

# Myanmar's ASEAN Chairmanship

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This issue brief discusses Myanmar's relationship with ASEAN, its agenda for chairmanship in 2014 and an early assessment of its performance.

## KEY FINDINGS:

**1** Myanmar assumed the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2014 for the first time since ASEAN was created in 1967. The “normalization” of Myanmar with the regional organization after decades of turbulent relations has symbolic and practical significance for the nation, the region and the organization.

**2** 2014 is a critical year leading to the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015. Under the theme “Moving Forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Prosperous Community,” Myanmar sees it as a priority to shepherd the process.

**3** The maritime territorial disputes and rising tensions in the South China Sea present a major dilemma for Myanmar to

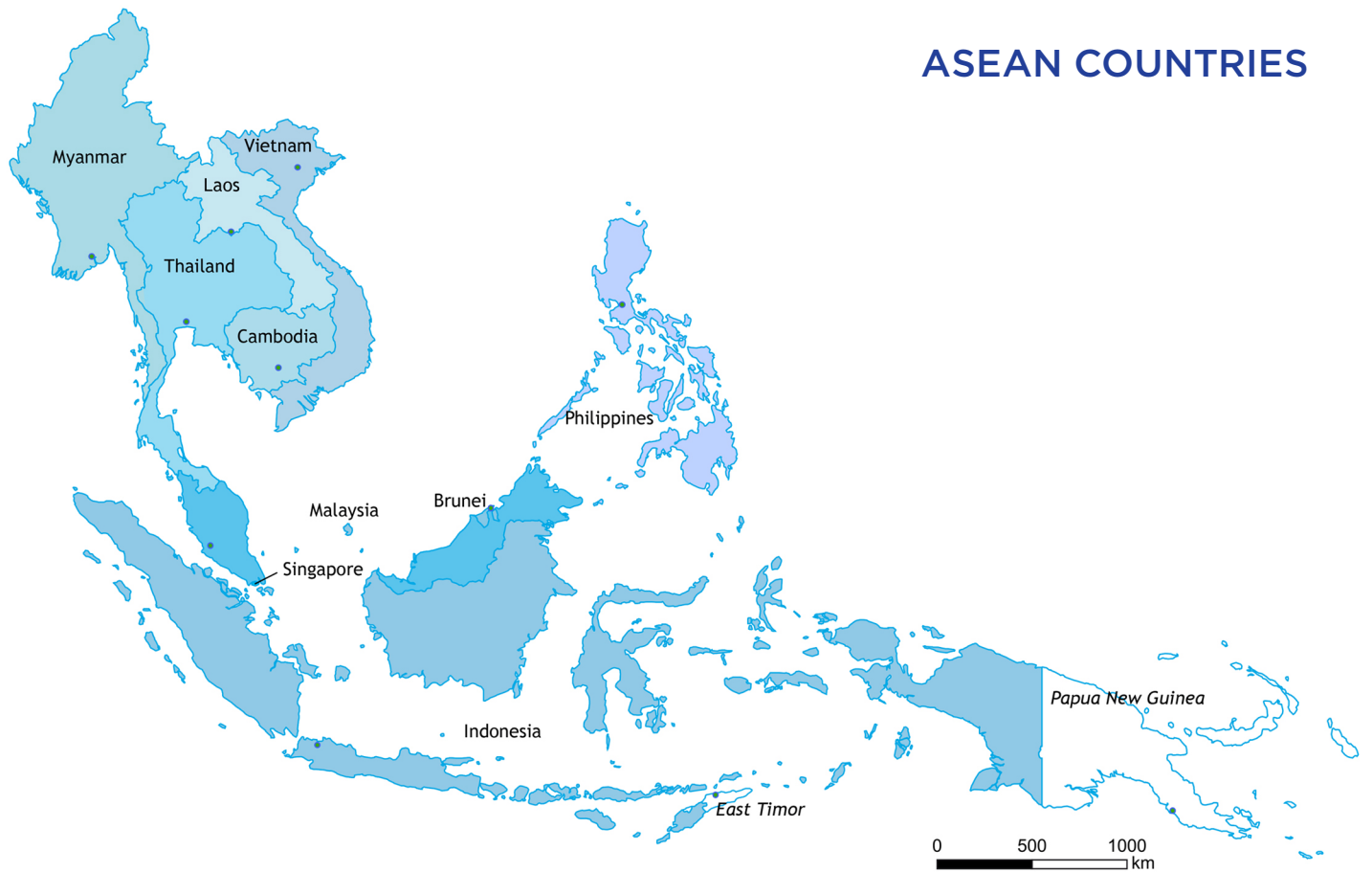
maintain balance between safeguarding ASEAN solidarity and managing its bilateral relationship with China.

**4** To date, Myanmar has successfully carried out its role as chair of ASEAN, despite its volatile domestic situation and logistical challenges.

This is the fourth of a series of four issue briefs on the changes and challenges that Myanmar faces in its domestic and foreign policies since the beginning of the nation's democratization in 2011. These briefs explore how external factors and forces influence and shape various aspects of Myanmar's internal development, including economic growth, ethnic conflict and national reconciliation, as well as the foreign policy strategies of the Thein Sein government.

This brief examines Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship in the year of 2014. It discusses Myanmar's historical relationship with ASEAN since the founding of the regional organization in 1967 and Myanmar's agenda in light of the upcoming establishment of ASEAN Community next year. In addition, it explores the challenges Myanmar has encountered as chair of ASEAN, including the South China Sea disputes, as well as its own domestic hurdles as a result of logistical infrastructure challenges and the human rights issues.

## ASEAN COUNTRIES



Map source: Vigerske, Martin. "ASEAN countries capitals." *Wikimedia Commons*. September 6, 2014.  
[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ASEAN\\_countries\\_capitals-en.svg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ASEAN_countries_capitals-en.svg).

## Overview

Although Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, the country's domestic politics and human rights record have consistently complicated its relationships and status within ASEAN. In 2005, due to its human rights controversy and criticisms from the West, Myanmar was pressured to forfeit its turn at chairmanship under the institution's rotational rules. Therefore, when Myanmar's political and economic reform finally opened the door for the country to chair the organization years later, both Myanmar and ASEAN were ready to reintegrate the country into the regional community as a normal and equal member.

The hope has been high both in and outside of Myanmar for its public debut as the chair of ASEAN. On top of navigating through the challenges to be faced in the year leading up to the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015, there have been calls for Myanmar to play a key role in the South China Sea disputes and thereby help shape ASEAN's relationship with China. In comparison, the goals and agendas set by the Myanmar government for its year as chair are relatively modest and have been pursued in a prudent style.

Despite this discrepancy in expectations as well as earlier doubts about Myanmar's ability to tackle the logistical challenges and domestic controversies, the assessments of Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship to date from both internal and external sources have been largely positive. While Myanmar still has a long way to go to be fully reintegrated into the region or to eventually play a leadership role, its first ASEAN chairmanship has laid a firm foundation for such a future.

## I. Myanmar's Historical Relationship with ASEAN

Myanmar's long and complex relationship with ASEAN dates back to ASEAN's inception in 1967, when the organization first invited Burma to join.<sup>1</sup> Burma rejected the invitation for fear of losing neutrality, a central theme in the country's foreign policy. As a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Burma adhered to the five principles of peaceful coexistence and neutrality. Since some ASEAN states were then also members of a military bloc — the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) — joining ASEAN could potentially jeopardize Burma's status of neutrality.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, part of ASEAN's original aspiration was to counter threats from internal communist insurgencies and China's support for revolutionary communism in East Asia.<sup>3</sup> Burma refused to be drawn into a regional association that was perceived to be anti-communist, as it could have undermined Burma's support of the Non-Aligned Movement. A sense of dissociation was the primary characteristic of Burma-ASEAN relations for the following two decades, accompanied by the increasing isolation of Burma especially after the bloody suppression of the August 1988 student-instigated "8888 Uprising" and the annulment of the 1990 election results.

The interests of ASEAN and Myanmar in each other were rekindled in the early 1990s. During this period, Myanmar's repressive domestic politics and human

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rights abuses remained a major concern for ASEAN. However, reemerging concerns of a rising China as a security threat prompted ASEAN to adopt a policy of “constructive engagement” with Myanmar.<sup>4</sup> “Constructive engagement” was first practiced by Thailand to protect its security and economic interests and deflect international criticism of its cooperative policy with Myanmar’s State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). ASEAN adopted this policy in 1994 with Myanmar’s membership in mind.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, Myanmar faced increasing Western sanctions and international isolation after the 1990 elections, making it necessary for SLORC to build ties with potential partners with less-stringent human rights policies. ASEAN was an ideal choice as it could help Myanmar with international recognition, economic assistance, and investment. As elaborated by Kyaw Soe Thein, Director of ASEAN Division, Foreign Economic Relations Department of the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Development, “Strengthening external security..., increasing trade and investment links within the region and achieving greater development” were key factors that led to Myanmar’s decision to join ASEAN.<sup>6</sup>

However, Myanmar’s transition to ASEAN membership was neither smooth nor free of controversies. Myanmar became an official observer in ASEAN and a member of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996. Nevertheless, its pursuit of full membership was protested by both the European Union and the United States.<sup>7</sup> Member countries such as Thailand and the Philippines also opposed its membership due to Myanmar’s poor human rights records. In 1997, the membership eventually came through with the insistence and endorsement of Malaysia, which served as ASEAN chair that year.<sup>8</sup> The admission was attacked internationally for ASEAN’s “inconsistency and double standards” – while Myanmar was admitted as a full member of ASEAN, Cambodia’s membership was postponed due to Hun Sen’s “coup.”<sup>9</sup>

Joining ASEAN arguably improved Myanmar’s external environment in the 2000s, although the extent of such improvement is subject to debate. On one hand, Myanmar attained a regional identity, achieving recognition in the region as a member of the Southeast Asian community. Fellow ASEAN members such as Singapore and Thailand were Myanmar’s top investors and trading partners in the years to follow, which was of key importance to the military government.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, despite its significant size (second largest in Southeast Asia), rich economic potential and historic leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, Myanmar has not been regarded as a “key player” within ASEAN by other member countries.<sup>11</sup> Due to its domestic politics, economic weaknesses and the Western sanctions, Myanmar was regarded as a “second-class” citizen of ASEAN for a long time.<sup>12</sup>

This negative image peaked in 2005 when Myanmar was forced to forfeit its turn as ASEAN chair due to pressure from both ASEAN members and ASEAN’s dialogue partners, out of fear that Western countries might boycott the meetings hosted by Myanmar.<sup>13</sup> Many Myanmar analysts and officials continue to view

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that experience as a national humiliation. Furthermore, the stifling of the Buddhist-led Saffron Revolution in response to the removal of fuel subsidies in 2007 sparked a sharp and harsh response from ASEAN. During the meetings in September that year, the ASEAN foreign ministers unprecedentedly “expressed their revulsion to Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win over reports that the demonstrations in Burma [were] being suppressed by violent force,” and they strongly urged Myanmar to exercise restraint and seek a political solution.<sup>14</sup>

ASEAN's reservations about Myanmar did not subside until the country embarked on political and economic reforms in 2011. Since its inauguration in March, the Thein Sein government has carried out a series of reform efforts in pursuit of political democratization and economic liberalization. In response to such domestic progress, in November 2011 ASEAN decided to endorse Myanmar for ASEAN's 2014 chairmanship. While some observers argued that ASEAN prematurely assumed Myanmar's reform to be genuine and sustainable,<sup>15</sup> Myanmar lived up to ASEAN's endorsement through “free and fair” 2012 by-elections and following reform efforts.<sup>16</sup>

## II. Myanmar's ASEAN Agenda

The theme Myanmar chose for its 2014 ASEAN chairmanship is “Moving Forward in Unity for a Peaceful and Prosperous Community.” This is closely associated with the regional organization's schedule to establish ASEAN Community in 2015, and Myanmar has viewed the push to build a strong foundation for the ASEAN Community as its key task.<sup>17</sup> The three pillars of ASEAN unity are interdependent and interrelated, divided into the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). APSC envisages a rules-based community of shared values and norms; AEC aims for regional economic integration by 2015, with a single market and production base, a highly competitive economic region, equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy; and ASCC seeks to forge a common identity and improve quality of life. Progress toward this can best be measured by implementation of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity and the ASEAN Community Blueprints.<sup>18</sup>

When Brunei handed over the ASEAN chairmanship to Myanmar in late 2013, President U Thein Sein in his acceptance speech encouraged ASEAN to make efforts to meet its 2015 targets, from economic development and integration to population management and disaster preparedness, as well as a unified vision for international relationships.<sup>19</sup> As chair, Myanmar set the following goals to fulfill its mission:

- To ensure the full implementation of the remaining tasks in realizing ASEAN Community by 2015.
- To set the priority areas for acceleration in implementation of the ASEAN Community, to review the status of community building, to set future initiatives to vitalize ASEAN, to formulate programs in promoting ASEAN external relations.

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- To carry out the review of ASEAN Charter, in order to maintain the relevance of ASEAN in changing circumstances.
- To conduct the mid-term review of the implementation of the ARF vision statement and to develop a new vision for ARF.
- To transform ASEAN as a people-centered organization, to enhance engagements with civil society, to accelerate participation of women, youth, parliamentarians, and media in the activities of ASEAN.
- To work on developing the ASEAN Vision beyond 2015.<sup>20</sup>

The assessment of progress toward the ASEAN Community under Myanmar’s guardianship has been largely positive. In April 2014, the Mid-Term Review of the ASCC Blueprint noted “satisfactory progress” in the areas of human development, social welfare and protection, social justice and rights, environment sustainability, and ASEAN identity awareness.<sup>21</sup> The Blueprint was followed by the Joint ASEAN Secretariat and World Bank Integration Monitoring Report as an update on the progress made toward AEC goals.<sup>22</sup> By August 2014, President Thein Sein claimed that “the founding of an ASEAN Community has nearly reached 80 per cent [of what needs to be done] and will be finished in 17 months’ time.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the rhetoric and efforts made by ASEAN members under Myanmar’s chairmanship, whether the ASEAN Community will become a reality by 2015 is widely debated even within ASEAN. Earlier in 2014, Asia Development Bank economists assessed that “the integration and liberalization goal (of ASEAN Community) is a long process that will continue beyond 2015, with 2025 as a more likely new target deadline.”<sup>24</sup> This view is in fact shared by many Myanmar analysts, who question whether the establishment of AEC will bring immediate and major changes to ASEAN members’ economic policies and activities.<sup>25</sup> Given the technical difficulties of implementation, few observers expect a full liberalization by the end of 2015 as the one witnessed in Europe.

### **III. The South China Sea Disputes under Myanmar’s ASEAN Chairmanship**

In recent years, ASEAN has become a central theater for contention over the South China Sea disputes. The watershed event was the 17<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Regional Forum hosted in Hanoi in July 2010. At that meeting, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that, while the US took no stance on the competing sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, the peaceful resolution of those competing claims was a matter of US “national interest.”<sup>26</sup> China fiercely refuted the American and Southeast Asian “fallacies” on China’s positions and characterized Clinton’s comments as an attack on China.<sup>27</sup> Since then, China has adopted increasingly assertive policies in the South China Sea, straining relations with the United States and Southeast Asian countries. China’s behavior was met with strong reactions by other claimant countries such as the Philippines and Viet-



nam, which began to pursue regional diplomatic and legal approaches to counter perceived Chinese ambitions.

As a result, the tensions in the South China Sea have dominated the agenda for most key ASEAN meetings in the past few years. While the Philippines and Vietnam have pushed for a collective regional response to Chinese behaviors, Beijing has insisted that each issue be handled bilaterally, determining it to be a critical task to defeat such “schemes of multilateralization” of the South China Sea disputes that portray the South China Sea as a problem between China and ASEAN.<sup>28</sup> During the 2011 ARF meeting in Bali, Secretary Clinton reasserted the US “strategic stake” in the South China Sea, stressing the principles of “freedom of navigation, unimpeded legal commerce, and the maintenance of peace and stability.”<sup>29</sup> However, during Cambodia’s chairmanship in 2012, China successfully convinced Cambodia to block a joint statement that explicitly mentioned the South China Sea, resulting in ASEAN’s failure to reach a joint statement for the first time in its 45-year history. While China perceived this to be a major diplomatic victory, the event drew substantial regional criticism of Cambodia’s handling of the matter as chair, which undermined ASEAN’s solidarity. Brunei’s chairmanship in the following year led to a constructive agreement between China and ASEAN to work toward a binding Code of Conduct (CoC), but the tensions remained strong.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, when Myanmar assumed the ASEAN chairmanship, it stepped into the center of the controversy regarding how ASEAN as the regional organization should address the South China Sea disputes. There were high hopes both in and outside of Myanmar for the country to play a meaningful role. Senior Myanmar officials such as the president’s spokesman U Ye Htut argued that Myanmar’s close ties with China would be an advantage in resolving the South China Sea disputes.<sup>31</sup> Since Myanmar is also serving as coordinator of ASEAN-US Dialogue Relations<sup>32</sup> from 2012 – 2015, one analyst described hopes that “this dual role of ASEAN-US dialogue coordinator and ASEAN chair may help Myanmar balance relations with China, so that negotiations on a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea will proceed on an even keel.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet many analysts worried that the South China Sea disputes would be the biggest challenge for Myanmar as ASEAN chair precisely because of its long-standing but now deteriorating relationship with China.<sup>34</sup> In the past, China had sought Myanmar’s support of China’s position on the South China Sea at ASEAN meetings, which Myanmar tacitly rejected by insisting on its neutrality. The deterioration of relations with China since the beginning of Myanmar’s reform is widely recognized in both countries as well as in the region. Any major initiative by Myanmar to push for the long-delayed CoC or to put China under the spotlight would inevitably be viewed by China with great hostility, reinforcing Chinese perceptions of Myanmar’s “betrayal” as a result of its reforms and improving ties with the West.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Vietnam and the Philippines, who have previously pushed for collective actions by ASEAN to counter China’s assertive-

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ness, are expected to do so again in 2014. As chair, Myanmar will have to take the demand from these members seriously and address them in some way.

Myanmar's position on the South China Sea disputes is neutral for the simple reason that it is not a claimant state. The prevailing view among Myanmar analysts is that the South China Sea is not Myanmar's "fight" to begin with and that Myanmar has no position on sovereignty claims. However, they also recognize that as a member and chair of ASEAN, Myanmar needs to prioritize the solidarity of the regional organization and, at the minimum, include the South China Sea issue on the agenda.<sup>36</sup> Understanding its importance, analysts from Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made Myanmar's position clear: "A fallout like the one created by Cambodia in 2012 was simply out of question [so] Myanmar will not sweep the issue of South China Sea under the carpet."<sup>37</sup>

Between its obligations as ASEAN chair and its relationship with China, Myanmar has pursued relatively modest goals on the South China Sea issue and has rather skillfully navigated between pushing for a collective ASEAN position and deflecting China's frustration. In principle, Myanmar allows for full inclusion and discussion of the tensions in the South China Sea in ASEAN meetings but treads carefully in all final documents about naming names and pointing fingers at any parties, including China. For example, when the 24<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit began in May 2014, China and Vietnam were involved in a new heated stand-off over China's oil rig deployment near Triton Island, and the world anticipated the Summit to be dominated by the topic. President U Thein Sein promised "extensive discussion" of regional and global issues of great concern to ASEAN, which people presumed to be about the oil rig stand-off, but he carefully avoided referring to the South China Sea dispute directly.<sup>38</sup> Similar balancing acts were found in the statement issued by the foreign ministers as a result of the summit. The statement expressed the foreign ministers' serious concerns, urged all parties to exercise self-restraint and avoid actions which could undermine peace and stability and to resolve disputes by peaceful means without resorting to threat or use of force.<sup>39</sup> While the statement contained no antagonistic messages toward any party, including China, Myanmar elevated the significance of the message by creating a stand-alone document rather than burying it in the longer summary of proceedings.<sup>40</sup>

The communiqué from the August ASEAN Regional Forum was another carefully crafted document that all parties could find comfort in and derive their own interpretations from. According to a senior US official, the discussions at the meetings chaired by Myanmar reflected an "all-time high" level of concern by ASEAN countries about China's unilateral use of its superior military power for coercive purposes.<sup>41</sup> Myanmar allowed ASEAN claimant countries to vent their anger and frustration at the meetings, such that the United States characterized the sessions as "a significant setback" for China.<sup>42</sup> However, little change was made to the language of the statement issued as the result of the meetings. China largely deemed it satisfactory that it was not named in the statement and the



Triple Action Plan<sup>43</sup> proposal by the Philippines (which China opposes) was only noted, rather than supported in the communiqué.<sup>44</sup> In addition, because China regarded the United States as the primary “troublemaker” trying to “agitate the tension and alienate China-ASEAN relations,” Beijing’s rage was targeted much more at Washington rather than Myanmar as the ASEAN chair.<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. Challenges and Assessments

During the course of Myanmar’s ASEAN chairmanship, two domestic issues have had a potential negative impact on the evaluation of its performance: Myanmar’s human rights issues and the logistical challenges as host. These challenges have not significantly altered the overall positive evaluation of Myanmar’s ASEAN chairmanship, as observers in and outside Myanmar have been largely satisfied with the country’s performance.

Despite the political reform and progress of the country, certain political issues in Myanmar have remained volatile, raising concerns that Myanmar’s ASEAN chairmanship is “bogged down by ethnic, religious and communal violence at home.”<sup>46</sup> This is particularly the case in relation to the Rohingya issue.<sup>47</sup> Some analysts have observed that Myanmar’s chairmanship is being side-tracked and increasingly eclipsed by other preoccupations, “When we get news on Myanmar nowadays it’s all about the Rohingya and Rakhine.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in early 2014, the Rohingya crisis drew wide international criticism when the government banned the organization Doctors Without Borders from operating in the Rakhine State.<sup>49</sup> Rights activists criticized the government’s handling of the Rohingya issue, challenging the credibility of the government’s reforms and its legitimacy to chair ASEAN. The Rohingya issue also harms intra-ASEAN relations, as Rohingya refugees have been fleeing Myanmar for Southeast Asian states such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>50</sup> In 2012, domestic organizations directly called for the Indonesian government to raise the Rohingya issue at ASEAN meetings.<sup>51</sup> Human Rights Watch in May 2014 insisted that ASEAN should move past its non-interference policy to resolve the Rohingya crisis.<sup>52</sup>

However, despite efforts to make the Rohingya crisis an ASEAN issue, several practical obstacles have prevented ASEAN involvement. The ASEAN Way stipulates non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states, and ASEAN’s consensus-based approach requires unanimity on issues such as the Rohingya crisis among all member states, including Myanmar. Myanmar is not interested in lending such consent; indeed, during the January 2014 ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting, the Myanmar government asked ASEAN not to discuss the Myanmar’s ethnic issues, despite growing concerns about its treatment of Muslim minorities.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, during the course of 2014 other ASEAN members have also faced their own human rights problems, such as Thailand’s political instability and military coup and Malaysia’s political controversy related to the charges brought against popular opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim. These make criticisms of Myanmar’s Rohingya issue by ASEAN particularly difficult.

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The more practical and immediate challenge to Myanmar's successful ASEAN chairmanship lies in the logistics of hosting more than 1,000 meetings throughout the year.<sup>54</sup> Myanmar suffers from a chronically underdeveloped infrastructure, including its transportation system, electricity supply, internet connectivity, and so forth. During the World Economic Forum and Southeast Asian Games in Myanmar in 2013, many such problems surfaced. Soft infrastructure, or human resources capacity, is another key shortage for the country. As noted by Myanmar scholars, managing the ASEAN chairmanship will “impose extra burdens upon a narrow cohort of able people who are managing the reform process, but who are already grossly overworked.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite the concerns, logistical challenges have been handled relatively well by Myanmar so far in 2014. Several factors contribute to this success. First of all, Myanmar learned major lessons from hosting the World Economic Forum and Southeast Asian Games in 2013, tackling in a targeted manner many of the deficiencies revealed. Second, understanding the weaknesses and constraints of Myanmar's underdeveloped infrastructure, participating officials and journalists have demonstrated a surprisingly high level of tolerance and accommodation toward the hiccups and inconveniences occurred.<sup>56</sup> Last but not least, the technical assistance provided by ASEAN and the United States contributed tremendously to help Myanmar prepare for the chairmanship in terms of both substance and logistics.<sup>57</sup> Other countries including Japan, South Korea, and Singapore also provided financial assistance. According to a Myanmar official, China assisted Myanmar in “building a state guest house in Naypyidaw to accommodate all the visiting heads of states.”<sup>58</sup>

Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship is of great symbolic significance for both the country and the regional organization. It is a matter of dignity for the former pariah state to be recognized as a normal member of the regional organization. The recognition and applause from the its fellow Southeast Asian neighbors and the rest of the world for successfully carrying out the chairmanship role has greatly boosted the national pride of the Myanmar people as well as the legitimacy of the Myanmar government and its reform agenda. For ASEAN, the re-integration of Myanmar has also normalized the regional organization so that all members can now assume the rotating chairmanship. It has also enhanced ASEAN's connectivity to South Asia while adding to the “regional democratization when established electoral democracies such as Thailand and Malaysia are at risk of rollback.”<sup>59</sup>

Myanmar is still in the process of strengthening its ASEAN identity and improving its capacity to play a bigger role within the regional organization. According to some Myanmar scholars, most of the Myanmar populace has yet to achieve a comprehensive understanding of ASEAN and the implications of its membership for Myanmar. For example, most of the Myanmar people have yet to know what ASEAN's three pillars are, so the government is designing methods to educate the general public about the organization. Myanmar policymakers and strategic

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thinkers are also in the process of crafting a unique niche and strategy for Myanmar within ASEAN. However, many critics suggest that Myanmar will primarily be consumed for the foreseeable future by domestic problems, economic development and capacity building; therefore, a significant role of Myanmar within ASEAN is unlikely to develop in the near future.

## V. Conclusions

Myanmar has had a long and complicated relationship with ASEAN since the establishment of the regional organization. It rejected membership in 1967, dissociated with the organization for the following two decades, rekindled its interest in the 1990s, and eventually became a full member in 1997. The country had to relinquish the rotating chairmanship in 2005 due to external pressure but finally won the opportunity to be ASEAN chair in 2014, a critical year in preparation for the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015.

Myanmar's chairmanship has not been an easy ride. The disputes and tensions in the South China Sea have raised difficult decisions and management challenges for Myanmar as chair of ASEAN. In particular, as a non-claimant country with a complicated relationship with China, Myanmar has had to manage a delicate balance between safeguarding ASEAN solidarity and avoiding antagonizing China. In addition, domestic obstacles such as religious and communal violence and infrastructure deficiencies have presented significant challenges to Myanmar's chairmanship role. Despite the challenges, most Myanmar observers have given positive assessments of Myanmar's performance as ASEAN chair. It is hoped that the chairmanship experience will lay a firm foundation for the country's growing role within the regional organization for the future.

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