

Singapore: Presentation Notes

The Honorable Chan Heng Chee
Ambassador of Singapore to the United States

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee took up her appointment as Singapore's Ambassador to the United States in 1996. Prior to her appointment, she was the Executive Director of the Singapore International Foundation (which created a Singapore version of the Peace Corps) and Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. She was the founding Director of the Institute of Policy Studies. She has served as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations and was concurrently High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico. Ambassador Chan has received a number of awards including Honorary Degrees of Doctor of Letters from the University of Newcastle, Australia; and the University of Buckingham, United Kingdom. She was named International Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women in 1998 and she won Singapore's inaugural "Woman of the Year, Award." She received the National Book Award in the non-fiction section for *A Sensation of Independence: A Political Biography of David Marshall* in 1986 and the National Book Award for *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grassroots* in 1978.

Ambassador Chan has served as a member on the International Advisory Board of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the International Council of the Asia Society.

Ambassador Chan received from the Government of Singapore The Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 1999 and the Meritorious Service Medal in 2005.

Ambassador Chan was educated at the University of Singapore and Cornell University.

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I am sharing with you Singapore's experience in dealing with Myanmar, post-Cyclone Nargis, as a case study for today's discussion. You may recall that in September 2007 the regime had cracked down violently on peaceful demonstrations led by Buddhist monks. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers, who were then in New York for the UN General Assembly, convened an emergency meeting and reacted strongly to express our collective revulsion. We also supported the use of the Good Offices of the UN through the Gambari Mission. However, the Myanmar Government objected to Professor Gambari meeting ASEAN leaders during the Summit in Singapore at the end of 2007, making it clear that Nay Pyi Taw wanted to deal with the UN and the international community directly. Thereafter, ASEAN stood aside until Cyclone Nargis tragically hit Myanmar the following May.

Cyclone Nargis left more than 130,000 people missing and dead. For two weeks, there was a standoff between a paranoid Myanmar government on one side, and foreign governments and international aid agencies on the other. ASEAN and the ASEAN Secretary-General made strenuous efforts to persuade Myanmar to accept international assistance. Singapore, as the ASEAN Chair, convened an emergency ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting (19 May 08) and persuaded Myanmar to agree to the formation of an ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force (AHTF) and the Tripartite Core Group (TCG) comprising of the Myanmar government, ASEAN, and the UN, to oversee the flow of international assistance. ASEAN also worked with the UN to hold the ASEAN-UN International Pledging Conference three weeks after the cyclone to raise international aid for Myanmar.

Lessons Drawn

The destruction caused by Cyclone Nargis was unprecedented in magnitude and the situation would have been much worse if the international community – both governments and aid agencies – had not offered assistance.

ASEAN's involvement has been key to the success so far of the Nargis relief and recovery programme. ASEAN was the vital bridge between the UN and the international community and the extremely wary and distrustful Myanmar government. ASEAN's

involvement served as an assurance to the Myanmar that humanitarian assistance was not going to be used as a pretext to bring about regime change, while giving assurance to the international community that the aid would not be diverted to non-humanitarian uses.

It's generally agreed among donor governments and NGOs that as the aid effort stabilised, there has been no substantial diversion of humanitarian supplies. Singapore's own projects have proceeded smoothly. Embassies in Myanmar, including Singapore's, investigated all rumours of our aid supplies being sold in markets in Yangon, but did not find evidence. There were no reports from NGOs and UN and donor agencies working in the field about lack of co-operation from local Myanmar officials. The International Labour Organization (ILO), for instance, has noted that its work programmes in the Ayeyarwady Delta, which were set up to show that village-scale infrastructure can be built without the use of forced labour, are now being copied by the Myanmar Public Works Department for its own projects in the Delta. Space has also opened up for local NGOs and unofficial groups which formed to do Nargis-related relief work, and have subsequently found niches for themselves.

This episode highlights how, through such creative openings, the cooperation and combined efforts of Myanmar, ASEAN members and the international community can open up new tracks of cooperation, generate new opportunities and develop trust between Myanmar and the international community.

The international community needs to preserve this opening and leverage on it to continue engaging Myanmar. According to some observers, the post-Nargis situation helped reformist-minded officials in the Myanmar government to be able to act independently and gave them space to engage the NGOs. This has in turn greatly benefited the NGOs, resulting in a win-win situation for both sides.

US Policy Review

Secretary Clinton's comments during her recent visit to Asia were read by many as a sign that the US was prepared to listen to alternative views and not hold rigidly to the hard-line stance of maintaining sanctions on Myanmar. Secretary Clinton was reported to have acknowledged that sanctions have not worked, although she also noted that reaching

out and trying to engage Myanmar had not influenced them either.

The lighter touch adopted by the US appears to have led to some easing of tension. We saw, for instance, that when Stephen Blake, the Director for Mainland Southeast Asia in the State Department, was in Myanmar in March, he even met with the Foreign Minister and Labour Minister.

The Myanmar leadership, on its part, is reported (in *The Voice Journal*) to have sent feelers to the Obama Administration proposing to restart dialogue, of course with conditions. (Note: The conditions are that the US should upgrade diplomatic relations by re-establishing Ambassadorial level representation, remove visa restrictions, and recognize Myanmar's efforts in eradicating narcotic drugs.)

Sanctions vs. Engagement

The economic and political isolation of Myanmar has not worked to bring about regime change and a Western-style democracy as desired by many in the West. Some might even say that it has been counter-productive, in that it has made it even more difficult for those of us who want to see the lot of the Myanmar people improve with more economic, social, cultural and political engagement with the rest of the region. And sanctions have not moved the regime but only made life more difficult for the people.

US government restrictions on the World Bank and UN's ability to work with the Myanmar government have severely limited their capacity to work for improvements in the humanitarian field, which we can all agree is an area where the people of Myanmar badly need help. The UNDP, for instance, struggles under donor-imposed restrictions by the US that it does not have to bear even in North Korea. It is not permitted any contact with Myanmar government agencies in the execution of its programs, which prevents it from either improving government agencies' capacity for service delivery or exerting any positive influence on them in respect to practices and attitudes towards both their own people and the international community. This is a wasted opportunity for mindset change from the bottom up.

As Senator Jim Webb has argued, not only were the sanctions unable to change the political system within Myanmar in any way, the US ended up ceding political capital

to countries that were still willing to deal with Myanmar, notably China and India. The hard-line stance has not helped to enhance the US' strategic influence in the region.

Singapore has been encouraging Myanmar to open up. When PM Thein Sein visited Singapore this March, PM Lee made the point that as an old friend and neighbour of Myanmar, Singapore wished Myanmar well and hoped to see Myanmar develop and prosper. We explained that the global environment is changing; a new US administration is reviewing the global situation and formulating its priorities and strategies in foreign policy, and the global economic crisis is making countries ask how they can more effectively conduct their affairs with other regions of the world. We expressed the hope that Myanmar would seize this moment to take bolder steps towards national reconciliation and to engage the international community.

Post 2010 Elections

The regime has said that it will hold elections next year. We should welcome this. It would be unrealistic to expect a leap forward to an open and democratic system. But there will be a constitution and the 2010 elections will at least be a step forward, from which other steps will in time have to be taken. It is better to have elections than not to have elections. The process of national reconciliation will take time, but we should also note that the Myanmar government is not a monolithic entity and there are those who favour more engagement with the outside world. In our region we have seen how elections, however limited initially, can lead to a smooth transition to democratic politics, such as happened in Indonesia.

In dealing with Myanmar, it is useful to ask if our actions will be helpful to the Myanmar people and the process of national reconciliation. A better calibrated approach could see the use of more social, political, humanitarian and economic engagements with Myanmar as “carrots”, balanced with appropriate targeted measures as “sticks”. Such a balanced approach is likely to yield better results and prospects for the Myanmar people.