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ASEAN as a Mediator of Burma Rejoining the International Community by Emmanuel Yujuico

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Western powers alike the US and the EU have long been at loggerheads over how to bring Burma back into the international fold. Whereas ASEAN has preferred to use “constructive engagement” that does not publicly ostracize Burma, Western powers have had longstanding economic [sanctions](#) in place regarding trade and investment. Which approach is more effective? Recent openings by Burma or (officially) Myanmar suggest that ASEAN’s carrots may pave the way for the removal of Western powers’ sticks instead of the other way around.

For all its fraught history under military rule, there is no denying that Burma is geographically part of Southeast Asia. Since ASEAN places mainly geographical criteria on membership—only Timor Leste remains outside its fold, although it is now making its case for [full membership](#)—Burma joining ASEAN in 1997 was a straightforward action. Unlike in the EU where aspirants are subject to human rights criteria and in the Eurozone with its macroeconomic criteria (which are far from [foolproof](#) as Greece has demonstrated), there is a greater tolerance of political-economic diversity in ASEAN almost by necessity.

There has been much interest in the West [as of late](#) regarding Myanmar’s ongoing attempt under Thein Sein to rescind its pariah status, shunned as it is by Western commerce. Given that many expressed scepticism about the conduct of elections in Myanmar in 2010, the actions of its current government are [unexpectedly encouraging](#) to many observers. Not only have IMF representatives visited Burma for the first time in a long time to consider how to mitigate its [dual exchange rate system](#), but the US has already sent an envoy [twice to look over](#) ongoing changes there. In particular, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi leading the drive towards applying sanctions has caused no small amount of debate: Has doing so left more Burmese worse off than otherwise? More contemporaneously, what should trigger the removal of these sanctions? ASEAN itself has [never been keen](#) on sanctions.

It is in this regard where we need to revisit ASEAN and its more encouraging approach to normalizing Myanmar’s standing in the international community. Myanmar is still smarting from being effectively forced to [vacate its turn](#) as the rotating chair of the organization in 2006. Although the newer member countries Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam favoured its chairmanship, original members including the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore did not over possible image problems for the regional grouping. However, Myanmar is now hoping that prisoner release, more humane treatment of minorities, economic reform and so on will help ASEAN become more comfortable with the idea of Burma chairing ASEAN in 2014.

Importantly, ASEAN’s erstwhile diplomatic heavyweights from G-20 member Indonesia have recently completed a [tour](#) of Myanmar, most prominently Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa who has commented on its now “irreversible” reforms. His voice will likely be the deciding one in determining whether Myanmar gets the nod for its desired 2014 chairmanship of ASEAN. A decision may come as soon as the upcoming 14-19 November 2011 summit in Bali, Indonesia. Many regional leaders [express](#) the particular need for whoever chairs ASEAN to maintain its image as an increasingly progressive grouping.

In a number of ways, Indonesia is a model for Myanmar in its transition from military-dominated rule to a more conventional market democracy. It was not so long ago that Indonesia underwent fairly traumatic changes after the fall of Suharto in 1998, and it probably has something to share on how to make a similar transition possible in Myanmar. For instance, the [Irrawaddy](#) notes that Indonesian parliamentarians have given advice to Burmese delegates on how providing a framework for political and economic reforms set the stage for Indonesia’s resurgence not only from decades of authoritarian rule but also from stagnation post-Asian financial crisis.

There is no small amount of regional prestige in chairing ASEAN. With its growing global clout, ASEAN also provides legitimacy to its putative head. The hopeful aspect is that 2014 when Myanmar wishes to chair the association is still a few years away, leaving it with little room in the meantime to return to its previous ways lest this prize be wrested from it (again). Myanmar is looking to ASEAN as a vehicle for legitimizing itself first within the region and then to the wider world instead of making a direct bid to normalize relations elsewhere. More so now than before, ASEAN does matter to its members as well as to the world community.

Lastly, it bears remembering that the Burmese themselves have produced highly skilled diplomats not just in regional but also in global arenas. U Thant, UN secretary-general from 1961 to 1971, is generally [remembered](#) for his adroit handling of various diplomatic convulsions at the height of the Cold War. Having had a successful diplomat who led practically the entire

international community as late as 1971, it is hard to believe that the Burmese do not have the perseverance and talent to simply rejoin it in 2011.

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