

## SPECIAL EVENT SUMMARY

# United States Relations with ASEAN at Thirty

*A Luncheon Discussion Program on October 25, 2007, of the East-West Center, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, and The Stanley Foundation*

### WITH:

- ◆ Prof. Catharin E. Dalpino, Georgetown University
- ◆ Ambassador K. Kesavapany, Director, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)
- ◆ Ambassador Rodolfo C. Severino, Former Secretary-General, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and currently Visiting Senior Research Fellow, ISEAS

The program featured a spirited discussion about recent developments in Southeast Asia and U.S.-ASEAN relations. The Burmese ruling junta's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators dominated the dialogue between the speakers and the audience of U.S. government officials, congressional staff, and Southeast Asia policy experts. The implications of the ASEAN Charter for regional economic integration and the outlook for the East Asian Summit (EAS) also generated questions and discussion.

One of the more discussed propositions was that while the Burmese military definitely is the problem, it also must be part of the solution because it effectively holds together a country of more than 100 ethnic groups. U.S., EU and other international pressure to end the junta risks "creating another Iraq," which remains riven by Sunni/Shia sectarian violence long after Saddam Hussein's demise. The best hope for Burma's future may be via a "middle way," which would involve incremental changes rather than a wholesale dissolution of the ruling junta. However, it could be difficult to win broad support for such an approach. Policymakers in Congress and the Bush administration likely would regard efforts to forge a "middle way" as backing down. With China and India unlikely to intervene in a meaningful way, resolution of the Burma conundrum ultimately may hinge on a future Buddhist-led implosion combined with unified external pressure via the United Nations.

### BURMA AND ASEAN

- ◆ **"Cognitive Dissonance"** – There is considerable "cognitive dissonance" on the subject of the recent Burmese military crackdown, not only within the international community but also between critics (such as the United States and the EU) and the ruling junta. The terms "dialogue" and "national reconciliation" mean different things to the West and to the junta. For example, to the United States, "national reconciliation" means the election of democratic government. The junta defines "national reconciliation" as completing the constitutional drafting process and sweeping away all political opposition. This disconnect creates a zero-sum situation and impedes efforts to find a "middle way," which may involve incremental changes rather than a wholesale dissolution of the ruling junta.
- ◆ **"Do Something"** – There is considerable pressure from Congress for ASEAN to "do something" significant to sanction the Burmese junta. In fact, Congress is poised to pass legislation that would close a loophole in U.S. law that currently allows Chevron to participate in

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offshore natural gas development. Congress also may pass legislation that would sanction U.S. businesses that benefit indirectly from Burmese trade and investments. But ASEAN, as an organization, does not have many chips to play. It has no army, for example. ASEAN's statement using the word "repulsion" to describe the pro-democracy crackdown is unprecedented in its strength but does not represent a significant shift from its long-time policy of non-interference in a member's domestic affairs. U.S. critics should bear in mind that ASEAN's policy toward Burma has been and continues to evolve in meaningful ways.

- ◆ **Suspending Burma from ASEAN** – ASEAN leaders will convene their annual summit 18-22 November in Singapore to mark the 40th anniversary of ASEAN. While there is no indication that ASEAN is officially considering suspending Burma, the issue hands over the meeting. If leaders decide to suspend Burma from ASEAN, this likely would have no remedial impact on the junta; it probably will respond by moving even closer to China. Relations with ASEAN members do not mean as much to the Burmese military as relations with China. However, a decision by ASEAN not to suspend Burma could hurt the organization in the court of world opinion, including the United States, and reflect poorly on ASEAN's efforts to portray itself as a bona fide regional player in global affairs.
- ◆ **Leverage of China and India** – The leverage that China and India ostensibly have over Burma may be overstated. China and India need Burma for strategic reasons perhaps even more than Burma needs China and India for energy-related and other trade and investment revenue. China needs another sea outlet, which Burma affords. India needs Burma's help in dealing with insurgents in its northeast region, as well as the country's energy resources.

#### ASEAN CHARTER

- ◆ The ASEAN Charter, the final draft of which will be unveiled at the November summit, was crafted to serve as impetus for economic integration. Specifically, the Charter includes a detailed strategic plan that effectively locks members in to achieving certain economic reforms within an established timeline. The plan generally is aimed at improving the capacity of regional members to comply with trade and investment agreements by streamlining
- ◆ ASEAN has long had norms for inter-state behavior. The new Charter will set down for the first time norms for the behavior of states toward their citizens—human rights, democracy, rule of law and good governance. The Charter also will provide ASEAN a legalistic instrument to invoke in the future should there be evidence that a member is violating these norms.
- ◆ In addition, the draft Charter will (1) make the decision-making process in ASEAN more effective and judicious and (2) strengthen ASEAN institutionally by improving the capacity of the Secretariat and enhancing its authority. The speakers emphasized that the Charter is a "tool" for decision-making and promoting compliance with the agreed upon commitments—but it will not alter the character of ASEAN overnight.

#### OUTLOOK FOR EAST ASIAN SUMMIT (EAS)

- ◆ The speakers said it would take another two-to-three years to know whether the East Asia Summit (EAS) would develop into a viable regional institution. Currently, the regional grouping that has developed the most momentum not only as a forum for dialogue but also potentially for economic integration is the so-called ASEAN plus three arrangement, i.e., the ASEAN members plus Japan, China, and South Korea.
- ◆ There is growing discussion in Southeast Asia about the viability and effectiveness of APEC as a regional economic organization. Some experts have proposed collapsing APEC into the EAS. While that scenario would ensure a more central role for the United States in an Asian economic institution, it likely would not end up excluding the Latin American members of APEC, which would be controversial.
- ◆ The time is not ripe for United States inclusion in EAS. The entrance of the United States, given its power and scale, will have major implications for a still-nascent organization. In the meantime, though, U.S. non-governmental organizations and research organizations might begin to work with their Southeast Asian counterparts to create a positive setting for a more intensive U.S.-ASEAN dialogue.