

**Talk Given by H.E. U Linn Myaing at the Course on Myanmar,  
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I would like to thank Professor David Steinberg for inviting me this afternoon to be a guest speaker during this very first course on Myanmar here at SAIS.

I am also delighted and honoured to meet young scholars who have a keen and genuine interest in my country and to give some input into the course from a perspective, not only of a representative of the Government of Myanmar but also of someone who was born, educated and spent most of his working life in that country. A citizen who believes that one day, Myanmar will develop into a peaceful, modern and developed country where democratic values that are in line with both our culture and traditions flourish.

I remember the time when my brother did his graduate studies here at SAIS way back in 1985-86, when he told me there was no program on Myanmar and practically no chance for a student to exchange views on events taking place in Myanmar with faculty members. Now, students like you who want to learn and conduct an in-depth study about the country's political, economic and social systems have a chance to do so and I believed that you are gaining knowledge from a balanced and correct perspective. I am happy not only for all of you, but also for my country.

I shall try my best to present to you the recent events taking place in my country and to explain to you the reasons behind these developments, as well as how geographical, historical, political and economic aspects contribute to the formation of policies in Myanmar's relations with the world community.

I cannot deny that Myanmar at present is a subject of controversy and that many people have difficulty in understanding the prevailing situation and that most people condemn what is happening without much thought. This is mainly due to misunderstandings created by much of the media and a lack of information on the actual facts regarding the country.

I notice that during the course of lectures given by Professor Steinberg so far, you have been able to acquaint yourselves with quite a number of events that took place in Myanmar decades ago. However, I should like to once again touch upon those aspects that have a bearing on the future direction of the country.

First and foremost, I should like to begin with the question of the name of the country. The official name of my country is now "Myanmar" and many people are puzzled by this and think of it as a new name. Actually, the first reference to the term Myanmar can be found on a stone inscription in one of the temples of Bagan built in the 12th century A.D. It was only after the annexation of the country by the British colonialists in the late 19th century that the country came to be known as Burma, presumably due to the fact that the majority of the inhabitants belong to the ethnic group Bamar. All through the period

that the country was referred to as Burma, we in our own language have always used Myanmar as the name of our country.

In Myanmar, there are 8 major national races or ethnic groups, namely Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine and Shan. The term Myanmar encompasses all the national races living in the country and not only to the Bamar race in contrast to the name Burma, which actually is an Anglicized name based on Bamar. As such, the Government restored the original usage of the name of the country to its rightful status in 1989 with the aim of breaking away from the colonial past and embracing all the ethnic groups living in Myanmar under a unified banner.

The United Nations was informed of the new name and the country is recognized as Myanmar in the U.N. This concept of the original name has been accepted and recognized by all countries in the world with the exception of a few Western countries who base their stand solely on political reasons without having any regard to the literature, language and history of the country and its people.

I feel that in order to understand the situation prevailing in Myanmar and her future direction, one needs to have a bit of background on the geographical location, the history, as well as the traditions, culture and characteristics of the people.

You are all aware that Myanmar, with a land area comparable to that of Texas, is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia and is sandwiched between Asia's two most populated and largest countries - China and India. It also forms a land bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Mountain ranges form a natural border with its neighbours, Bangladesh, India, China Laos and Thailand while it meets the Andaman Sea with 1300 miles of coastline to the South and Southwest.

Among the many mountainous regions around the country are found snow-capped mountains in the north, among which one is the highest peak in Southeast Asia. The mountains, the semi desert region in the Central Plain, the rich delta area to the South and the over 800 islands large and small along the long coastline, all provide an abundance of natural resources for the people. Myanmar is one of the few countries in the region with over 50% of its land still covered by forests.

This land with such diverse topography and natural resources attracted inhabitants from the north centuries ago and the first city states appeared in the 2nd century BC. It was in the 11th century AD that the first Myanmar Empire was formed by King Anawrahta after unifying the smaller city states of Mon, Shan and Rakhine. The kingdom was able to prosper and to remain free and independent for nearly 200 years until the Mongol hordes of Kublai Khan destroyed the city of Bagan.

The Empire disintegrated once again to smaller states until King Bayintnaung managed to unify the country again from 1552 to 1581 as the Second Myanmar Empire while King Alaungpaya ruled the Third Myanmar Empire in the 18th century.

During the reigns of these three great kings, Myanmar was strong and prosperous and managed to be independent. However, in the early 19th century, the potential and the rich resources of the country did not go unnoticed by the colonial powers. After 3 Anglo-Myanmar wars, the whole of Myanmar was annexed by the British and became a part of

the British Empire. The last Myanmar King was deposed in 1885 and exiled to India while Myanmar ceased to exist as a Kingdom.

After the Second World War broke out, Myanmar suffered twice as a major battle ground, leaving the land and its resources destroyed. When independence was finally regained in January 1948, the whole infrastructure of the country was in need of reconstruction. Unfortunately this was prevented by insurgencies that broke out throughout the country, on ideological, political, racial and religious grounds, the resulting legacy of a colonial administration of a divide and rule policy that favoured different groups over others. It got to the point of the then democratically elected government, besieged on all sides, being dubbed as the "Rangoon Government" because it could exert no effective authority beyond the city limits. In addition, the remnants of the Kuomintang Army from China tried to gain a toehold in the Northeast of the country.

However, we did manage to save the Union from disintegration and subsequently, different types of Government emerged. Due to the weaknesses in the State Constitution drawn up under the British rule, the governments that were formed according to the constitution could not deal with the threat of the disintegration of the Union and it led to the emergence of a new State Constitution with a one party system and a centrally planned economy. Since this did not produce results that the people expected, after 26 years of practice, it also collapsed with the upheaval of the masses in 1988. This was a time that saw mass looting and general lawlessness that led to public lynching by beheading amongst other things.

The Armed Forces of the Union, born out of the struggle for our independence, and which historically has saved the Union three times from disintegration was once again compelled to assume the responsibility of the State. The present Government managed to restore law and order, peace and stability in the country and has taken measures to build a peaceful, prosperous and modern democratic state, to benefit all the peoples residing in the Union.

From its history, the nature and characteristics of the Myanmar people can be clearly identified as being a nationalistic and proud people who cherish freedom and independence. Apart from being sincere and open, we do not want to hurt the feelings of others and this is encapsulated by the word *ah-nah-de* which has been described as being unique to the Myanmar people. We are tolerant and content with what we have, virtues most probably brought out by the Buddhist philosophy and way of life. However, we never give in easily to pressure and intimidation from others, especially from outsiders and will resist with whatever power we possess. Thus, we have often been accused of being too dogmatic and undiplomatic, foolishly stubborn to the point of getting hurt.

This leads me to the 4 factors about our country that needs to be taken into account when reflecting on the present situation in Myanmar and its future.

The first is that Myanmar has had to fight back for its independence. The second is that Myanmar is a multiracial society with 135 ethnic groups that are found scattered in overlapping areas of the country. The third is that, since regaining independence, there has been a problem of armed insurgency that still exists in pockets along the border areas. The fourth is our strategic location between China and India, two of Asia's major

powers.

I mention these factors because they have a significant bearing on the future direction of Myanmar. I cannot stress their importance enough as they play a most important role in the formation of any policy. Non disintegration of the Union, non disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty have become the main national causes. The present Government is committed to a multi-party democracy and a free market economy. Towards this, political parties of different shades and opinions have been allowed to form within the bounds of law in preparation for a multiparty democracy. And furthermore, a National Convention, comprising of delegates from all strata of life, including representatives of legally standing political parties, has been convened to lay down basic principles to be enshrined in the future State Constitution. Quite recently the political deadlock that once existed between the Government and the leading political party, the NLD, has been overcome and confidence has been restored to a certain degree between the two parties. Daw Aung Sann Suu Kyi and her senior colleagues have been moving around the country and resuming their party organizational activities without any restrictions. She has also been meeting with foreign guests, observing the infrastructure development projects undertaken by the Government as well as by relevant UN agencies. A situation has been created to further proceed with the national reconciliation process and to work out a home-grown political settlement at a pace beneficial to the country and the people.

On the economic front, necessary foundations for a market economy to flourish have been laid down and the door remains open for foreign investment. However, we understand that much time is required to transform one economic system to another and the Government is still feeling its way about the best road to take. Development of infrastructure continues, right into the border areas that previous governments could not go in due to insurgency problems. Numerous roads, dams and bridges have been built, new hospitals and schools opened and a progressively successful tourism industry continues to flourish along with the addition of necessary accommodations and transportation. The infrastructure development projects implemented in the far flung border regions, through a specifically established Ministry for the development of border areas and national races, have contributed significantly to the eradication of poppy cultivation and narcotic drugs. However, all of these successes achieved by the Government in developing the country for the betterment of the lives of the people are often ignored when the country is being talked about. We find such attitudes to be detrimental and not serving any useful purpose.

We have achieved all this because we were given time and space, as well as restraint, engagement and positive responses by the international community. Imposition of political pressure and negative economic maneuver could never lead to such progress. We will continue to make sure that we progress steadily and surely, rather than hastily and haphazardly. We have seen in many developing countries that rapid transformations often lead to anarchy and instability. Taking into consideration the four factors I mentioned earlier, and the level of development of the country, it would be a pity if this were the future Myanmar is to head into.

I would now like to turn to the foreign policy of Myanmar and the role that Myanmar is playing in international and regional arenas.

Cold War was beginning as Myanmar regained her independence and at that point, the

top priority was economic, infrastructure and social reconstruction. We believed that only by staying out of the conflicts in the region could we achieve our goals. Therefore Myanmar adopted an independent and nonaligned foreign policy, which later was turned into an independent and active foreign policy. Myanmar participates actively in activities for world peace, opposes any kind of war, imperialism and colonialism, and maintains friendly relations with all countries in accordance with 5 principles of peaceful coexistence whose essence is mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. These principles of peaceful coexistence still remain the major cornerstone of the Foreign Policy of Myanmar.

Especially throughout the cold war period, Myanmar maintained its neutrality and repelled communist domination from the North at the expense of the lives of many of our fine soldiers. When communism was threatening some of our Southeast Asian neighbours, the free world never had to fear that Myanmar would succumb or be overrun. And you have to remember that this was achieved without receiving any assistance from the US or from any other country. This is another reason why the Armed Forces are such an integral part of Myanmar.

Myanmar became the 58th member of the United Nations, 3 months after regaining independence and since then, has been working as a responsible member of the organization with relevant agencies for the development of the country, as well as for the betterment of the whole world.

U Thant of Myanmar led the United Nations for 10 years during the difficult Cold War era, contributing immensely to the prevalence of peace throughout the world and to the development of the organisation.

Not only does Myanmar actively participate in the affairs of the world in the UN context, she is also contributing in any way she can for the advancement of the developing countries by being a founding member of the nonaligned movement. We are convinced that the developing countries could cooperate politically, economically and socially in the framework of the movement.

Myanmar always puts great emphasis on the promotion of bilateral relations with the countries in Asia. In 1967, when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded, Myanmar was invited to be a founding member of the association. But due to the national policy at that time and international and regional situations, Myanmar declined the offer. However, when the country opened up again, both politically and economically in 1988, it did become possible for Myanmar to join ASEAN. Subsequently in 1997, we became a full fledged member of ASEAN and is now participating fully in the activities of ASEAN, including the US-ASEAN Dialogue.

Also to pursue economic cooperation with the South Asian countries, Myanmar joined BIST-EC, the economic cooperation group comprising of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand in 1997, thus changing the name to BIMST-EC (Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand-Economic Cooperation).

As Myanmar possesses a strategic location in the region, in addition to being a land bridge between South and Southeast Asia, it plays an important role in the development of the economy as well as for the security of the region. She also possesses an

abundance of natural resources and has the potential to be a major food supplier to the other countries.

Any presentation on Myanmar's interaction with foreign countries would not be complete without mentioning relations with the United States, a relationship that actually began way back in 1857 when the American emissary and missionary Mr. Kincaid was received by King Mindon who in turn, sent a letter to President Buchanan of the US to announce his wish to become an ally for the benefit of the future generations for both countries.

During the Second World War, armed forces led by famous American generals such as Stillwell and Merrill played a decisive role in the Northern Myanmar Campaign and in the Chinese theatre.

Diplomatic relations were established between Myanmar and the United States in September of 1947, 4 months before we actually became a sovereign state. We have had good relations with the United States, with cooperation in many fields including counter narcotics, until 1988 when relations cooled due to political reasons.

In 1997, relations got to a new low level when the administration issued an executive order banning new American investment in Myanmar depriving both US companies and Myanmar entrepreneurs of their right to participate freely in the economic life of the country. This was an unfortunate decision as it meant that US companies will have to try and catch up with other international companies should the executive order be rescinded.

In addition, there is now a movement afoot in the Congress to impose sanctions on all products from Myanmar into the United States. It has led to a cancellation of orders from garment factories in Myanmar. There are nearly 400 garment factories in Myanmar of which only 2 are wholly state owned. The rest are in private hands and altogether they hire about 300,000 people. Each person working in the factory has an average of 5 people dependent on the worker's income. As orders dwindle some factories have had to be shut down, leading to the loss of jobs for the workers. Not only does the worker lose her job, the source of income for her family is also lost. So, if all the garment factories were to close, it would mean that about one and a half million people will be left without means of support. The lack of US investment in Myanmar means that sanctions can be imposed with very little effect on American interests. It is for precisely this reason that those lawmakers who are trying to push through the sanctions can do so without much thought given or research done about what the effects of the sanctions will do to the ordinary people of Myanmar.

Our country has great potential not only in terms of natural resources but also in its hardworking people. Companies that invest in Myanmar generally find satisfaction in working with the local workforce and hopefully American companies will eventually be able to have the opportunity to enter the country.

There has been some progress in the state of relations between Myanmar and the US. In recent months, there have been enhanced cooperation in the areas of counter terrorism, counter narcotics, combat of HIV-AIDS, and search and recovery of the remains of American servicemen lost in the northern regions of Myanmar during the Second world War.

Myanmar continues to pursue a policy of friendship and cooperation with all the countries of the world. It is our fervent hope that the international community will come to understand the challenges and difficulties that Myanmar is facing in transforming the country to a democratic society and provide the necessary support and encouragement so that we reach our goal sooner, rather than later.

I hope that you will study the situation in Myanmar from all possible angles, instead of focusing only on the negatives, a trend which unfortunately has only been too popular among people outside the country. It is also important to remember that the issues in Myanmar are not simple and that like any situation, there is no black or white answer to them. Failure to learn and accept the complexities of Myanmar can lead you to a skewed perspective. Complexities such as those with the ethnic issue, the drug problems - ironically introduced into the country and encouraged to proliferate throughout the society by the colonial administration for their own political purposes, and the insurgency problem that appeared together with our independence and which still exists now. But maybe you have to have lived under conditions related to these issues to understand what I am trying to say.

It would of course be best if you could visit the country and see for yourselves what it is really like out there and then only make your own judgment. Failing that, my colleagues at the Embassy and myself stand ready to provide you with any information regarding Myanmar and also to assist you in any way we can should any of you decide to visit the country.

Thank you.

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