



# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

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Bünthe, Marco, and Jörn Dosch (2015),  
Myanmar: Political Reforms and the Recalibration of External Relations, in:  
*Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 34, 2, 3–19.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-8710>

ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<[www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org](http://www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org)>

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Published by

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and  
Hamburg University Press.

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# Myanmar: Political Reforms and the Recalibration of External Relations

Marco Bünthe and Jörn Dosch

## Introduction

Myanmar has seen an unprecedented political opening in recent years, which has clearly transformed the long-term repressive military regime. Since President U Thein Sein took office in March 2011, he has initiated a political liberalisation that has reduced repression and created avenues for participation in the institutions designed by the military the decade before. These reforms have opened new political space for both civil society and the political opposition. As a consequence, the international community has praised U Thein Sein widely for his reformist policies. *Foreign Policy* named him “Thinker of the Year” in 2012, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon praised his “vision, leadership and courage to put Myanmar on the path to change”. Despite these glorifications, however, Myanmar’s political opening is highly contested. Some see Myanmar’s reforms as a “survival strategy of the quasi-military government” to overcome the danger of factionalism and to increase regime durability by creating power-sharing institutions (McDonald 2013; Croissant and Kamerling 2013). Others see the current opening as the beginning of a “protracted transition” to unfold in the years to come (Bünthe forthcoming). Some authors have also posited that it was the military’s desire to establish domestic and international legitimacy that triggered Myanmar’s elites to change (Pederson 2012).

Robert Taylor contends that it was the country’s dire economic situation that stimulated change (Taylor 2012). In this article, it is argued that the country’s liberalisation is a deliberate strategy of the military, whose aim is to achieve economic renewal and a recalibration of foreign relations. This special issue is specifically devoted to examining the changing foreign policy of the liberalizing regime, the external aspects of Myanmar’s reform process, and the relevant reception and implications of this foreign policy shift. The idea for this issue emerged from a conference on Myanmar’s international relations at the Department of Political and Administrative Sciences at the University of Rostock in November 2014, where earlier versions of most of the following articles were presented. The conference was funded by the university’s Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

This opening chapter provides some background to the domestic reform agenda, along with its drivers and motivations. From 1988 to 2011, the military built up institutions that guaranteed the military's dominant position in the political arena. The second phase, since 2011, has seen a guided relaxation of the military's coercive controls and the liberalisation of political spaces for the opposition and civil society. In order to contextualise Myanmar's external relations, this article will first describe the military's strategy and then outline the key changes that have been implemented in the country's foreign policy.

## The General's Grand Strategy: The Background to the "Burmese Spring"

The military reverted to civilian rule in 2011 only after it managed to create a new political order that "locked in" the military's political role. Having consolidated its position internally and severely weakened the opposition movement, the top military leadership embarked on a transition to a "disciplined democracy", entrenching the military's political prerogatives (Bunte 2014). The political changes from 2003 to 2011 fell short of a genuine democratic transition, since they did not entail any form of political liberalisation and because the political space was extremely narrow and repression was at its tightest during the years of implementation (Praeger Nyein 2009). The most important steps in this process of formal institution-building were the writing of a new constitution (1993–1996; 2004–2007), the referendum about the new constitution (2008) and the creation of a regime-sponsored party and the (heavily scripted) elections in November 2010. To ensure that all these steps of formal institution-building would proceed smoothly and as it saw fit, the junta dominated the whole process, selected the members of the National Convention and rigged the referendum and elections in 2010. Senior General Than Shwe first had to overcome the dangers of factionalism within the military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and then ensure the unity of the armed forces (see Bunte 2014).

## Political Liberalisation under U Thein Sein

In his inaugural address in March 2011, President U Thein Sein announced far-reaching political, administrative and economic reforms. This unexpected liberalisation was not a product of a schism within the military, caused by external pressures or a defeat in war – rather, it

emerged from the military's position of strength: Having entrenched military prerogatives and secured the old guard's exit from power, the second guard could "safely" embark on a liberalisation of the political system from the top down. During his first months in office, U Thein Sein convinced the opposition and members of the international community of his commitment to reform. Although initiated from a position of strength, the plans encountered resistance from conservative bureaucrats and hardliners in the military, as they felt their vested interests and their positions were endangered (Hlaing 2012; Pedersen 2011). During his first three years in office, U Thein Sein initiated political (first year), socio-economic (second year) and administrative (third year) reforms. Whereas the political reforms ensured a liberalisation of the political system, the socio-economic and administrative reforms of the second and third years aimed primarily to improve governance, fight corruption and reform the economy.

What led to these reforms? President U Thein Sein himself attributed the need for reforms to his experience visiting the Irrawaddy Delta after a devastating cyclone, Nargis, hit the area in May 2008. Seeing that people in the Irrawaddy Delta were not expecting state authorities to help them led to an "understanding that things could not go on the way they were" (*Financial Times* 2012). His personal experience might explain his own reformist agenda, but other daunting challenges set further incentives for reform: First, Myanmar's economic reliance on China and the military's (nationalist) fear of China's growing influence made economic and social reforms imperative and triggered decisions to seek a re-engagement with the West. Second, although the impact of sanctions has been contested for years, it became clear that Myanmar needed to end the isolation to create new opportunities for its business sector (made up of cronies of the military) and the general population at large. Since a political liberalisation was a precondition for dialogue with the West, political and economic reforms needed to be initiated (Bünthe and Portela 2013). However, since the junta leader was pressured by a younger generation of army officers and could only safely retire after he managed his succession, he transferred power only after the process of formal institution-building was finalised. After four-and-a-half years in office, the country has seen much progress in the fields of national reconciliation, liberalisation of political freedoms and press censorship. However, the liberalisation is also very uneven and has had the unintended consequence of contributing to religious and ethnic violence.

## Reconciliation with the NLD and the Release of Political Prisoners

Building some kind of truce and a genuine reconciliation with the National League for Democracy (NLD) was a precondition for a recalibration of external relations. Consequently, since coming into office, the Thein Sein government has attempted to improve its relationship with the main opposition party. Knowing that he could only rebuild the country with the help of opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Thein Sein approached her and invited her to Naypyidaw on 17 August 2011. Her consent to the president's reform path was key to making Western states lift their economic sanctions. In a scene heavy with symbolism, the two were photographed at Thein Sein's residence with the president seated under a portrait of her father, independence hero General Aung San (*New Light of Myanmar* 2011). A day later, she stated that she believed that "the president wants real change" (ICG 2011: 3). In November 2011, the Thein Sein government amended the political-party registration law and the election law, which allowed the opposition leader to run in future elections. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi gave up her confrontational approach towards the regime and steered the opposition towards reconciliation. The NLD decided to register the party with the Election Commission and run in the April 2012 by-elections.

In early January 2012, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi described the president as "an honest man [...], a man capable of taking risks if he thinks they are worth taking" (*BBC* 2012) – an indication that she knew how difficult implementing reforms would be, given the resistance of hard-line elements within the military. The by-elections of 1 April 2012, which were held to fill 46 vacant parliamentary seats, were generally seen as an important credibility test of the will to reform on the part of Thein Sein's new government. The NLD enjoyed a landslide victory in the April by-elections, winning 43 of 44 seats they contested. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, herself, managed to get elected to Parliament in a rural township outside of Yangon. Most internal and external observers characterised the by-elections as relatively free and fair (*Election Monitoring Network* 2012). Although the by-elections were a major step in the country's transition, their significance is limited, since only a finite number of seats were open and the outcome could not significantly alter the balance of power within Parliament, which is still dominated by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Nevertheless, the NLD transformed itself from an "anti-system" opposition party into one that is "transition-seeking" (Bunte forthcoming) and is now working within the political system

to bring political change. The NLD's announcement that it would put candidates forward for the 2015 elections emphasizes this change.

To demonstrate his reformist credentials, U Thein Sein had already released a number of political prisoners by mid-January 2012 – among them, some of the most vocal government critics – seemingly without any conditions attached to their release: student leaders Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi; the leader of the 2007 monks' demonstrations, Ashin Gambira; and comedian Zarnagar. A number of those released were able to join the political process. For instance, members of the 88 Generation Students Group decided to form the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, an NGO, which helped monitor the by-elections (Election Monitoring Network 2012) and mobilised against ethnic intolerance, openly condemning Buddhist attacks on minority Muslims (see below). Since his appointment, President U Thein Sein has granted amnesty to selected prisoners on 13 separate occasions, the latest occurring in January 2014. On 6 February 2013, the president announced plans to form a committee to “scrutinize the remaining political prisoners serving their terms in prisons throughout the country so as to grant them liberty” (quoted in Martin 2013: 6). The 16-member committee was chaired by Union Minister Soe Thein and included representatives from opposition groups with a history of supporting the release of political prisoners, such as the 88 Generation Students Group, the AAPP(B) (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners [Burma]) and the NLD. The committee has met several times, but significant differences emerged regarding the definition of “political prisoner” and, by extension, regarding the estimates of the number of political prisoners in Burma; even a year later, the committee reportedly continued to disagree about both (Martin 2013).

Moreover, critics claim that the government continues to arrest and detain activists, often for violating new laws governing the right to peaceful assembly and protest (author's interview with a local NGO activist, Yangon, 4 April 2013). According to data from the AAPP(B), there are currently 169 political prisoners in Myanmar, most being held for violating article 18 of the peaceful assembly law. The liberalisation thus entailed a significant opening without fully establishing freedom to mobilise for either opposition or ethnic groups (discussed below).

## Relaxing Press Censorship

A very significant move of the opening has been the relaxation of internet and media controls, resulting in a level of press freedom not seen since 1962. In 2011 internet controls and censorship were relaxed and

certain restrictions on international and independent news websites were lifted. In August 2012 the government proclaimed both an end to pre-publication censorship and the dissolution of the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division. As a consequence, Reporters without Borders ranked Myanmar 145th of 179 countries in 2014. Previously, the country was ranked 151st (2013), 169th (2012) and 174th (2011). We have witnessed a considerable liberalisation of the press. However, parallel to this, conservative bureaucrats within the Ministry of Information have exhibited a continuous resistance to this opening. There are also older laws and guidelines in place that call for prison sentences for those who disseminate information perceived to pose a threat to national security, domestic tranquillity or racial harmony; report about corruption or ethnic politics; or portray the government negatively (Reporters without Borders 2012: 38). The government has also used its powers to suspend press freedom in recent years, whenever it felt the press violated this responsibility. For instance, in July 2012 the magazines *The Voice* and *Envoy* were suspended for reporting on a possible cabinet change. In February 2014 the government arrested five journalists and banned the privately owned *Unity Journal* for “disclosing state secrets” – it had published a story on the construction of a chemical weapons factory in central Myanmar. The reporters were sentenced to ten years in jail based on the 1923 State Secrets Act – the sentence was subsequently reduced to seven years. All this indicates that progress still needs to be made before a free press that can act as a fourth estate can be established.

Moreover, press liberalisation proved to be a double-edged sword for Myanmar’s transition. On the one hand, it enabled a freer discussion about political reforms. On the other hand, however, it allowed for a Buddhist-nationalist discourse and the agitation of an ultra-nationalist movement that preached intolerance and violence against the country’s Muslim community. Xenophobic, nationalistic anti-Muslim sentiments were spread on the internet and social media platforms.

## Allowing Room for Civil Society

Freedoms of movement and association have also been liberalised, which has allowed civil society more space to become active. As part of this democratic reform agenda, President U Thein Sein signed the new Law on Freedom of Assembly in December 2011. The law, which is still very much contested today, allows for peaceful demonstrations under very tight conditions: Organisers have to ask the authorities for permission five days in advance. The law also imposed a penalty of one year’s

imprisonment for protests staged without permission. This law has broadened the freedom of movement so greatly over the past year that the country has seen a number of protests – for instance, demonstrations by hundreds of residents of Yangon and Mandalay against energy shortages in May 2012 (*The New York Times* 2012). Following the suspension of two newspapers in July, nearly 100 journalists in Yangon and approximately 60 in Mandalay protested, most wearing black t-shirts reading “Stop killing the press”. In September and October 2012 lawyers demonstrated against the privatisation of state property (*The Irrawaddy* 2012). However, several applications to rally by ethnic groups and the opposition have been rejected, such as the NLD’s attempt to commemorate Martyrs’ Day in 2012 and the student union’s wish to honour the 50th anniversary of the student protests at Yangon University.

Whereas civil society’s space has grown and many protests have been tolerated, a number of activists have also been charged for demonstrating without permission. In November 2012 the authorities violently cracked down on a protest by villagers and monks against the expansion of a copper mine in Letpadaung, near Monywa. More than 70 protesters were injured when riot police stepped in to quell the demonstrations against the project, which was a collaboration between a Chinese company and the military conglomerate Myanmar Economic Holdings. The crackdown led to a public outcry and a rare apology by state authorities (*Myanmar Times* 2012). However, a number of civil society activists have been jailed since 2012 for organizing protests at the copper mine. The episode illustrates two developments: First, civil society activists and NGOs today have far more room to mobilise and make their voices heard than they did previously. Second, some politicians and authorities – with vested interests – still use the law to stifle public protests.

The government also promulgated a new law on labour organisation that allows for the formation of unions and grants the right to strike. The International Labor Organization (ILO) provided assistance in drafting the law. As with public demonstrations, workers in the public sector must provide notice to strike 14 days in advance, and workers in the private sector must provide notice three days in advance. A number of unions were formed. After by-laws for the labour legislation were enacted in March 2012, more than 350 worker organisations were formed by the end of that year, and another 260 were assembled by mid-August 2013, according to figures from the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security. As a consequence, strikes at factories have increased tremendously, especially at industrial sites near Yangon. All in all, civil society is able to thrive far more freely than ever before. The room to

manoeuvre has grown remarkably in the last two years. New political freedoms enrich this picture. In all areas, however, reforms are fragile and contested, and there is still resistance on the part of some authorities to giving room to activists and civil society groups.

## Attempted National Reconciliation: The New Peace Initiative

Since coming into office, President U Thein Sein has also attempted to bring an end to the 60-year-long civil war between the central government and certain ethnic groups. Relations between the government and the ethnic groups had been deteriorating even more drastically since 2009, as the military government attempted to force ethnic-minority armies to convert into Border Guard Forces under the control of the Burmese army. Ceasefires with the Kachin collapsed, enhancing the latent distrust held by ethnic-minority leaders, who felt once more that the Burmese government was neither interested in genuine peace nor willing to satisfy their main demands of ending human rights abuses, ensuring equitable resource-sharing and strengthening regional autonomy. In his inaugural address, U Thein Sein declared he would make peace a priority and promised to hold talks without prior conditions. In the next two years, he managed to sign peace agreements with most of the ethnic armed groups (17). In January 2012 a ceasefire agreement with the Karen National Union (KNU) was signed – the first in 50 years of civil conflict. These ceasefires were supposed to lead to a national ceasefire between the central government and all ethnic groups (Holliday 2012). After 15 rounds of negotiations, the government and the rebel representatives managed to sign a draft of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) on 31 March 2015. The NCA needed to be signed by *all* armed ethnic group leaders as well. At their meeting in June 2015 they agreed on the existing text, but demanded various additions to the document. The government's reaction to the new developments was lukewarm, revealing of its general opposition to amending the draft.

Moreover, the peace process has been overshadowed by constant fighting, especially in the northeastern part of the country; the Burmese military continues to fight the Kachin and the Kokang rebels. Decades of fighting have created a climate of distrust. The ethnic groups continue to harbour great reservations about the government; the latter is demanding that the former abandon their armed struggles, recognise the Constitution, give up fighting and integrate themselves into the national

army. The ethnic groups have not found a common voice, with most, but not all, of them demanding a rewriting or serious revision of the Constitution along with the establishment of a truly federal state with a federally structured army. Lasting peace is a protracted issue, since on both sides economic interests are involved and major grievances need to be recognised.

## The Reaction to Reform: Myanmar's External Relations

As a medium-sized and relatively underdeveloped country, Myanmar's foreign policy has always been more reactive than proactive (Ganesan 2005: 31). Since its independence, the country has followed a non-aligned foreign policy and there have been a number of intriguing continuities, such as the involvement of the military in foreign policy and their attempt to manage border areas in times of civil war (Egreteau and Jagan 2013). Moreover, balancing its strategic partners has always been a characteristic of Myanmar's foreign policy strategy. The country's rulers have tried to remain equidistant from each neighbour. For instance, when Than Shwe made a state visit to New Delhi in 2004, other senior members visited China. At the same time, pre-2011 Myanmar had not been fully autonomous in designing and managing its foreign relations, due to sanctions imposed by the US, the EU and other mainly Western powers. Until the late 1980s, Myanmar had been well integrated into the international system. However, this structural setting changed dramatically in August 1998 when, in the wake of the violent crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, many foreign governments started to rethink their approach, leading to staggered sanction regimes and Myanmar's partial international isolation in the 1990s and early 2000s. The United States' policy towards Myanmar was focused on the restoration of democracy and support for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD (Haacke 2012). In a similar vein, the EU made the normalisation of relations conditional upon an "improvement in the human rights situation" and "substantive progress towards an inclusive democratization process" (EU 2010). Myanmar's post-2011 reform process has not only triggered the gradual lifting of external sanctions but also provided the framework for tangible adjustments of policy. David Cameron, UK prime minister, spearheaded the re-engagement process when he became the first high-profile Western leader to visit Myanmar since the beginning of the reforms – in April

2012, only a week after the NLD won a number of seats in a series of parliamentary by-elections.

The domestic reform process has also provided the backdrop against which Myanmar has started to realign its relations with China. During the period of international sanctions, Myanmar depended largely on Beijing's support, both politically and economically, for its security and development. However, as Maung Aung Myoe argues in the first of the following articles, for some years the SLORC/SPDC regime had been increasingly uncomfortable with its great reliance on China. Beijing, in turn, sees Myanmar as a "geopolitical pivot", or more precisely, a pillar of its "string of pearls" strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. Myanmar is the only country bordering China with access to the Eastern Indian Ocean, specifically the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. For many observers within Myanmar, China's past support for the military regime had been a main factor in preventing any meaningful political change or democratisation and in strengthening the repressive nature of the regime. While the Burmese government – realising that the strategic asymmetry between Myanmar and China is unlikely to disappear – has refrained from presenting or constructing China as a threat, there can be little doubt that reducing Myanmar's strategic and economic dependence on Beijing ranks high on Thein Sein's foreign policy agenda. The most visible – and, for Beijing, shocking – indication in this regard was the decision in September 2011 to suspend the construction of the controversial Myitsone Dam, a hydroelectric project financed and led by a state-owned Chinese company.

Myanmar's government does not perceive its relations with China and the US as a zero-sum game in which changes in one case inevitably impact the other. In other words, Naypyidaw's more sober perspective on Beijing is not primarily the result of markedly improved political and economic ties with Washington. At the same time, it is hard to ignore that normalizing relations with the United States seems to be the highest priority for Myanmar. Jürgen Haacke shows that the comprehensive reforms ushered in from mid-2011 by President U Thein Sein formed an important stepping stone, but Washington's 2009 adoption of pragmatic engagement as the outcome of the Burma policy review conducted by the Obama administration played an equally important part in the process of bilateral rapprochement. On her groundbreaking visit to Myanmar in late 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would reciprocate under the formula of "action-for-action". Ultimately, however, the substantive US policy shifts towards Myanmar in 2012 proved possible only because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

agreed with the Thein Sein government and the Obama administration that the time for a new approach had come. Haacke also elaborates on the dynamic patterns of decision-making regarding US Myanmar policy and finds that particularly during the first term of the Obama administration, the State Department became the key incubator of and vehicle for change in relations with Myanmar, whereas congressional voices remained largely subdued. However, as Myanmar's political reforms failed to advance beyond the key concessions offered in 2012, Myanmar has again become a point of controversy between the administration and Congress. The question of military engagement has attracted particular attention. Haacke concludes that existing congressional resistance to more substantial military-to-military relations is likely to place a ceiling on any further deepening of bilateral ties for the time being.

Such explicit or implicit limits to the depth and breadth of cooperation are not visible in the case of relations between the European Union and Myanmar. The EU has evinced a comprehensive foreign policy change, from a rigorous sanctions-driven approach to a sudden, almost hyper-optimistic embrace of and support for the still fragile and ultimately risk-prone reform process. At the same time, Jörn Dosch and Jatswan S. Sidhu demonstrate that, while guided by normative convictions and concerns for human rights and democracy, the EU's approach and posture *vis-à-vis* Myanmar since 1988 has been more reactive than carefully planned and strategised. Whereas in the period from 1988 until early 2011 the EU's Myanmar policy frequently fluctuated between a "carrot" and a "stick" approach, depending on the circumstances, since 2011 the emphasis has been exclusively on carrots. This signifies an important shift in the application of normative power. The EU has generously provided large amounts of aid intended mainly to assist Myanmar in its transition. The European Commission alone has allocated 688 million EUR to support the country's reform process over the period 2014–2020, an amount supplemented by equally substantial contributions from several member states, including but not limited to Germany, the UK, France and Sweden. The EU's official documents reflect a strong optimism about the reform process that does not factor in the possibility of an autocratic recession. While this optimism is shared by the European Commission and most EU member states, the similar perceptions and compatible normative foundations on which their policies are based have so far not translated into well-coordinated and coherent foreign policy strategies and development cooperation programmes.

However, no external actor has responded more enthusiastically to Myanmar's political transition than Japan, which has forgiven an unprec-

edently high percentage of Myanmar's debt and allocated new large-scale official development assistance (ODA), including the first yen loans to Myanmar in a quarter of a century. As Donald M. Seekins explains, in collaboration with the new post-junta regime, Tokyo has sketched out ambitious development projects for Myanmar that, if carried out, would be a major factor in transforming not only the economy but also society and inter-ethnic relations within Southeast Asia's second-largest country. Both the large size of Japan's post-2011 ODA intervention in Myanmar and its emphasis on ambitious infrastructure projects, especially special economic zones (SEZs), draw attention to an important yet often ignored problem in the usual debates on "development": Can modernizing and transforming an "undeveloped" economy and society solve deep and long-standing *political* conflicts, or is it likely that technology-driven economic development, by concentrating power more thoroughly in the hands of recipient-country elites, will succeed only in making the political system more authoritarian? Seekins takes a pessimistic view, arguing the inflow of large amounts of ODA is likely to be destabilizing. Indeed, it is likely to make deep-rooted social and ethnic conflicts inside Myanmar even worse than they are now unless, prior to large-scale economic intervention, there is a *political* resolution to the most serious of these conflicts.

Whereas China, the US, the EU and Japan are trying to establish a new basis for their respective bilateral relations with Myanmar, India and Russia are encountering the challenges and opportunities implicit in building tangible relations in the absence of strong historical foundations. Pierre Gottschlich describes India's approach towards Myanmar as a "new beginning in international diplomacy". From an Indian perspective, as Gottschlich argues, a change in the relations between New Delhi and Naypyidaw is not simply conceivable but absolutely necessary. For India, the current situation presents a unique opportunity to rectify some foreign policy failures of the past and overhaul its attitude of obliviousness and neglect towards Myanmar that has marred the relationship for decades – in spite of a 1951 bilateral Treaty of Friendship, which, according to Nehru, was supposed to last "forever thereafter". After more than 65 years, New Delhi has still not made a palpable foreign policy announcement about Myanmar, let alone drafted a grand strategy regarding the country – a rather surprising fact given that the two states share a land border stretching 1,643 kilometres. Drawing on interviews with different stakeholder groups, Gottschlich shows that there is agreement neither on the most decisive issues in the bilateral relationship nor on the order of India's foreign policy priorities towards Myanmar. However, five themat-

ic areas have emerged as the *de facto* cornerstones of India's interest: Democratisation, the most important focal point of Western actors, is probably the weakest and "fuzziest" one in India's case. New Delhi's more crucial foreign policy concerns are directed towards security in India's Northeast and the problem of illegal migration, the expansion of trade and infrastructure development, access to energy resources, and the role of Myanmar in India's relations with China. Beijing naturally plays an important role in all of New Delhi's foreign policy considerations. India and China seemingly compete for influence in Myanmar in every policy area. According to Gottschlich, many members of the Indian foreign policy establishment perceive their own nation and China as rivals, particularly regarding the "crossroads" nation Myanmar.

China is an equally important factor in Russia's emerging relations with Myanmar. In the concluding paper of this special edition, Ludmila Lutz-Auras demonstrates that in view of the rise of China – as well as Washington's "Pivot to Asia" announced by the Obama administration – Moscow does not want to risk any kind of marginalisation in Southeast Asia, a region increasingly seen as an economic and strategic priority. Russia aspires to gain a foothold in Myanmar, with the threefold geopolitical objective of increasing and strengthening its access to the Indian subcontinent, the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. Unlike the US, the EU and other Western powers, Russia never imposed sanctions on Myanmar or interrupted political and economic relations. Yet, economic ties form a weak base – the bilateral trade volume totalled 113.9 million USD in 2013, a negligible sum. "In the light of activities of Chinese, Thai and Indian entrepreneurs, the Russian businesses look quite pale in Myanmar", writes Lutz-Auras, pointing to a wait-and-see mentality of Russian companies. However, Russia has recently begun to successfully establish itself as a major stakeholder in the country's oil and gas sector. Defence relations between the two countries – fuelled by Russian weapon sales – have also been growing.

Overall, the six articles provide evidence of a frantic international search for both opportunities in Myanmar and competition for influence there. Based on substantial ODA and investments, but also general diplomatic and political support, the US, the EU and Japan have sought and secured major roles for themselves in Myanmar's socio-economic and political transition, which has translated into an expanding US, European and Japanese presence in the country. This development has come at the expense of China's influence. However, China has maintained its position as Myanmar's second-largest trading partner (the top position has been occupied by Thailand for more than a decade) and is possibly still

seen by sizeable segments within the military-turned-civilian government as the country's most important political ally. Domestic peace-building, the democratisation process and the human rights situation in Myanmar are matters of interest and concern for the US, the EU and – to a lesser extent – Japan, but not for China and Russia. Despite its rhetoric and support of liberal values, India's position is closer to China and Russia's than to the former grouping's. At the same time, the US, EU and Japan – let us call them the “international pro-democracy actors” – are not following a coherent and coordinated strategy in their support of the reform process. Even within the US and the EU, there is hardly any agreement on the best and most preferable policy options to pursue in relations with Myanmar. While in the case of the US the argument is being fought between the administration and Congress, the EU member states, amongst themselves and in conjunction with the European Commission, have not even tried to harmonise their approaches. At first glance, the situation resembles Cambodia in the 1990s, when international donors transformed the country into a “playground” for their development experiments (Dosch 2007: 152). There is, however, a striking difference: The involvement of foreign actors in Myanmar is mainly driven by powerful mercantilist interests that were absent in the case of Cambodia. As Pierre Gottschlich rightly points out in his article, “Myanmar's vast oil and gas resources are intriguing to many countries. Competition for exploration and exploitation rights began long ago.”

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**Keywords:** Myanmar, Burma, foreign policy, political reforms, political liberalisation, external relations

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