefit of the people in Myanmar. The recent breakthrough in making the military government open up to receiving international relief aid suggests that diplomatic efforts behind the scenes yield more results than issuing condemnation alone.<sup>37</sup> The squabbling over international aid prompts a rethinking of the role of the West and how it is going to be relevant to the future political transition in Myanmar. Any effective solution to the problem of Myanmar will depend on how the international community across the

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<sup>35</sup> The criticism was directed at radical leftist intellectuals in China at the height of the May Fourth Movement in 1919. See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), pp. 304-05.

<sup>36</sup> “Norway critical of sanctions against Myanmar,” *Xinhua News*, May 16, 2008 <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/16/content\\_8187370.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/16/content_8187370.htm)>.

<sup>37</sup> “Aid breakthrough in sight for Burmese storm victims,” *The Independent*, May 19, 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/aid-breakthrough-in-sight-for-burmese-storm-victims-burma-830588.html>.

continents aligns its interests. The alignment of interests in turn needs to be based on a common understanding of the problems in Myanmar.

### Conclusion

Myanmar has been a focal point in international politics not necessarily because of what is going on inside the country as such, but rather, ironically, because it represents a point of contention between different international actors and their ideologies. Different actors across the world are interested in solutions to the political standoff in Myanmar for different reasons. By the same token, reactions to what is going on in the country differ markedly. The Asian approach to the Myanmar problem rests on bilateral relations underscoring pragmatism, not idealism. As was mentioned earlier in this paper, regional stability and economic development are the fundamental and shared concerns of China and ASEAN, and these issues remain the priority in their policy-making regarding Myanmar. The opposition to sanctions and principle of non-interference upheld by the neighboring countries are furthermore in line with the tradition shared by the Asian countries at large. In contrast to this regional style of conflict management stands the highly ideologically-charged approach favored by Western governments, revolving exclusively around the word “democracy.”

International politics is not about who is right, or who is wrong, but rather it is about whose interests matter, and whose matter more than others. Myanmar is a problem that only becomes one as the result of interaction of different forces in the arena of international politics. While the international community would seem united in its desire for positive change in Myanmar, views of how such change should be pursued are divided. Underlying the different interests of different actors are geography and ideology. China-Myanmar relations are built on the traditional *paukphaw* relationship and its *reciprocal* nature will continue to be the basis of bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries, despite the volatility of international relations. The same applies to the *symbiotic* relations between ASEAN and Myanmar. In dealing with Myanmar, in short, the approaches adopted by China and ASEAN are largely identical, albeit with minor differences. Differences between them depend essentially on how much each is willing to tolerate influences from outside the region. Since geography is a given, the

remaining variable of change is ideology. How likely is the Western ideological approach to the problem of Myanmar to change? It depends on how the West views itself, and may review itself, in a rapidly changing world. Ideology is a variable but does not have to be a determinant in all international affairs.

## About the Author

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