

U.S., Not Myanmar, Is Isolating Itself

by Mike and Gail Billington

The level of hysteria in Washington against the military junta in Myanmar (persistently called Burma, its former name, by U.S. officials, as a form of insult to the regime) reached a fever pitch on May 18, when President Bush, in a letter to the Congress extending sanctions against the country, described the impoverished Southeast Asian nation as a “continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.” The harsh sanctions against Myanmar ban all imports, freeze assets, ban certain travel, and restrict financial transactions. Senators Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) have even called for the expulsion of the Myanmar Ambassador to the United States.

Of course, the multiple crimes of the Bush Administration, now exposed to the world, have dramatically reduced America’s moral authority to assert who is, and who is not, a threat or a human rights abuser. The Myanmar Junta, called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), made note of this fact in a May 24 release: “The recent developments in Iraq and Afghanistan are classic examples of how wrong things could end up when the respective political histories, cultures, and security needs of a country are ignored in making a transition to democracy by forces from the outside.” What’s more, the nations of Asia have dramatically rejected such confrontation with Myanmar, in favor of cooperation and engagement, while even the European Union, which has until recently maintained such a level of hostility toward Myanmar that relations with the rest of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Myanmar is one of ten members) were severely threatened, has now taken serious steps toward reconciliation.

The National Convention

On May 17, 2004, the SPDC re-opened the National Convention to draft a Constitution and a structure for a return to representative government. The Convention had been convened in 1996, but was suspended when the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, pulled out in protest against the preconditions set by the military regime—in particular, that the military continue to play a significant role in any new government. The reasons for this condition rest primarily on the historical reality, that the nation is composed of many different ethnic entities, while many of these entities still maintain separatist intentions, and separatist armies.

It is thus of great historical significance that the current session of the National Convention has succeeded in bringing together over 1,000 delegates, representing nearly all of the disparate ethnic and religious communities, for the first time in the nation’s history. When the “democratic opposition” NLD refused to attend at the last minute—to the surprise of most of its international supporters—the international press reported widely that the Convention was thereby rendered “inconsequential.” This judgment has been proven to be grossly distorted.

The clearest example of this fact comes from the UN Special Human Rights Envoy to Myanmar, Paul Sergio Pinheiro. Pinheiro has been a severe critic of the SPDC’s human rights record, especially in regard to the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the NLD (although they were invited to attend the National Convention). Nonetheless, he reported on June 6 that there were “interesting new changes” taking place at the Convention. He pointed to the approximately 400 ethnic groups in attendance, which have “been given the opportunity to distribute their documents and present their ideas to the assembly. I am seeing that both on the government and NLD sides there is a space” for relaxing their tense relations.

This was evident from the reports from delegates in the Western press. Agence France Presse spoke with one ethnic delegate during a break in the Convention on June 6, who reported that “power-sharing” between the ethnic communities and the capital in Yangon, within a unitary state, was the primary issue for most delegates: “We’ve been discussing the most serious aspects, the power sharing: administrative, judicial, and legislative elements.” He acknowledged that the framework for the talks was fixed, especially in regard to the role of the military under a constitutional government.

The first session adjourned on July 9, with each element making up the Convention having presented their proposals during the final two weeks: the representatives of the parties (except the NLD), the elected representatives (from the 1990 election), representatives of national races, farmers, workers, intellectuals, and State Service employees. They will reconvene after the harvest.

Indonesia’s Ali Alatas on Myanmar

To situate the current progress in Myanmar, it is essential to look at the unique character of the nation in recent history. No foreign observer expresses that uniqueness with more insight and passion than the senior statesman from Indonesia, Ali Alatas. Alatas was Indonesia’s Foreign Minister from 1988 through 1999, under Presidents Suharto and Habibie, during which time he performed a crucial role in negotiating peace between the Philippines government and the Moro National Liberation Front in the Province of Mindanao, and in bringing peace to war-torn Cambodia. Alatas, who is the honorary co-chairman of the USINDO Society, spoke in Washington on March 23, 2004, on the Tenth Anniversary of that organization. Asked about the situation in Myanmar, he gave

Myanmar and the Eurasian Land-Bridge



this eloquent reply:

"I've been given the task to help in solving the problems in Myanmar. I have visited once, and will visit again. Myanmar has a very particular history. It is one of the very few developing countries which inherited a Constitution from the colonial powers which said that all the minorities had the right to declare independence. This created a very difficult situation. The history of Myanmar is the history of the central government trying to *keep the union alive*. Therefore, one can

imagine *why* the military came up, as a force which *ruled*. Now that military wants to move to democracy. If you know that history, then you can understand the voices which say: 'You can't expect full-fledged democracy overnight.' Therefore, we must persuade the government to *move* toward democracy, but show understanding of the stress it must go through.

"The military feels that it contributed so much to the development of the country, that they have the right to partici-

pate in government. How much can Aung San Suu Kyi accept this? The Prime Minister has a seven-point roadmap to democracy and progress. We're watching, carefully, how this is implemented. I come as a *friend* of Myanmar, not with any individual interest in the country. I appreciate their support for our war of independence [in Indonesia], but I also told them that, as a friend, I will tell them the truth. They are, after all, a very sensitive people."

This sentiment is generally shared by Myanmar's fellow Asian nations. The U.S. demands for confrontation, sanctions, and isolation were only grudgingly accepted by some regional governments in the past, but the ugly reality behind Bush Administration's demands for "regime change" is now apparent to all, and Asia has rejected confrontation in favor of engagement and economic development—with significant results.

The European Union Bends

As to the European approach, the issue of Myanmar's participation in ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) conferences has led to a near fatal break in relations between the European Union (EU) and ASEAN. The Europeans have adamantly refused to participate in any meetings which including representation from Myanmar, even though Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997. Until now, ASEAN has grudgingly circumvented this problem by agreeing to allow only the original six members of ASEAN (without Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos, which joined later) to attend meetings with the EU, while nonetheless asserting their intention that ASEAN should be allowed to define its own delegate members to ASEM. When the EU was expanded this year, adding several Eastern European states, the EU requested that the new members be added to the states participating in ASEM, but still refused to allow Myanmar to attend! This was too much for ASEAN, which refused to accept the new EU members unless they also agreed to acceptance of the new ASEAN members—including Myanmar. Their solidarity in this issue led to the cancellation of two ASEM meetings, and the planned October heads-of-state ASEM summit in Vietnam appeared to be doomed.

However, EU External Relations Minister Chris Patten issued a surprising concession on June 29, in an interview with the Singapore *Straits Times*. While continuing to accuse Myanmar of multiple human rights offenses, Patten said that this "should not prevent our Asian partners from benefiting from regular dialogue through ASEM with all 25 countries of the now enlarged EU, and it must not be allowed to dampen our relationship with the whole region. We are ready to negotiate deeper bilateral relations with any state that so wishes." Then, in the context of a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Indonesia on July 2, EU Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana said that an agreement had been reached with ASEAN for the October meeting to proceed with all participants from both sides, although the details are still not public.



Myanmar's Prime Minister Khin Nyunt is underlining his country's potential role as a transportation hub for Asia—which drives the neo-cons mad.

Everyone wants to see the beginning of practical and functional relations between the SPDC and Aung San Suu Kyi, but it is not just an SPDC problem. The unbending attitude of Suu Kyi and her NLD has even led ASEAN to drop from this year's communiqué their earlier demand that she be released from house arrest, while adding that the organization "underlined the need for the involvement of all strata of Myanmar society in the ongoing national convention. We encourage all concerned parties in Myanmar to continue their efforts to effect a smooth transition to democracy," noting that the National Convention "had the potential to pave the way for a new Constitution and the holding of elections."

This leaves the United States essentially alone in its unilateral, punitive approach to Myanmar. Despite minor concessions from Secretary of State Colin Powell (who acknowledged that the rest of Asia has a legitimate "different approach to the problem"), and a continuing low-scale program from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency to aid in Myanmar's highly successful drug eradication campaign, the otherwise severe sanctions and forced isolation from Washington raises the question of why the Bush Administration is willing to isolate itself (yet again) from the rest of the world on this issue.

The Crossroad for Eurasian Development

The British colonization of Burma, as Myanmar was then known, was central to their broader imperial design for Asia. Burma's plentiful rice production fed the British Empire in the region, while opium was introduced from British India—always the number-one cash crop for the British. Opium production was centered in the mountainous northern and eastern regions, along the borders with India, China, Laos, and Thailand, produced by the diverse ethnic cultures of those regions. As under British imperial power everywhere, the British used "divide and conquer" methods, cultivating cultural and political differences among ethnic entities to prevent national unity against their colonial rule.

The British were driven out in 1942 by the Japanese, who were joined in the invasion by a Japanese-trained army of Burmese nationalists led by Aung San (the father of Aung

San Suu Kyi) and the so-called Thirty Comrades. Over the course of the war, Aung San turned against the Japanese, and was recognized by the British as the head of the nationalist forces after the war. With the British unable to maintain their control over India after the war, the decision was made to extend independence to Burma as well (Burma had been ruled as part of the British Raj in India). However, as in India, where the British first arranged for division (and perpetual conflict) before releasing control, so they also made certain that the hill tribes and ethnic minorities along the borders in Burma would remain independent from the capital in Yangon. Aung San, in his negotiations with the British after the war, would not allow a formal division of the country, but conceded to a stipulation that each ethnic entity could decide, after ten years, to declare its independence if it so desired. As Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said, this left a sword hanging over the head of the new nation, which was used to full advantage by the British and their American allies after the death of Roosevelt. (Aung San was killed in 1947, supposedly by another faction in the Thirty Comrades, before the fragile independence was granted in 1948.)

The Cold War isolation of China by the Anglo-American interests after 1949 turned Burma into a battlefield yet again, as remnants of the Chinese Nationalist Army, which had been driven off the mainland into Taiwan by the Chinese Communist forces, were transported by the CIA into northern Burma, without bothering to ask permission from Yangon. The British and the Americans cultivated both opium and the allegiance of the ethnic entities, with the intention of keeping the border regions ungovernable—and thus facilitating both military and drug operations in the region, while also destabilizing China. These are the ugly realities of neo-colonial policies in Southeast Asia, which ultimately led to the disaster of the Indochina wars of 1950-79.

As Southeast Asia was transformed into a playground for surrogate colonial warfare between the superpowers in the 1960s, Burma's response was to retreat into almost total isolation. Gen. Ne Win, another of the Thirty Comrades, headed a military junta which took power in 1962, and ran the "Burmese Way to Socialism" for the next 26 years, which left Burma out of the development that emerged across Asia after the end of the Indochina wars. Aung San's daughter Suu Kyi, who had been educated and nurtured in Oxford and London since her youth, returned to Burma in 1988, as Ne Win was forced from office by a group of young military officers. She assumed the position as head of the Western-oriented opposition, forming the NLD as her political party. Violent demonstrations in 1988 were suppressed by the new military junta, and the results of elections held in 1990, won by the NLD, were suspended. The new junta which had replaced Ne Win adopted the name Myanmar for the nation, and attempted to simultaneously maintain stability, open up slowly to the West, and unite the nation for the first time in history, through negotiations with the ethnic minorities and drug lords.

While the Western press focused entirely on the back-and-forth battles between Suu Kyi's NLD and the junta, dramatic progress was being made in pacifying the border regions. Even U.S. drug enforcement officials acknowledge that the opium production has been drastically reduced, as one after another of the drug armies was brought "into the fold" of national unity in exchange for ending both drug production and armed insurrection. For the first time in history, Myanmar is united and at peace. For the first time in history, the potential, obvious from a glance at the map, that Myanmar, which stands as a geographic pivot point among the three most dynamic areas in today's world economy—India, China, and Southeast Asia—can be transformed into a reality through mutual development.

The Hub for Asian Development

Speaking on June 7 to the opening ceremony of an ASEAN Chamber of Commerce and Industry Conference in Yangon, Myanmar Prime Minister Khin Nyunt enunciated a vision for Myanmar's role in Asia: "In sharing common borders with two Southeast Asian countries, namely Thailand and Laos, as well as with China, Myanmar can serve as the bridge between ASEAN member states and China. Indeed, Myanmar also serves as a transportation link to South Asia, since Myanmar has common borders with India. Today there already exists land transportation links between Myanmar and India, China, and Thailand. Moreover, we are in the midst of establishing trilateral road links that will promote trade and commerce, tourism, and people-to-people contact. We believe that Myanmar can serve as an important transportation hub for the region."

This points to a more substantive reason for Bush Administration intransigence regarding Myanmar. The policy of the neo-conservative faction in power under Vice President Dick Cheney has been based on the outlook of the Defense Policy Guidance, written in 1991 by Paul Wolfowitz and others under then-Secretary of Defense Cheney's direction, that no nation or combination of nations can be allowed to develop the economic capacity to challenge the power of the "only superpower," the imperial United States and its British ally. This imperial vision, a continuation of the classic British imperial view, is the explanation for the words placed in the mouth of George Bush, that Myanmar, despite its poverty and size, constitutes a "continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." The danger, to the imperial mind, lies not in Myanmar itself, but in the peaceful development of Eurasia as a whole which will be significantly advanced by the emergence of a peaceful and developing Myanmar.

Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's emphasis on transportation is critical. When Lyndon LaRouche issued his detailed proposal for the Eurasian Land-Bridge in 1997, as the centerpiece of a vast Eurasian physical development project, to bring the world out of the current decline into depression, there was a

glaring gap in the southern-most branch of the three cross-continental transportation corridors—Myanmar. There were no adequate roads from Myanmar either west into India, east into Thailand, nor north into China, let alone the needed rail lines.

This is now changing rapidly. The old “Burma Road,” built during World War II to ship military supplies from allied bases in India to the Chinese forces fighting the Japanese in central China, is being reconstructed, as well as other land connections into China. The East-West Economic Corridor, from the Vietnamese coast, through Cambodia and Thailand to Myanmar, is being developed as part of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), of which Myanmar is a member. India and Myanmar are also completing a modern highway system connecting northeast India with Yangon, and another crossing central Myanmar into North Thailand, and thus connecting also to the East-West Corridor to Vietnam. In October 2003, then Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee proposed a car rally from India’s eastern city of Gauhati to the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi!

Building rail lines along these corridors is essential to realize the full potential for development of the region, but there are as yet no active plans in that direction.

Energy is central to Myanmar’s development, both as a source of development income, and for internal use. The Yadana natural gas and pipeline project, completed by Unocal from the United States and France’s Total in 1999, is already shipping gas to Thailand from offshore deposits—despite huge and well-funded operations to disrupt it from the anti-growth environmental and human rights mafia. Bangladesh is now ready to approve an Indian project for developing onshore gas deposits in Myanmar, and a pipeline through Bangladesh and on to India, with collaboration from South Korea’s Daewoo International. Myanmar Energy Ministry official Soe Myint told the *Myanmar Times* on July 5 that only four of Myanmar’s 17 sedimentary basins suitable for oil production have been explored and exploited.

Thailand is planning to build five hydroelectric dams on the Salween River in Myanmar, with the first scheduled to come on line in 2012. Thailand and Myanmar have also marked out several potential sites for Thai/Myanmar industrial parks, and a 30,000 hectare agricultural project with 800 Myanmar farmers. Myanmar has invited Thailand (and others) to participate in industrial parks in other parts of the country as well. India is cooperating with Myanmar on a Chidwin River hydroelectric project, to provide energy for the development of India’s northeastern states.

Geopolitics, or Peace through Development?

There is a popular misconception among both Myanmar’s enemies and many of its friends, that Myanmar is, and will remain, the subject of Cold War-style geopolitical conflict and competition. In this view, India’s newly renewed interest in Myanmar is a reaction to the growing Chinese influence

in the country, and the threat of potential Chinese military presence there as well. Similarly, Thailand and others in Southeast Asia, as well as the Japanese, are supposedly only cooperating with Myanmar so that it will not be gobbled up by China. One of the few competent U.S. Myanmar scholars, Dr. David Steinberg of Georgetown University, who has worked strenuously to bring the United States around to a sane approach to Myanmar, also adopts this geopolitical approach, and argues that Washington should engage with Myanmar in order to stop China’s economic domination. A June 21 *International Herald Tribune* op-ed by Dr. Steinberg, for example, says: “Myanmar links India to the rest of ASEAN, and for China it provides access to the Bay of Bengal and potentially to the Malacca Straits, the most important natural waterway in the world. This has obviously been of concern to Delhi, which tests its missiles on the Bay. Key Japanese officials have also indicated that a Myanmar closely allied with China is not in Japan’s national interest. If it hopes to balance Chinese influence, the U.S. should reconsider its policies.”

But this geopolitical argument ignores the reality of the current global strategic and economic crisis. Increasingly, nations of the world are coming to recognize that the largest financial bubble in the history of mankind, combined with the imperial outlook of the current British and American regimes, armed as they are with a pre-emptive nuclear war doctrine, requires more than defensive moves on a geopolitical chessboard, in order to prevent the advent of a new dark age. Nothing less than cooperation, through the notion of the “advantage of the other” established by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which launched the age of sovereign nation-states, can return the world to a course of sanity and peace through development. China and India, as well as the United States, can only survive the unfolding crisis if they again find their common interest in the development of the physical economy of our world. Myanmar’s future must be seen in no smaller framework.

Nonetheless, Dr. Steinberg’s argument that “The U.S. must rethink sanctions on Myanmar,” as he titled his op-ed, is certainly correct, and has helped flush out the enemy. The *Wall Street Journal*, the leading voice of both the neo-conservative war party and the bankrupt bankers of London and Wall Street, issued a commentary on July 19, by the assistant editorial editor Michael Judge, titled “Are Sanctions Evil?” Judge praises the Bush Administration for “its unilateral sanctions [against Myanmar] with diplomatic pressure to get other nations onboard.” Judge ignores the growing isolation of the U.S. in regard to Myanmar, claiming that the policy is working. While never denying that sanctions are evil, he embraces them, as serving the interests of his mentors. This is the mentality of the “beast-men” backing the Imperial Presidency. The United States will only reverse its isolation by rejecting this mentality, and reviving the nation-building spirit which once defined this nation’s mission in history.