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Regionalism in Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future

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Regionalism in Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future

Maung Aung Myoe

With realism as the core of its strategic-cum-security foreign policy, and in conformity with the geopolitical reality of the post-colonial Myanmar in a Cold War regional setting, Myanmar has historically and traditionally pursued its foreign relations on the basis of bilateralism and neutralism; and it is thus that these two elements form the main tenets of Myanmar's foreign policy. Myanmar's worldview has been shaped by a realist paradigm: states must be self-reliant for survival, while diplomacy and deterrence are the primary instruments of state foreign policy. A balance of power or threat is the basis of stability in world politics. This realist perception continues up to the present. Throughout the Cold War period, Myanmar paid little attention to regionalism.¹ In the post-Cold War period, being cognizant of the changing international and regional security environments, and although it remains realist to the core, Myanmar has embraced constructivism in the form of regionalism. In this context, Myanmar's embrace of regionalism is aimed at fostering and enhancing state security, which is always conflated with regime security and national security in her overall perspective. Myanmar was particularly attracted to the ASEAN grouping's *modus operandi* known as the ASEAN way. The "ASEAN way" involving an informal and incremental approach to co-operation based on consultation and dialogue, which constitutes the ASEAN diplomatic norm, was by and large in line with the comfort level of the military regime in Myanmar. While, initially after joining ASEAN, Myanmar was strongly against deviations from the established principle of "constructive engagement," it eventually managed to accept ASEAN's "enhanced interaction" as a new *modus operandi*. It appears that, as far as the Myanmar government is concerned, issues that do not threaten national sovereignty or the nation-building process can be subject to discussion among the member states in the spirit of ASEAN unity. Moreover, after several years of experience with cooperative security arrangements, Myanmar is now a signatory to the ASEAN Security Community; for the first time in its post-colonial history agreeing to be a member of the regional security architecture.

¹ Here what is meant by "regionalism" is simply the idea of participating in a grouping of countries in a given geographical region. For more detail of the forms and contents of regionalism, see Amitav Acharya, *Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia-Pacific*, 2nd Edition (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003).

This paper studies regionalism in Myanmar foreign policy mostly in the context of ASEAN-Myanmar relations and it argues that Myanmar's decision to embrace regionalism was primarily motivated by her desire to enhance state security, which also meant regime security; the threat to which was more internal than external in nature. Her subscription to this regionalism was facilitated by the end of the Cold War divide, particularly in Asia. Myanmar's regional cooperation was predicated upon notions that the regional organization should be free from great power manipulation and should be a form of collective defense, with members subscribing to the principle of non-interference in each others' states.

MYANMAR AND REGIONALISM

Myanmar's relations with her Southeast Asian neighbours throughout the Cold War and before she attained ASEAN membership can best be understood within the context of bilateral relations. This, however, does not mean that Myanmar had no interest in the region as a whole; far from it. In fact, regionalism is not entirely new to Myanmar. Bogyoke Aung San actually visualized and floated an idea of forming a regional organization in Southeast Asia 60 years ago. On 20 January 1946, at the first Congress of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, Aung San illuminated his idea in the following terms:

In fact, some day it may prove necessary and possible to have, say, something like a United States of Indo-China comprising French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and our country. This is not an idealistic conception. It is one that may well be commended by historical developments of these countries having several points of affinity with one another ethnically, strategically, economically and otherwise. So then we must understand and try to understand internationalism and learn to cultivate the right spirit of internationalism. By cooperating with other nations for multi-lateral interests we can have the benefit of the world's best in every possible way and thus our life will become infinitely higher and richer.²

² Aung San, *Burma's Challenge* (Yangon: New Light of Myanmar Press, 1946), pp. 72-73. It is important to note that while Aung San was floating the idea of a regional organization with other countries, he was struggling with his own ethnic minorities in Myanmar.

Aung San's vision was never materialized by the AFPFL government which ran the country for about 14 years after independence in 1948. It was overshadowed by the advent of the Cold War in Asia and the geopolitical configuration of the time. Myanmar's position on regionalism was again expressed by General Ne Win, not long after the formation of ASEAN, during his visit to Singapore in April 1968.

In Southeast Asia today, there are powerful forces at work--forces which have their origin in the countries of the region and which have their origin outside the region. The interplay of these forces will influence the future of Southeast Asia. Though the conflict between the forces outside the region casts its shadows over the political scene, we in Burma (Myanmar) believe that ultimately only the forces of the region will prevail and play a decisive role in determining the kind of Southeast Asia we shall have to live in.

For our part, we look forward to the kind of Southeast Asia in which every nation will be free to live its own life in its own way. We believe that in such a community of nations it will be possible for each nation also to live in peace and friendship with its neighbours. But such a situation will not come about of itself: all the nations of the region will have to work for it steadfastly. It is to fit in with these objectives that we have fashioned our national policy.³

In this context, Daw Than Han, who was a director-general in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argued that "Burma is traditionally orientated in sentiment towards regional thinking and cooperation, though it has been slow in defining what that means in the longer term."⁴ She further explained that "in Burma's view, regional cooperation is conditional upon the existence of a reasonably stable internal regional order within which the actions of other states are predictable and where rational policy is therefore possible."⁵ Therefore, the strategy of Myanmar's foreign policy throughout the Cold War period was built on bilateralism. In her words:

³ General Ne Win's Speech on 21 April 1968 in Singapore

⁴ Daw Than Han, *Common Vision:: Burma's Regional Outlook* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University, 1988), p. 70.

⁵ Ibid.

For its part, Burma believes that a practical first step would be for the countries of Southeast Asia to develop good neighbourly bilateral relations of mutual trust and confidence, perceiving this as essential before countries of the region can hope to move in the direction of formal regional cooperation. This explains the emphasis that Burma currently places on bilateralism, an effort to improve and strengthen ties with all of its neighbours in Southeast Asia. . . . Burma's participation in any formal regional cooperation will depend greatly on how free its members are from alliances directed against each other and on the individual commitment not to allow the use of one's territory for any act that constitutes a threat to another's security.⁶

Despite her emphasis on bilateralism, Myanmar continued to participate in regional and multilateral institutions. It was apparent in her participation at the Bandung conference and the Non-aligned Movement. In 1954, Myanmar was one of the leading countries that helped formulate what was known as the Bandung Principles or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Moreover, Myanmar was also a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Even without regionalism at the core of its foreign policy, except a hiccup in her relations with China during the latter's Cultural Revolution in late 1960s, Myanmar had been generally on good terms with all her regional neighbours and maintained fairly stable and correct relations with them throughout the post-colonial period.

About four months before the formation of ASEAN in 1967 Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik reportedly expressed Indonesia's and Thailand's desire to invite Myanmar to join the imminent association. But the possibility was declined by the Myanmar government of the time. During his visit to Yangon in May 1967, the Indonesian foreign minister made a further unsuccessful attempt to persuade Myanmar to join the regional organization. Another unsuccessful attempt was made by the Philippine Foreign Secretary in December 1967 when he was in Yangon for the Colombo Plan meeting. Myanmar's policy towards ASEAN became clearer when Ne Win replied to visiting Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1974 that "Burma could not join ASEAN until all of the organization's members recognized China, and all US bases were removed from Thailand."⁷ Thus, as Josef Silverstein explained

⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

⁷ T.D. Allman, "A New Look for the Old Brigade", *FEER* (11 March 1974), p. 24.

it, the rejection by the Myanmar government of the invitations to join ASEAN stemmed from the fact that Myanmar's policy was not in accord with the practice of allowing foreign troops to be stationed in the territories of some ASEAN states.⁸

In reference to ASEAN, the political report of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) Central Committee submitted to the Third Party Congress held in February 1977 stated:

At the same time, some countries have been trying hard and taking all possible measures for regional peace and security, for prevention of world war, and for world peace and security. ASEAN, consisting of five countries from Southeast Asia, was formed with the aim of mutual cooperation in economic and social fields. But, now it has taken another step and has been trying to create in Southeast Asia a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). It had also been trying to win over the other Southeast Asian nations to join in it and to lend their support. Moreover, for the realization of its objectives, the association has been trying very hard to seek support and recognition from other countries in the world.⁹

With regard to ASEAN's activities, the BSPP stated that "although the objective of building ZOPFAN in Southeast Asia as set down by ASEAN is good in principle, Burma (Myanmar) considers that there is a need not only for the countries in the region to take part in the endeavour with a common objective and will, but also that the countries themselves be independent and be free of foreign armies and foreign military bases."¹⁰ This statement basically explained Myanmar's stand on ASEAN and the precondition of her involvement in regional affairs. However, at the Fourth Party Congress held in 1981, the BSPP was more concerned with the regional balance of power politics. In the political report, it was stated:

Both ASEAN countries and the rest in the Southeast Asia, in their own ways, have been working hard to prevent interference and influence of external powers in the region. It is noted that the PRC has embarked on improving the

⁸ Josef Silverstein, "The Military and Foreign Policy in Burma and Indonesia", *Asian Survey* (Vol. 22, No.3, March 1982), p. 285.

⁹ *Political Report by the Central Committee of the BSPP at the Third Party Congress (1977)*, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11

government-to-government relations with non-communist countries in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union has been providing economic and military assistance to Vietnam. The United States has also been providing military assistance to and conducting joint exercises with Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. Moreover, some regional countries have been trying to maintain regional stability and balance of power by seeking assistance from the West.¹¹

The BSPP government was acutely aware of the polarization of the regional order and the prevalence of a regional balance of power. Although it did not mention officially the existence of an “Indochina security complex” and a “Malay Archipelago security complex”, it was, however, concerned about the possible implications of being caught up in the regional balance of power politics. The Political Report to the Fifth Party Congress in 1985 expressed serious concern about the de facto existence of two political ententes and political situation in Southeast Asia. It noted:

In Southeast Asia, with the Kampuchea issue as a pretext, and with the backing of major powers, the Indochina socialist countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia on the one hand and the ASEAN group of the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei on the other hand, are competing [for influence in the region]. It is learned that, although the original aim of ASEAN at the time of formation was simply for cooperation in economic and social development, after the Kampuchea issue, the association members are collaborating with each other in political and military spheres. It is noted that the PRC sided with and helped ASEAN on the Kampuchea issue and the Soviet Union helped the three Indochina states.

As the Southeast Asia region is politically, economically, and militarily strategic, major powers are interested in and are giving attention to regional issues. The United States, as the situations demanded, supplied military assistance to Thailand and deployed its troops at Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base. Similarly, the Soviet Union also deployed its troops at Cam Ranh Bay Naval Base and Da Nang Air Base, and has been expanding its presence

¹¹ *Political Report by the Central Committee of the BSPP at the Forth Party Congress (1981)*, pp. 105-106.

in the region. Likewise, the PRC has been supporting the coalition government of Kampuchea with military assistance. In this way, by making the Kampuchea issue a pretext, the major powers have involved themselves in regional affairs, and have been complicating the situation by breaching regional peace and stability.¹²

In short, throughout the Revolutionary Council and the BSPP periods, the Myanmar government strictly maintained its position on neutralism. In the spirit of Bandung principles, Myanmar maintained amicable relations with all her Southeast Asian neighbours regardless of their domestic policies and foreign policy orientations while rejecting numerous invitations to join ASEAN. The Myanmar government stayed at an equal distance from both ASEAN and Non-ASEAN countries. In addition, Myanmar was strictly neutral in her position on the Vietnam war. Joining a regional organization heavily infiltrated or manipulated by external powers was considered undesirable and even detrimental to regional stability and peace. Thus, Myanmar firmly based its foreign policy fairly and squarely on bilateralism.

MYANMAR'S DECISION TO JOIN ASEAN

Why did Myanmar eventually join ASEAN and what did she expect from it? Immediately after the military takeover in the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) on 18 September 1988, later rejuvenated as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) on 15 November 1997, the Myanmar government reinstated the decade-long foreign policy of what was known as “independent and active foreign policy”. However, the SLORC government realized that the self-imposed isolationist policy of the past was no longer relevant to the changing international and regional security environment. Thus, the government was in quest of a new foreign policy direction. Yet, in the early days of its rule, the SLORC continued to base its foreign relations on bilateralism. Myanmar relations with her neighbours were correct and cordial, except a hiccup in her relations with India as the latter was involved in supporting the political opposition in the last two years of the 1980s and the early 1990s. However, after the 1990 election, as the government nullified the election results and refused to honour the winning party, the international community began to mount pressure on the government. Moreover, as the SLORC government decided to

¹² *Political Report by the Central Committee of the BSPP at the Fifth Party Congress (1985)*, pp. 98-100.

manage a political transition in Myanmar, it began a search for legitimacy at home and abroad. SLORC's domestic legitimacy was eroded after the 1990 election. Legitimacy abroad could buttress domestic legitimacy, and this led to the decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement in 1992.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar government continued her non-aligned policy and maintained friendly relations with her neighbours. Despite her acute awareness of Thailand following a buffer zone policy in the past, especially since the early 1960s, the SLORC government had been on good terms with the Thai government since its inception, as General Chavalit paid a highly publicized visit to Myanmar in late 1988. Until early 1992, the relationship between Myanmar and Thailand was based on a constructive engagement policy, and was fairly stable and consistent though some problems remained, such as overlapping territorial claims. Both exercised considerable restraint on issues that could escalate into bilateral tension and clashes. However, bilateral relations with Thailand began to deteriorate, especially after the government led by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai came to power, and the military clash over Hilllock 492 in late 1992 was a potential flash point in bilateral relations. The Thai government appeared to want to bring Myanmar into ASEAN so that bilateral issues could be resolved in multilateral and regional forums. ASEAN was also somewhat concerned about Myanmar slipping under the Chinese sphere of influence. Some senior Myanmar diplomats, especially those in ASEAN capitals, were also pleading with the senior leadership the case for joining ASEAN. However, at that time, the Myanmar government was concerned with ASEAN-China relations and the Myanmar government had to weigh carefully any potential offence to China by joining a regional organization. China was perhaps Myanmar's only source of diplomatic support at that time, and the Myanmar government was watching carefully the development of ASEAN-China relations. During his visit to China in January 1996, Senior General Than Shwe informed his counterpart of Myanmar's intention to join ASEAN. In his speech, Than Shwe did mention that Myanmar had been working closely with ASEAN in the following terms: "The structure of the international relations in the world today has changed. In view of ever improving contacts among nations it would not be possible for individual nations to stay aloof. They have to work for regional cooperation to secure regional stability and progress. Myanmar, like the PRC, has placed emphasis on its relations with nations in the region and at the same time it

gives priority to cooperation with ASEAN nations."¹³ To the delight of the Myanmar government, China came out in support of Myanmar's application for ASEAN membership, while Western countries are generally against it. Moreover, Myanmar observed ASEAN's policy of absorbing other Southeast Asian states, namely Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Soon after Vietnam became a member of ASEAN, the Myanmar government took serious interest in joining the association. Myanmar was particularly attracted to ASEAN's cardinal principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states.

In fact, ASEAN had been pursuing a policy of "constructive engagement" with Myanmar since the early 1990s. It was in 1991 that the term constructive engagement was coined by Thai foreign Minister Arsa Sarasin to describe Thai official foreign policy towards Myanmar, and this subsequently became the official ASEAN approach as well. Despite the relations between ASEAN and Myanmar being generally warm and cooperative, when Myanmar decided to join the Association some member countries strongly urged delaying the membership. Thailand and the Philippines, as well as some western countries, were against Myanmar's early entry into the ASEAN on the basis of opposition to this by the domestic political opposition in Myanmar, and particularly in response to the call for delay of Myanmar's ASEAN membership by Nobel-laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who feared the SLORC government gaining more diplomatic standing and legitimacy. The Myanmar government noted their opposition to Myanmar's membership in ASEAN and its official and semi-official media criticized the two ASEAN governments for being the followers of Western governments, and the SLORC government thus become more determined to become a member of the Association.

Myanmar was invited as an observer to the 29th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) held in Jakarta in July 1996. A month later, Myanmar applied for membership of ASEAN. Moreover, the Myanmar government formed a "Steering Committee on ASEAN Affairs" on 15 October 1996 to oversee and review Myanmar's participation in ASEAN and to provide policy guidance on Myanmar's activities in the association. Every ministry was instructed to form an ASEAN unit to coordinate ASEAN activities and functions. Moreover, the Department of ASEAN Affairs, with three divisions—political and security, economic and functional, and coordination—was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in

¹³ *New Light of Myanmar* (11 January 1996)

addition to the Southeast Asia Desk under the Department of Political Affairs, to coordinate ASEAN activities and functions in Myanmar. Despite strong protests from the United States and anti-government organizations, at a special ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 31 May 1997, ASEAN decided that Myanmar would be accepted as a full member of the Association in July 1997, along with Laos and Cambodia. Subsequently, on 23 July 1997, Myanmar was formally admitted to ASEAN, on the occasion of 30th anniversary of the association.

Soon after Myanmar joined ASEAN, according to an authoritative source, at a military training course in July 1997, Senior General Than Shwe explained to a group of senior military officials the reason for joining the organization along these lines: We must live together with friends. If we do not have and live together with friends, we will eventually be in trouble. The best organization to make friends with is an organization which is similar to and familiar to us and with no intention of interfering in our internal affairs, with a policy of treating members equally, and with good principles and objectives. We should and must join this kind of organization. Thus, we decided to join ASEAN. There is nothing to lose by joining ASEAN; and we will only gain from it. It will not hurt our national interests. It will not interfere in our internal affairs. We will make friends and stand together with countries that have good intentions and are helpful." ¹⁴ Then, about a year later, in July 1998, the Senior General explained to another group of senior officers the reasons for joining ASEAN and remarked on the progress in the following terms: "Since joining ASEAN, we have found that our diplomatic and international relations posture is better and stronger. Now, we have also joined BIMST-EC. . . In the field of international relations, we cannot follow the policy of 'no friend; no foe' as we used to do in the past. The world has changed. There is no more a balance of power. Thus, regional groupings or regionalism have become important. We can no longer stick to the 'no friend; no foe' policy. We must formulate and follow a new foreign policy of 'all friends; no foe'. Of course there will be intimate friends and distant friends. ASEAN is our intimate friend, and the rest are our distant friends."¹⁵

¹⁴ Interview with a senior military officer

¹⁵ Ibid.

At the time of joining ASEAN, the official newspapers carry a series of articles about ASEAN. In one of its articles, it said that by joining Myanmar's rich natural and human resources with the capital and technological know-how of ASEAN countries, Southeast Asia would become an economically developed and vibrant region of the world.¹⁶ According to an advisor of the SPDC there were at least two reasons which led Myanmar to join the association. First, it had to do with changing internal and external conditions in the country. The Myanmar government, which had devoted so many resources to dealing with an internal armed security threat over the previous 50 years, was no longer preoccupied with domestic security issues and paid more attention to external matters. Second, it was argued that "in this age of globalization and regionalism, the country realized that it could not continue to isolate itself and it needed to identify with a sympathetic group, which would treat it as one of them, a group that would not exploit Myanmar's weak situation."¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Myanmar government also explained that joining ASEAN would provide the following benefits:

- Myanmar, through ASEAN, could now meet the groups posing a threat to her collectively, and make her attitude known to them in specific and precise terms and act accordingly.
- Opportunities emerged to open the door wider politically and economically with the help, understanding and sympathy of fellow ASEAN members.
- With greater co-operation from friends in the region in various sectors, Myanmar would not have to place more emphasis on investments from the other parts of the world (Western hemisphere) than that from its own region.
- With more contacts and communications among the peoples of the region in multifarious fields, the ten nations, with common cultural traditions and colonial experiences, could formulate the specific characteristics of ASEAN.¹⁸

Myanmar's decision to join ASEAN was also explained by two senior government officials. Politically, they argued, Myanmar's membership would contribute to peace and stability of the ASEAN region, better confidence-building measures among member states, and strengthening of external security. In return, Myanmar could expect a sense of greater

¹⁶ "Facts about ASEAN", *Kyemon* (4 August 1997).

¹⁷ Khin Ohn Thant, "ASEAN Enlargement: Economic and Financial Implications for Myanmar", in Mya Than and Carolyn L. Gates (ed.), *ASEAN Enlargement: Impacts and Implications* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2001), p. 264.

¹⁸ Facts about ASEAN-8, *Kyemon* (August 1997).

security, a way out of its isolation and marginalization, and access to and participation in the regional grouping. Economically, Myanmar's membership would expand its already substantial economic space and would increase trade and investment links within the region. Thus, the country and the region would achieve greater development that would lead to increased efficiency among other benefits.¹⁹

Myanmar's critics have also argued that the decision by the Myanmar government to join ASEAN was motivated by both political and economic reasons. Politically, the Myanmar government needed international recognition in the face of international isolation, particularly from the United States and the European Union, and, economically, it needed development assistance and economic cooperation with groups of countries sympathetic to it. However, Myanmar authorities insisted that joining ASEAN was not a reactive process, but a pro-active one based on changing domestic and international circumstance. In the words of Myanmar Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw, Myanmar would like to be part of ASEAN's "shared destiny" and aspire to the prosperity of Southeast Asian nations.²⁰

In my opinion, there is another reason for joining ASEAN. While the ASEAN countries were concerned with Myanmar falling into the Chinese sphere of influence and becoming a factor threatening regional stability, Myanmar was also concerned with growing Chinese influence domestically. Myanmar's decision to join ASEAN was partly motivated by her desire to hedge against growing Chinese influence in Myanmar. In fact, a closer Sino-Myanmar relationship was in the interests of both parties in the new geopolitical configuration of post-Cold War international politics. In the context of growing Chinese influence, Southeast Asia could have been again divided. However, it has just emerged from a regional divide and could not afford to fall back into it. The lack of strategic autonomy has allowed ASEAN to build up a credible regional organization capable of handling its own regional affairs. Fostering regional unity was a primary reason for ASEAN to absorb Myanmar into the association. There were also individual motives among ASEAN leaders of the time to accept Myanmar into ASEAN. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's aim was to champion the ASEAN cause. Indonesian President Suharto hoped to redress the authoritarian-democratic dichotomy within the organization and to mitigate its authoritarian image. Moreover, Western

¹⁹ Kyaw Tint Swe and Aung Htoo, "Myanmar in ASEAN: Cooperation for Development", *Proceedings of the Symposium on "Interaction for Progress: Myanmar in ASEAN"*, Myanmar, 1998, p. 171.

²⁰ *Nation* (16 December 1996).

pressure made Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia more determined that Myanmar should join ASEAN; thus, the West's policy was counterproductive. In sum, it was the confluence of the interests of both Myanmar and ASEAN that made Myanmar's membership of ASEAN a reality.

MYANMAR'S PARTICIPATION IN OTHER REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Myanmar's regional experience with ASEAN gave further impetus to its participation in other regional or sub-regional organizations. One such important sub-regional grouping in which Myanmar participates is the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). When the first meeting of leaders from Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand took place in Bangkok on 6 June 1997, (the organisation was known in those days as the BIST-EC -- Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand Economic Cooperation), Myanmar attended it as an observer and later applied for membership. Myanmar was subsequently granted full membership on 22 December 1997 and the grouping was renamed BIMST-EC. Later, Bhutan and Nepal joined the group; thus, the grouping was renamed as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, at the first summit held in Bangkok on 31 July 2004, while the acronym remains unchanged as BIMSTEC. The grouping has identified six priority sectors for cooperation: Trade and investment; technology; transport and communication; energy; tourism; and agriculture and fisheries. Since its accession to the grouping, Myanmar has been actively participating in the grouping's programmes and playing the role of leading country in the energy sector. Within the framework of BIMSTEC, Myanmar, India, and Thailand had been cooperating for the realization of a trilateral highway project and deepwater seaport project in Myanmar, which will open up business opportunities for regional countries.

The Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) is another sub-regional grouping which Myanmar has been cooperating with. It is made up of Myanmar together with China (Yunnan), Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. It was initiated by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992 with the purpose of promoting economic cooperation among nations along the Mekong River. The GMS countries have made substantial progress in implementing sub-regional

development projects.²¹ Myanmar has been part of the GMS since its inception. However, the Myanmar government has observed that the GMS programme, which initially focused on the development of basic infrastructure, had been broadened and deepened to include social sectors such as human resource development, tourism, the environment, investment and trade and trans-border issues.²² The Myanmar government has realized that the GMS plays a vital role in promoting closer cooperation as well as in cultivating mutual understanding among the member countries.

In addition to GMS, Myanmar is also part of the Ayerwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). At the special ASEAN Summit on SARS, held in Bangkok on 29 April 2003, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra floated the idea of establishing what was later known as the “Ayerwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy”, among his colleagues from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, to bridge the economic gap among the mainland Southeast Asian nations and to promote prosperity in the sub-region. About six months later, the Myanmar government hosted the first summit of these four countries in Bagan on 12 November, at which the ACMECS was officially endorsed and the “Bagan Declaration” was adopted, affirming their commitment to cooperate in five broad priority areas: Trade and investment facilitation; agricultural and industrial cooperation; transport linkages; tourism cooperation; and human resources development.²³ (Public health was added as the sixth area of cooperation in August 2005.) Endorsed under

²¹ The First GMS Summit, held in Phnom Penh on 3 November 2002, endorsed the Strategic Framework for the GMS, which focuses on five strategic development thrusts: Strengthen infrastructure linkages through a multi-sectoral approach; Facilitate cross-border trade and investment; Enhance private sector participation in development and improve its competitiveness; Develop human resources and skill competencies; and Protect the environment and promote sustainable use of the sub-region’s shared natural resources. The GMS priority projects are grouped into 11 flagship initiatives in pursuit of these strategic thrusts. They include North-South Economic Corridor, East-West Economic Corridor, Southern Economic Corridor, telecommunications backbones, regional power interconnection and trading agreements, facilitating cross-border trade, investment, and tourism, enhancing private sector participation and competitiveness, developing human resources and skill competencies, strategic environment framework, food control and water resource management, and Mekong tourism development. The GMS program seeks to achieve enhanced connectivity, increased competitiveness, and a great sense of community in the GMS. The improvement of physical links such as road, rail, water and air transport systems, and telecommunication and power systems will create better networks in the sub-region as well as improve linkages with other countries in Asia. The improvement of ‘software’ elements such as the Cross-Border Transport Agreement, the power trade agreement, common policies to promote trade and investment, and capacity building will help to improve the competitiveness of the sub-region economies. The projects aim to prevent disease, degradation of the environment and illegal human trafficking, and will help to create higher incomes and improve quality of life, which will contribute to a greater sense of community.

²² *NLM* (7 July 2005).

²³ *NLM* (13 November 2003).

the “Economic Cooperation Strategy Plan of Action” are 46 common projects and 224 bilateral projects to be implemented over the next ten years. Vietnam joined the group on 10 May 2004. The grouping is complementary to the existing bilateral and regional economic cooperation. At present, ACMECS has made progress in a number of areas, including the establishment of industrial estates in border areas of member countries. Myanmar has been cooperating with Thailand in building industrial zones in Ba-An, Mawlamyaing, and Myawaddy under the ACMECS. Myanmar also serves as the coordinating country for the agricultural and industrial cooperation sector. At the second ACMECS summit held on 3 November 2005, Myanmar Prime Minister confirmed the country’s commitment and obligations to the grouping.²⁴ Myanmar finds her participation in the ACMECS convenient and is confident about it, since the group is clearly dedicated to economic cooperation.

MYANMAR’ ASEAN EXPERIENCE

As an ASEAN member, Myanmar has participated in 200-plus events and activities organized by the Association. The Myanmar government also hosts many ASEAN meetings in Myanmar; it hosted more than 100 various ASEAN meetings in Yangon between 1998 and 2004, including 11 ministerial meetings.²⁵ In its official assessment:

Joining ASEAN was a significant achievement. At a time where the Western powers had exerted political and economic pressure upon Myanmar and used their influence in ASEAN to persuade the Association not to admit Myanmar, the acceptance by the Association was Myanmar’s political gain and a sign of fraternity among Asian nations. By joining ASEAN, Myanmar on the political front was able to counter the pressure groups through ASEAN forums and made clear statements on Myanmar’s stand on various issues. Economically, joining ASEAN has resulted in an increase of investment from ASEAN member countries that led to the rise of the amount of foreign direct investment. Because of increased production output, the country’s exports

²⁴ NLM (5 November 2005).

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs: History and Activities* (Yangon: MOFA, 2005), p. 8.

have boomed; and we have also acquired advanced technology and created more jobs and opportunities for Myanmar citizens.²⁶

Moreover, as a member of ASEAN, Myanmar is part of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and other regional forums such as ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+1. In addition, Myanmar is a signatory to the ZOPFAN. The functional cooperation is not a major problem for the Myanmar government, but there is a financial burden involved as it has to host a number of ASEAN events in Myanmar and send delegations to ASEAN meetings abroad.

As expected by the Myanmar government, ASEAN provided a diplomatic shield in her relations with Western countries and some international organizations. ASEAN was united in standing against the European Union's decision to exclude Myanmar from the ASEAN-EU ministerial meetings. Due to the strong resistance from ASEAN, Myanmar was finally invited to the meeting in December 2000, after nearly three years of diplomatic negotiations. Again, due to ASEAN's firm position on Myanmar's participation, Myanmar was allowed to attend the 2003 ASEAN-EU Foreign Ministers' meeting in Brussels. Similarly, ASEAN has taken a firm position to include Myanmar in the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) summits. In September 2005, ASEAN economic ministers boycotted the sixth Asia-Europe Meeting held in Rotterdam over the Netherlands' refusal to issue a visa to the Myanmar minister and sent only senior officials to the talk. ASEAN was also against the economic sanctions imposed on Myanmar by the United States and the European Union. It is thus that the Myanmar government has benefited from her membership in ASEAN.

However, soon after joining, Myanmar faced the problem of some ASEAN countries attempting to change the ASEAN Way. In 1998, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan called on ASEAN members to change their traditional non-interventionist approach in respect of each other's internal affairs to what he called "constructive intervention." In fact, the original idea of constructive intervention came from Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in July 1997 but it did not get much attention at that time. The Thai Foreign Minister tried to justify the concept and received backing only from the Philippines. The Myanmar government saw such proposals as the acts of Western protégés in the region. Later, the Thai FM softened his position on constructive intervention and amended the proposed policy to

²⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

one of “flexible engagement.” The Myanmar government strongly protested at the proposed change and noted in its official media:

Myanmar is a sovereign nation. Myanmar will not allow anyone’s interference in her internal affairs. The aims, basic principles and concepts of the (ASEAN) Association have categorically stated that the Association would not for any reason interfere in the internal affairs of member nations. The Western Bloc or the neo-colonialists have long been insisting that this resolution should be amended and interference in internal affairs of member nations allowed. Surprisingly, some members have echoed the words of the Western bloc with the aim of interfering in Myanmar’s internal affairs. Are the nations of those ministers who made such remarks free from problems? Vietnam announced that it will not in any way discard the ASEAN policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of member nations. According to a Reuters report on 18 July 1998, Malaysia opposed a call by Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan that ASEAN should change its 31-year-old policy of ‘Constructive Engagement’ or non-interference in internal affairs of member nations to ‘flexible engagement’ where members talked openly of each others’ problems. The Philippines Foreign Minister, however, supported the Thai Foreign Minister and called for interference in Myanmar’s internal affairs.²⁷

When it came up for discussion at a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Malaysia were sharply critical of the proposed flexible engagement policy. The only support for Thailand came from the Philippines. The Myanmar government started a media campaign and warned that any change to ASEAN’s long-standing policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries was unacceptable. Nevertheless, as Jurgen Haacke explained, having repulsed flexible engagement, ASEAN governments informally agreed to henceforth allow for ‘enhanced interaction’, which implies that individual member states could comment on the internal affairs of other members that had a perceived detrimental impact on social, economic, and political life of other members

²⁷ Maung Po Hmat, “Myanmar will not, on any account, allow interference”, *NLM/Kyemon* (28 July 1998).

or the Association as a whole.²⁸ In fact, since 1999, ASEAN has held “retreats” after the ministerial meetings to discuss matters of common concern; it is a slight move away from the traditional non-interference principle to an open and frank discussion. After nearly three years of experiment, this new framework of “retreats” was considered useful for “informal, open and frank dialogue to address issues of common concern to the region”.²⁹ Indeed, in 2003, the Myanmar issue, namely the national reconciliation process and the taking of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi into protective custody, was discussed at the Foreign Minister Retreat in Cambodia. The joint communiqués issued at the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting clearly demonstrated the flexible interpretation or modification of ASEAN’s non-interference principle and a move slightly away from constructive engagement to enhanced interaction. The communiqué stated that “we (foreign ministers from ASEAN) discussed the recent political developments in Myanmar, particularly the incident of 30 May 2003, (and) we urged Myanmar to resume its efforts of national reconciliation and dialogue among all parties concerned leading to a peaceful transition to democracy.”³⁰ Moreover, Indonesia initially proposed the invocation of the ASEAN Troika mechanism, which has been in place since 1999, and Malaysia and the Philippines supported it. The aim was to send an ASEAN delegation to Yangon to seek a political solution to the ongoing crisis. Yangon resisted this proposal. Instead, it opted for bilateral crisis diplomacy and discussion with individual member states means for seeking understanding on the issue. This enhanced interaction with ASEAN led to the formulation of the “Myanmar Roadmap” and revitalization of the “National Reconciliation” process in Myanmar.

ASEAN became increasingly concerned with the excruciatingly slow pace of progress in national reconciliation process and the ongoing political crisis particularly in the aftermath of the 30 May 2003 incident in Myanmar. ASEAN’s enhanced interaction ensured that the Myanmar government did not stay aloof from or indifferent to ASEAN’s concern. About the same time, the Thai government came up with what was later known as the “Bangkok Process”, a forum to discuss the national reconciliation process in Myanmar, which related to peace, security and stability of the region. When the Myanmar government came to realize

²⁸ Jurgen Haacke, “Enhanced Interaction with Myanmar and the Project of a Security Community: Is ASEAN Refined or Breaking with its Diplomatic and Security Culture?”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, (Vol. 27, No. 2), pp. 189-190.

²⁹ ASEAN, *Joint Communiqué issued at the 35th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, 29-30 July 2002.

³⁰ ASEAN, *Joint Communiqué issued at the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, 16-17 June 2003.

that the process would draw attention from the international community and endorsement from ASEAN, and Myanmar would then find it difficult to diplomatically manoeuvre. In order to counter this move, the Myanmar government came up with “the Myanmar Roadmap” at the end of August 2003. This announcement of a “Roadmap” was timely; it was aimed at avoiding further involvement of ASEAN in Myanmar affairs and at avoiding further embarrassment to ASEAN. When the ASEAN Summit was held in October 2003, the Myanmar delegation came up with an agenda so that ASEAN did not necessarily need to press any further on Myanmar. In fact, at the end of the summit, ASEAN leaders adopted a conciliatory tone in their communiqué. It read:

The Leaders welcomed the recent positive developments in Myanmar and the Government’s pledge to bring about a transition to democracy through dialogue and reconciliation. The roadmap as outlined by the Prime Minister of Myanmar that would involve all strata of Myanmar society is a pragmatic approach and deserves understanding and support. The Leaders also agree that sanctions are not helpful in promoting peace and stability essential for democracy to take root.

This example illustrates that the Myanmar government cannot afford to be indifferent to ASEAN’s concern. In my opinion, the “Myanmar Roadmap” would not have been realized if there had been no ASEAN enhanced interaction.

On his return from the Bali Summit, in a triumphant mode after signing the Bali Concord II at the ASEAN Steering Committee Meeting No. 2/2003 held on 24 October, the Myanmar Prime Minister explained that the Bali Concord II was a historic milestone in ASEAN Summits and would serve the long-term interest of the countries in the region including Myanmar since it was based on the three pillars of a security, economic, and social-cultural community. In his words:

At a time when the unity of ASEAN and prospects of economic cooperation are under observation by the world, the successful signing of the Bali Concord II can be seen as a lucid determination to create an ASEAN region where peace, economies and culture flourish. Members of ASEAN will strive earnestly to practically serve the interest of all. . . The agreements of the recent

ASEAN Summit could accelerate the pace of success and cooperation of ASEAN. Therefore, ministries concerned must take quick and harmonious steps in respective sectors for the realization of these agreements.³¹

Then, at the closing ceremony of the Special Refresher Course No. 4 for University and College Teachers held at the Central Institute of Civil Service (Phaunggyi) on 30 January 2004, Prime Minister Khin Nyunt further elaborated on the Bali Concord II and said that “the vision of the first pillar (the security community) is to support peace through extended ASEAN cooperation, and to set up an ASEAN which enjoys greater peace and stability through the peaceful resolving of the problems between nations in an environment that is free from foreign interference and in which there is respect for each other’s sovereignty.”³²

Political developments in Myanmar were again discussed at the 37th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta in June 2004. The communiqué issued at the conclusion of the meeting reiterated ASEAN’s concerns about Myanmar and stated:

We noted the briefing given by Myanmar on the reconvening of its National Convention and the development thereon. We acknowledged the potential of the Convention in paving the way for new constitution and the holding of elections in keeping with it. We recalled and emphasized the continued relevance of the Joint Communiqué of the 36th AMM and the Chairman’s Press Statement of the 9th ASEAN Summit. In this regard, we underlined the need for the involvement of all strata of Myanmar society in the on-going National Convention. We encouraged all concerned parties in Myanmar to continue their efforts to effect a smooth transition to democracy. We recognized the role of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in assisting Myanmar to achieve this goal.³³

However, at the ASEAN Summit held in Vientiane in November 2004, the chairman’s statement made no reference to the Myanmar issue. At the summit, newly-installed Myanmar

³¹ *New Light of Myanmar* (25 October 2003).

³² *New Light of Myanmar* (31 January 2003).

³³ ASEAN, *Joint Communiqué issued at the 37th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, 29-30 June 2004.

Prime Minister General Soe Win held discussions with some of his ASEAN counterparts to brief them on the recent developments in Myanmar and to assure them on the continuation of the national conciliation process.

Then in early 2005, the issue of Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN came up. Myanmar was to assume the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006. But Myanmar's entitlement was challenged by political oppositions within and outside ASEAN. In fact, the Myanmar government faced mounting pressure from the West and some ASEAN countries to give up the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006. The United States and the European Union openly declared that they would boycott all ASEAN meetings if Myanmar became chairman. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that she would not attend the 2007 annual ministerial meeting if there is no progress in the democratization process of Myanmar. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong travelled to Myanmar on 30 March 2005 and expressed his deep concern about possible implication of Myanmar's chairmanship on ASEAN. In early April, Prime Minister Lt. Gen. Soe Win paid official visits to Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to gather diplomatic support for Myanmar's bid to chair ASEAN. The Myanmar government also received diplomatic backing from China.

During their meeting in the Philippines in April 2005, ASEAN foreign ministers failed to reach a consensus on the alphabetical rotation of ASEAN chairmanship to Myanmar and left the matter up to the Myanmar government to decide. ASEAN foreign ministers reiterated ASEAN's cardinal principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states. Meanwhile, Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win insisted that Yangon would take ASEAN's concerns and best interests into consideration and gave assurances that the Myanmar government would not be a "burden" to the regional association. In fact, since early 2005, a growing number of ASEAN Parliamentary members—most notably from Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, and the Philippines—had called on ASEAN to pressure Myanmar into giving up its right to the rotating chairmanship due to its poor human rights record and slow pace of progress in democratic transition.

Meanwhile, in June 2005, at a time ASEAN members were debating Myanmar's turn to take over the ASEAN chair in 2006, the official newspaper published a poem entitled "*If ASEAN and Myanmar are in solidarity*" to remind ASEAN members of its cardinal principles and the danger of interference [by extra-regional forces] in regional affairs. The last stanza of poem

stated: “Without outside interference, both Myanmar and ASEAN will be able to proceed steadily toward the realization of ASEAN goals, by helping each other in reciprocal manner, and could attain what both hope for.”³⁴

Myanmar's decision to give up the 2006 ASEAN Chairmanship was perhaps a test of her commitment to regionalism. Myanmar's decision to assume ASEAN chairmanship could have divided the member countries and could have damaged the association's image. On 25 July 2005, ASEAN Foreign Ministers announced that Myanmar had relinquished its turn to chair ASEAN in 2006. Later, in the communiqué, it was mentioned:

We have been informed by our colleague, Foreign Minister U Nyan Win of Myanmar that the Government of Myanmar had decided to relinquish its turn to be the Chair of ASEAN in 2006 because it would want to focus its attention on the ongoing national reconciliation and democratisation process. Our colleague from Myanmar has explained to us that 2006 will be a critical year and that the Government of Myanmar wants to give its full attention to the process. We would like to express our complete understanding of the decision by the Government of Myanmar. We also express our sincere appreciation to the Government of Myanmar for not allowing its national preoccupation to affect ASEAN's solidarity and cohesiveness. The Government of Myanmar has shown its commitment to the well-being of ASEAN and its goal of advancing the interest of all Member Countries. We agreed that once Myanmar is ready to take its turn to be the ASEAN Chair, it can do so.³⁵

This decision by the Myanmar government ended a row that had divided ASEAN members and had overshadowed the earlier ASEAN meetings in Manila and Vientiane. On Myanmar's part, the government had even formed a "Steering Committee for the Preparation of Holding the ASEAN Summit", chaired by the prime minister, with 20 members and 12 subcommittees, in 2003, which was reorganized in October 2004. Hosting the ASEAN summit and the ministerial meetings and retreats would have been a great boost for Myanmar diplomacy; it would have undoubtedly enhanced the regime's international image. However, the Myanmar

³⁴ *New Light of Myanmar* (7 June 2005); *Myanma Alin* (7 June 2005).

³⁵ ASEAN, *Joint Communiqué issued at the 38th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, 26 July 2005.

government embraced the sentiments of ASEAN colleagues.³⁶ Normally, with this kind of pressure, the Myanmar government would have decided to take up the chairmanship, considering their mentality of resisting pressure at all costs. In this context, ASEAN's enhanced interaction obviously had some impact on the behaviour of the Myanmar military regime.

Then, about two weeks later, Senior General Than Shwe sent a public message, for the first time, on the occasion of 38th anniversary of ASEAN day. In his message, the Senior General noted that "ASEAN has firmly laid down a code of conduct for the relations among nations in its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which is based on the principles of mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, with non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, settlement of difference or disputes by peaceful means, renunciation of the threat of use of force, and effective cooperation among themselves." And he further expressed Myanmar's stand on ASEAN in the following terms:

I truly believe that through the process of ASEAN integration, ASEAN will surely become a concert of Southeast Asian Nations, bonded together in partnership, in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies by the year 2020.

As the objectives and vision of ASEAN are in tandem with the political, economic and social objectives of the Union of Myanmar, Myanmar has actively participated in ASEAN since 1997 as a full-fledged member. In so doing, Myanmar has contributed to the maintenance of peace and security, economic and socio-cultural development in Southeast Asian region. It also in some way contributed to the endeavour of Myanmar in establishing a modern, developed, and peaceful nation.

³⁶ Myanmar's decision to give up the ASEAN chairmanship also sent a strong signal to the international community that the government is much more concerned with the national reconciliation process and is quite prepared to sacrifice its face and grace. One may contend that the regime could have speeded up its National Convention or released Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest if it wanted to chair ASEAN. But, in the perception of the military regime, such a decision would have unnecessarily compromised national security and been detrimental to national unity.

We have also been able to foster closer cooperation and mutual understanding with other members of ASEAN based on the spirit of ASEAN solidarity and contributing positively to regional peace, stability and prosperity in our region.

The emergence of an ASEAN Community will benefit people of Myanmar along with other ASEAN citizens in sharing the fruit of peace and stability, development and prosperity, and socio-cultural development. I would like to take this opportunity to urge our fellow citizens to strive in unison for the emergence of ASEAN Community in accordance with this year ASEAN Day's theme of "ASEAN Community Building for ASEAN People."³⁷

As ASEAN intensified its interaction with Myanmar by taking the issue of political transition for discussion at ASEAN meetings, the Myanmar government tried to convince its domestic audience that ASEAN still abides by the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, accepts no external interference in ASEAN affairs as a whole or in individual states, and stands together in the spirit of unity and fraternity.³⁸

Nevertheless, at the foreign ministers meeting held on 9 December 2005, the Myanmar issue again dominated the discussion and ASEAN foreign ministers pushed Myanmar to carry out democratic reform on aspects which was an embarrassment to ASEAN. The Malaysian Foreign Minister said: "We discussed the question of Myanmar, of the need for Myanmar to be more responsive to the wishes of the international community. We have registered our desire to see the political process, the map. We believe there should be some tangible

³⁷ *New Light of Myanmar* (8 August 2005).

³⁸ On 16 November 2005 in Tokyo on his way to the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) meeting, U.S. President George Bush commented that the people of Myanmar are living "in the darkness of tyranny" and he called for ASEAN to apply more pressure on Myanmar for political reform. This followed his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's naming of Myanmar as an "outpost of tyranny" during her Senate Confirmation Hearings on 18 January 2005. During the APEC meeting on 16 November 2005, Secretary of State Rice also noted the Myanmar government as "one of the worst regimes in the world" and called for ASEAN countries to engage in addressing the "appalling human rights situation in Burma" and keep the issue on the "radar screen". ASEAN responded to Bush that the association will continue to use engagement, not threats, to deal with Myanmar in order to avoid further isolating the country. In response, Myanmar's state-owned newspapers published a poem entitled "Outcome at APEC; Firm Stand and View of ASEAN", which runs as follows: Based on the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs; with mutual goodwill and loving-kindness brimming over; members are helping each other for greater good; ASEAN brothers do not accept the wedge or whittling; the powerful nation spoke out in interference and planned to whittle Myanmar away from ASEAN at the APEC summit; All ASEAN brothers strongly rebuffed that interfeerer who earned a great shame. (*Kyemon*, 21 November 2005).

movements, even though it's an internal affair of Myanmar. In order for all of us to defend Myanmar, Myanmar must show us movements with respect of the roadmap, as well as the position of Aung San Suu Kyi.”³⁹

Despite all these new developments in ASEAN, especially the modification of the non-interference principle, Myanmar continues with its commitment to the association. Both the poem and the message confirmed that Myanmar still wants to be part of the “shared destiny” of ASEAN and Myanmar is willing to cooperate with the association provided that the latter is not subjected to external interference in regional affairs. However, as the Myanmar foreign minister made clear to his ASEAN counterparts on 17 April 2006, during the ASEAN Foreign Minister Retreat, "Myanmar always respects suggestions and advices from friendly nations, but Myanmar will not accept them if they are in the form of political pressure".⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Regionalism is not entirely new to Myanmar policy-makers and it has actually been an important element in her strategic perspective,⁴¹ but the successive Myanmar governments in the post-colonial period never considered that collective defence or alliance could be an alternative to enhancing its own national security. In fact, historically, there was a tendency among the Myanmar political elite to view regionalism as great power manipulation. Myanmar's decision to not SEATO and other regional organizations was a clear indication of her position on regional security regime. Although it had never lost interest in regionalism, Myanmar paid more attention to bilateralism in her foreign relations throughout the Cold War period. The reason behind Myanmar's decision to not join ASEAN in the early days of the association was that Myanmar would have been inevitably drawn into the Cold War divide in Southeast Asia. Myanmar was particularly concerned about the spillover effects of wars in Indochina. After SLORC came to power, the Myanmar government reinstated the so-called independent and active foreign policy. For the first few years, the Myanmar government showed no serious interest in regionalism or multilateralism. Outstanding issues with her

³⁹ *The Straits Times*, 10 December 2005, p. 28; *Channelnewsasia.com*, 9 December 2005, 1901 hrs SST

⁴⁰ This information was available only in the Myanmar language Newspaper *Kyemon* (23 April 2006) and the Myanmar version of *Myanmar Times* (Vol. 13, No. 258; 28 April - 4 May 2006).

⁴¹ Daw Than Han, *Common Vision:: Burma's Regional Outlook*, Occasional Paper (Georgetown: Georgetown University, 1988), p. 70.

neighbours were resolved in the context and on the basis of bilateralism. This situation changed at the end of the Cold War and after the 1990 elections.

Being cognizant of the changing international and regional security environments, and intending to enhance state security which is usually conflated with regime security and national security, the military regime in Myanmar decided to embrace "constructivism" in the form of regionalism and multilateralism by joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1992, ASEAN in July 1997, and other regional organizations at later dates. In the aftermath of the 1990 election, the SLORC government decided to manage a political transition in Myanmar. In its quest for legitimacy, the military regime began to embrace regionalism and multilateralism hoping to bolster its eroding legitimacy. In this sense, ASEAN offered a window of opportunity for Myanmar to integrate again with the outside world. Thus, part of the motivation for joining ASEAN was to seek international support from the Southeast Asian neighbours. While bilateralism and neutralism remain core to Myanmar's foreign policy, regionalism and multilateralism have increasingly formed an integral part of it.

Myanmar was particularly attracted to the grouping's *modus operandi* known as the ASEAN way, which is characterized by informal interaction, quiet diplomacy, non-binding agreements, non-use of force or peaceful settlement of dispute, consensus-based decision-making, and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Thus, the ASEAN way of informal and incremental approach to co-operation based on consultation and dialogue, which constitutes the ASEAN diplomatic norm, was generally in line with the comfort level of the military regime in Myanmar. Myanmar's participation in ASEAN gave the country further confidence and enthusiasm in regional affairs and provided stimulus for regionalism. At the time of joining ASEAN, although some observers suggested that there was a policy divide within the Myanmar government on the matter of membership, there is no evidence to support this claim. Despite the change of the head of the government in October 2004, it is evident that the Myanmar government has continued her commitment to this regional association. With her experience in ASEAN, Myanmar has become increasingly involved in other sub-regional organizations, such as BIMSTEC, GMS, and ACMECS. Myanmar's participation in sub-regional organization, however, is not a major issue since they are centred more or less on economic cooperation, and are politically less significant.

ASEAN's constructive engagement, later modified as enhanced interaction, appears to be working in Myanmar. Myanmar's Roadmap and Myanmar's decision to relinquish the ASEAN chairmanship illustrated that Myanmar gave due consideration to the ASEAN factor in its decisions. The Myanmar government's decision to give up the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006 also reflects the growing acceptance and significance of regionalism in Myanmar foreign policy. Besides, the growing importance of non-traditional security issues in national and regional security that require wider regional cooperation will further cement Myanmar's commitment to regionalism and multilateralism.

Despite her apparent embrace of regionalism and membership of ASEAN, Myanmar showed, in her clashes with Thailand in early 2002, that it is still quite prepared to use force. The ASEAN identity has not yet to be established in Myanmar. However, this does not mean that the ASEAN factor is irrelevant in Myanmar's bilateral relations. As in the case of confrontation with Thailand, the situation could have been far worse if there had been no ASEAN factor. Later, together with the Thai government, the Myanmar government agreed to resolve bilateral issues in the ASEAN spirit. In this sense, ASEAN membership has indeed had some impact on Myanmar's foreign policy behaviour. Moreover, as "retreats" and the Troika mechanism have become a part of ASEAN's established diplomatic practices, the Myanmar government can no longer stay aloof from or completely indifferent to regional concerns. However, with a realist world view, the Myanmar government regards regionalism and multilateralism as supplementary to the regional balance of power politics in managing regional stability through persuasion and socialization.

Finally, the future of Myanmar's participation in ASEAN will depend on at least three factors. First is the degree of foreign [extra-regional power] interference in ASEAN affairs. This relates to ASEAN being in the driving seat in regional affairs. If ASEAN is unable to take initiatives on its own, or in other words, if ASEAN is manipulated by the great powers, Myanmar would be reluctant to further its cooperation on regional issues. Second is ASEAN's relationship with external powers. Myanmar is particularly carefully observing ASEAN's strategy in dealing with a rising China. Myanmar is also concerned about the accommodating of foreign forces on Southeast Asian soil by some ASEAN states. This is a result of them engaging in a soft balancing act by inviting US troops to make use of their facilities, which is against the spirit of ZOPFAN, the target of which was apparently China. So far, Myanmar finds ASEAN's strategy of mixing "balancing" against and

“bandwagoning” with China to be acceptable. Myanmar is more interested in seeing the association seeking "security with", rather than "security against", China. But, if ASEAN coalesced into an informal or formal military alliance against any particular power in the region, especially if it targets China, although this is an option that most in ASEAN would do their best to avoid, the geopolitical reality of Myanmar would dictate that she would have to withdraw from the regional association and return to bilateralism. Lastly, this relates to the principle of non-interference in each other internal affairs. While it has been increasingly tolerant of discussions about some of her internal issues by member countries in the spirit of ASEAN unity, and has managed to cope with the modification of ASEAN's approach to Myanmar from "constructive engagement" to "enhanced interaction", the Myanmar government is not prepared to accept any form of political pressure. In general, these factors also apply in Myanmar's decision to continue her subscription to regionalism.