Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

The Black Sheep of the Family: How Burma Defines its Foreign Relations with ASEAN

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Executive Summary

When Burma joined ASEAN in 1997, the military junta was attracted by the prospect of achieving some form of political legitimacy while gaining access to alternative markets to those that had been denied by Western sanctions. ASEAN, in turn, was more than happy to gain access to Burma's abundant natural resources and justified its actions through its policy of "constructive engagement". Burma had only emerged from relative isolation in the early 1990s and was experimenting with partial economic liberalization. ASEAN also hoped to offset the strategic impact that Burma's close alliance with the People's Republic of China could have in the region.

As Western pressure increased on the military junta, and on ASEAN, the Burmese generals have discovered that the original terms of their membership agreement may have changed. ASEAN appeared to redefine its principle of non-interference in the domestic politics of member states following the Depayin incident of 2003 where Aung San Suu Kyi was attacked by members of the SPDC's mass organization — the USDA. Her arrest and continued detention brought intense international pressure, and embarrassment, to bear upon ASEAN leading up to Burma's chairmanship in 2006. Despite the announcement of a Road Map to "disciplined democracy", Burma forfeited its Chair in 2005 and has since

1. Introduction

In July 2005, Burma forfeited its turn to chair ASEAN in 2006, eight years after having joined the regional organization. The move followed intense Western pressure upon ASEAN following events inside Burma in 2003, and a general failure on Burma's part to "keep its house in order" — as was promised by its leaders upon joining in 1997. Yet the move was also reflective of a possible change in ASEAN's attitude towards the handling of domestic problems among its member states. Traditionally, ASEAN has adopted a posture of non-interference in the domestic politics of its member states and indeed this attribute was an attractive option for Burma in 1997 as it sought regional alliances and legitimacy to counter the isolation imposed by the West. But as the ASEAN chairmanship rotated towards countries with more democratic agendas, or that could be more influenced by Western priorities, Burma's membership in the organization has at times become uncomfortable for Burma's generals, and embarrassing for ASEAN.

Burma has since independence in 1948 adopted a neutralist stance in foreign relations, while at the same time it attempted to balance competing interests of major powers in the strategically important region. The latter objective has required that it occasionally align itself towards one power in order to survive as an ostensibly independent nation. Indeed, it could be argued that Burma's foreign relations have been conditioned by a sense of survival since independence and that an officially non-aligned status has required a series of pragmatic short-term alliances in order to achieve survival. It is only relatively recently that Burma could be viewed as being more proactive and directional in its foreign policies, but that even here regional interest in courting the Burmese leaders has become more important because of what their neighbours view as a possibly destabilizing alliance

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2. Burma's Foreign Policy

Since independence, Burma has been ruled by a parliamentary democracy (1948-58 and 1960-62), by constitutional military rule (1974-88), and by direct military rule (1958-60, 1962-74, 1988 to the present). During the Cold War, particularly, Burma's foreign

military hardware and Burmese markets were flooded with Chinese products. China saw itself in competition with India in Southeast Asia and viewed closer relations with Burma as a means to gain road and rail access to the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Straits of Malacca for shipping its products from the interior, and to encourage foreign investment. Burma was also seen as a source of raw materials, a market for Chinese goods from Yunnan, and a means to gain access to a wider market in Southeast Asia. Burmese ports also presented China with an opportunity to develop a naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and China did not want Burma to enter into a security agreement with India.

Burma's interest in having good relations with China was fostered not only to ensure that the PRC would not return to supporting insurgents inside Burma, but also by the

3. Burma joins ASEAN

Burma's political and economic situation in the early 1990s made a partnership with ASEAN seem an attractive proposition. Facing diplomatic isolation and punitive sanctions from Western countries, Burma saw the advantages of ASEAN members having access to international funding (particularly the World Bank), a common voice in the UN, and a common posture on major policy issues and in negotiations with major powers — especially the US, EU, India and Japan. Whereas local resentment in Mandalay towards the influx of Chinese traders may have also prompted the junta's desire to find alternative markets, Burma's neighbours in ASEAN as well as India were becoming acutely aware of a potentially destabilizing problem brought about by China's increasing military and economic presence, and influence, over Burma.

In contrast to the Western approach, ASEAN justified its dealings with Burma through the principle of "constructive engagement" - first introduced by Thailand's Foreign Minister Arsa Sarasin in 1991. By promoting trade, diplomatic, and economic ties with an authoritarian regime, socioeconomic progress and the growth of a middle class would produce political liberalization. Yet the middle class in Burma was comprised of military officers and Chinese businessmen, all of whom stood to gain from maintaining the status quo. Despite the official line, most of the founding ASEAN member states also had their own reasons for engaging with Burma. Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, had strongly criticized the SLORC's forced repatriation of up to 200,000 Rohingya Muslims into neighbouring Bangladesh. Thailand, which was also dealing with disputed border problems and a Burmese refugee influx, saw Burma's natural gas supplies as a potential solution to its looming energy crisis. Both Singapore and Thailand were attracted by the SLORC's new foreign investment law and had begun to invest heavily. All were aware of Burma's abundant natural resources - timber, gems, and fishing - and source of cheap labour. Under the new SLORC regime, Burma was experimenting with a program of economic liberalization and was eager to accept foreign currency. This brought Burma closer to ASEAN's ideals and ASEAN's principle of non-interference in the domestic politics of member states was an attractive creed for the junta.

Burma attended the 1994 ASEAN meeting at the invitation of Thailand, where it declared that it would sign the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC). After releasing Aung San

engagement", which would allow member states to discuss and comment on the domestic policies of fellow members when they had cross-border implications.⁵ The move was supported by the Philippines but rejected by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore because

(b) Roadmaps

At the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) of Foreign Ministers in July 2003, in deflecting European criticism of the situation in Burma, Thailand's foreign minister, Surakiart Sathirathai, proposed the idea of a road map which would bring national reconciliation and democratic reform to Burma within three years — it was due to chair ASEAN in 2006. The foreign minister then met with his Burmese counter-part, U Win Aung, and told him that his government must come up with its own road map. The Thai road map consisted of five steps:¹¹

- 1. Release Aung San Suu Kyi from prison; free other opposition leaders from house arrest; re- open NLD headquarters and offices.
- "Confidence building": Hold an investigation into the Depayin incident; cease
 the press campaign against Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD; release all political
 prisoners; sign truces with remaining ethnic groups still fighting the tatmadaw;
 start peace talks.
- 3. Draft a constitution involving the military, pro-democracy opposition, and ethnic groups; adopt the constitution.
- 4. Transitional period before holding elections; lifting of all international sanctions against Burma.
- Hold elections overseen by independent international monitors; hold an international conference on aid for Burma.

The following month, Khin Nyunt – who had just been appointed Prime Minister – announced Burma's new seven-point Road Map for "disciplined democracy": 12

- 1. Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996.
- After the successful holding of the National Convention, step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system.
- 3. Drafting a new constitution in accordance with basic principles and detailed basic principles laid down by the National Convention.
- 4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum.
- 5. Holding of free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution.
- 6. Convening of Hluttaws attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution.
- 7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw.

A National Convention with the purpose of writing a new constitution was first proclaimed by the generals in 1992, a year before they established the USDA. Refusing to hand over power following the election loss of their National Unity Party in 1990, the generals had explained that the election was merely a signal for constitutional change and that all major parties, or at least those members not still incarcerated, would be invited to attend a convention designed for that purpose. At the time, it was believed that the generals favoured a regime that secured a permanent allotment for the military in parliament, along the lines of the Indonesian model. Should a new constitution ever come about, the

was clear that following the Dapayin incident, the ASEAN governments had "experienced and articulated a new quality of irritation". 15

In July 2005, at the ASEAN Foreign Minister's meeting in Vientiane, Burma's Foreign

5. A Return to Isolationism or a Return to "Neutrality"?

Since forfeiting its chair, it appears that Burma may have had mixed feelings towards some of its fellow member states. While it is true that the foreign minister of Thailand, Surakiart Sathirathai, and the former foreign minister of Indonesia, Ali Alatas, had not been permitted to meet with Suu Kyi on their respective visits in 2003, the situation seemed unlikely to now change. Prior to the Kuala Lumpur summit at the end of 2005, a group of Southeast Asian parliamentarians and a Malaysian cabinet minister had called for Burma to be expelled from ASEAN unless the regime improved its human rights record and urged that Burma permanently be on ASEAN's agenda. 18 ASEAN also noted the increased interest of the international community on developments in Burma at the Kuala Lumpur summit. The Chairman's Statement called for the release of those placed under detention, encouraged the country to expedite its Roadmap to Democracy, and welcomed Burma's invitation to Malaysia's foreign minister, Syed Hamid Albar, to learn first-hand of its progress.¹⁹ Over the next few months, however, a delegation led by Syed Hamid was postponed twice because, according to the Burmese foreign minister Nyan Win, Burma was too busy moving its administrative offices to a new capital. The delegation finally arrived but was not permitted to meet with Suu Kyi and the visit was cut short. Of the many signs that could indicate the generals are retreating to their isolationism of the past, perhaps the move to Pyinmana stands out.

(a) Building Capitals

On 7 November 2005, foreign diplomats in Rangoon were notified that the capital had left town. They were informed by the Foreign Ministry that they could write a letter if they needed to communicate with the Burmese government or, if they needed to communicate on urgent matters, they could send a fax to Pyinmana. The evacuation of government ministries by convoys of trucks laden with civil servants and their office furniture began at 6:37am on 6 November 2005 — an auspicious time according to Than Shwe's astrologers. The Tatmadaw had been developing a site for a number of years near remote Pyinmana, 240 miles (about 400 km) to the north. The generals did not bother to inform their ASEAN neighbours of their intentions to move the capital beforehand, and the first public announcement was given by the Information Minister, General Kyaw Hsan, the following day. No official reasons were given for the secretive move other than that it was centrally located and had quick access to all parts of the country. Speculation over the generals' motives has been rampant and most centre upon ensuring their "survival".

Of the many theories advanced, perhaps some of the more reasonable include the generals' desire to protect their administrative institutions by relocating them far away from the population and from any future mass demonstrations. In 1988, pro-democracy demonstrations had brought Rangoon to a standstill and the government's administrative offices were unable to function. By relocating them away from any possible future trouble, the SPDC could remain in control of its functions and co-ordinate an appropriate response. Another reason could be to provide a geographically more convenient military headquarters from which troops could respond to trouble in Rangoon as well as the frontier areas of the Karen, Shan, Kayah and Chin. Pyinmana was also the location of General Aung San's war-time headquarters.

The SPDC plans to move all of its government ministries, military headquarters, and a "parliament" to the new capital in 2006. It began a number of large projects in the area several years ago, including the construction of a large airstrip, a military hospital, a five-star hotel, a golf course, mansions for the senior generals, apartments, a national headquarters for ethnic groups, government offices, and bunkers and tunnels. The International Labor Organization has reported that extensive forced labor has been used

on the projects and that thousands of villages have been relocated. Although the SPDC has promised a ten fold rise in the salaries of civil servants, many are unhappy with the move. Due to a lack of accommodation for families in the new capital, single bureaucrats have been trying to find marriage partners to postpone their reassignment.²¹

On 27 March 2006 (Armed Forces Day) state television broadcast pictures of troops parading at the new site in the shadows of three massive statues of kings Anawrahta, Bayintnaung, and Alaungphaya – the three kings in Burmese history perhaps most noted for uniting the people and founding dynasties. The new capital was to be officially named Yanlon ("secure from strife"), but Than Shwe officially named it Naypyidaw ("royal city" or "place of the kings"). By heeding the advice of astrologers and founding the new capital, Than Shwe was honouring tradition while effectively asserting his own "royal" legacy.

(b) Finding Old Friends

In 2005, movements were afoot at the United Nations to have Burmaplaced on the Security

generals and promotes further cooperation between the Tatmadaw and the People's Liberation Army. The SPDC have also increasingly turned to Beijing for diplomatic advice.

At the ASEAN summit held in Vientiane in November 2004, the member states pushed ahead with proposals to incorporate China into a massive East Asian Free Trade Zone. Recent ASEAN summits included China, Japan, and South Korea (ASEAN + 3), and in December 2005 Australia, New Zealand, and India joined ASEAN's East Asian Summit. By engaging with China in multilateral dialogues and agreements, ASEAN attempts to avoid possible Chinese domination or at least control Chinese regional influence.²⁴ The ASEAN+3 concept has also become an indirect avenue by which ASEAN could influence Burma – through China.

In May 2006, the UN sent the Nigerian national, Ibrahim Gambari, to Burma to raise human rights issues and the prospects for restoring democracy. He was the first UN envoy to visit the country since Indonesia's Ali Alitas in 2005. When Rizali resigned in January 2006 because he had been denied entry for almost two years, he believed that Burma's Road Map had effectively come to an end with the arrest of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt in 2004. Sambari met with three SPDC Generals — Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Soe Win — in their new capital. During his visit, Gambari also became the first foreigner permitted to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi since Rizali's visit in 2004. This was also unexpected because the SPDC had only recently accused the NLD of having links to terrorist groups and threatened to ban the organization. But since the generals were concerned about the Security Council placing Burma on its agenda, the visit to Suu Kyi

servants to their remote new capital does not help the situation. In March 2006, the French section of Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières – MSF) ended its medical programs and withdrew from Burma, citing unacceptable conditions imposed by the authorities on how to provide relief to people living in war- affected areas. The SPDC had imposed so many travel restrictions on MSF, and applied such pressure on local health authorities not to cooperate with MSF teams, that it became impossible for MSF to work in an acceptable manner – i.e. without becoming nothing more than a technical service provider subject to the political priorities of the junta.³⁰

These developments make Australia's current position on Burma awkward at best, and possibly redundant. Australia withdrew aid to Burma in 1990 and criticized the regime in a1238(al pr t)18.8.1(o)0(s as(vicsan1(o))∏Jt7.8(,0.8(e)t 15)} 13.3(a)UST33.1(a)EU as18()ubje5(thdu1(o)0(svc)1Al3(omg/limits)) | 13.3(a)UST33.1(a)EU as18()ubje5(thdu1(o)0(svc)1Al3()ubje5(thdu1(o)0(svc)1Al3()ubje5(thdu1

6. Conclusion

It can be argued that Burma's domestic politics causes cross-border problems and that these create regional instability for a number of reasons. Burma remains a major producer of illicit drugs — natural and synthetic — which make their way through the region and to markets beyond by way of China, Thailand and India. Accompanying this drug production is the rising addiction and related social consequences experienced both inside Burma and across its borders, as well as the pandemic spread of HIV/AIDS— the crackdown on the operations of INGOs working in this area does not help the situation. More recently there have been UN reports of multiple bird flu outbreaks across the country and local awareness of the problem is unlikely to improve significantly. Border area conflicts as well as forced relocations and destitution has created a steady flow of illegal immigrants or refugees into neighbouring countries. One would think that for these reasons alone, ASEAN should be concerned with Burma's internal politics.

But international pressure on Burma since 1988 has added another dimension to the ASEAN-Burmarelationship. One may reasonably ask why all the fuss over Burma, especially when ASEAN harbours Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and has included countries with military dictatorships and corrupt leaders before? Unfortunately for the Burmese generals, for a brief moment their country too was caught up in the wave of democratization of the late 1980s, and a popular figure emerged who also just happened to be the daughter of their former independence leader. With Aung San Suu Kyi on the political scene, coupled with the staging and overturning of free elections, and Suu Kyi's awarding of the Nobel Peace prize, organized and influential pro-democracy movements outside the country flourished in the 1990s. Their actions have led to an increased international awareness on Burma which has caused headaches for ASEAN, particularly since 2003.

It can also be argued that joining ASEAN in 1997 may have been against Burma's longheld tradition of foreign relations neutralism — in its various forms — since independence. As a member of ASEAN, Burma has discovered that it is part of an organization that responds to outside pressure — from the US, the EU, and the UN. This makes Burma feel uncomfortable and it has increasingly embarrassed ASEAN. Yet it could also be said that Burma was pressured into joining ASEAN, as well as forging a closer alliance with China — because of the sanctions imposed by the West. If this is the case, then it should not be surprising that the generals may have felt uncomfortable inside ASEAN because they must have perceived that the original terms of their membership agreement have

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may mean returning to where the generals feel most comfortable — a policy of neutralism and the selective balancing of various country's interests against their own.

Burma's recalcitrance should inform ASEAN and the West that their positions have not brought about political change and that perhaps it is time to adjust their strategies, or at least the goals desired by their strategies. The generals have proved adept at adapting to external isolationist policies and indeed for much of their history have welcomed them. For the junta, economic liberalization was only a relatively new experiment that could be withdrawn if it threatened their political stability. Hence it has been hard for them to conceive of sanctions as being punitive measures designed to instigate political reform. Burma maintains alternative trade markets in China and India; it is seeking trade and investment opportunities with Russia; it maintains significant investments and trade with \$\alpha\$ing 8 or \$iz.9(0)13mtedo.9(0)]TJnd \$th.9(ner)aterals

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