

The following keynote speech was delivered at the POSCO Asia Forum at the POSCO Centre, Seoul Korea sponsored by the T J Park Foundation by Professor Robert H Taylor, Visiting Professor, Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong on 24 May 2011 entitled "South East Asia: The Past in the Future":

Introduction

The end of the Cold War in 1989-90 led many political commentators and analysts to echo the then current American foreign policy dogma, prophesying a "new world order" in which ideology would dissipate and a new amity among nations would prevail.¹ This prophecy soon collapsed as the bipolar system of the Cold War was replaced by a unipolar system and previously adhered to norms -- which had constrained military conflict -- gave way to "liberal interventionism" in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.² Such interventions in the internal affairs of weaker states have often been rationalised as made necessary by morally superior states correcting the behaviour of so-called "failed states."³ Many other aspects of international relations have also changed in the two decades that have passed since the Berlin Wall fell, and the former Soviet Union disintegrated.

However, in East and South East Asia, in terms of foreign affairs at least, much remains as it was, despite the evolution of institutions and continuing, unprecedented, economic, demographic, and urban and rural development that has transformed the physical lives of many in the last generation or two. This has also been an unprecedented period of international peace in these regions. The cities of South East Asia I began to

¹ Then President George H. W. Bush used the phrase in his addresses to Congress in the midst of the first American war in Iraq, including in his State of the Union Address on 29 January 1991.

² See Mark Duffield, "Liberal Interventionism and the Fragile State, Linked by Design?" in Mark Duffield and Vernon Hewitt, *Empire Development and Colonialism: The Past in the Present* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Curry, 2009), pp. 226-129.

³ See Robert Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 2000) and *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Atlantic Books, 2003). Cooper was former foreign policy adviser to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair and now works for the European Commission.

visit in the 1970s are now, in many ways, unrecognisable. The speed with which images, ideas and information become available was unexpected before the emergence of the digital age. The increase in the per capita incomes of most people is staggering in comparison with the recent past. In spite of occasional economic problems, some quite severe, at least temporarily, for most of us, to paraphrase the late British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, we never had it so good. East and South East Asia has been free of the consequences of American and European, mainly British and French, post-Cold War armed incursions in the domestic affairs of states.⁴ Is this the result of luck, accident or design?

Despite the numerous changes, there is an underlying historical pattern to the relations and issues which dominate the interrelated international politics of the two regions. Many of these issues go back to the 19th century, some even earlier. Despite all of the talk of 'globalisation' (a new, made-in-America, ideological construct popularised and trivialised in the post-Cold War age) in Asia, as in other parts of the world, the issues of interstate relations that our grandfathers' generation faced remain unresolved, and in many cases, ominously so. Perhaps the two most threatening potential points of conflict – the border between North and South Korea and the Taiwan Straits -- developed at the start of the Cold War in East Asia. In South East Asia, regional points of potential conflict, which might draw external powers into local disputes and therefore cause their potential expansion, also remain unresolved, despite the growth of institutions intended to manage, if not conclude, them.

ASEAN and the ASEAN Way

The major and most of the minor Asian states have avoided the worst excesses of the depredations of the IMF and the World Bank, whether through structural adjustment loans, or 'poverty reduction strategies' by being well-managed and resilient, as well as

⁴ The interventions in Cambodia following the Vietnamese removal of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and Timor Leste in 1999 were under UN auspices, multilateral in composition, and largely made up of minor powers in the immediate region of South East Asia.

responsive to their publics.⁵ Even the major financial crisis of 1997 was weathered, in retrospect, remarkably effectively and in some cases, such as Malaysia, seen off without having to bow to Western liberal dogma. The excessive outsourcing of public services to international and national NGOs has also been avoided for the same reason, as has the use of refugees as pawns in the domestic and international affairs of states. East and South East Asia have seen the development of functioning and effective states with relatively low levels of the malfunction that has been observed in states in other parts of the world and have provided the excuses for interventions in their affairs.

The expansion of the Westphalia system of states with their rights and obligations as established in international law made human rights the obligation of all states. This is codified in the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, the debate about so-called Asian values in the 1990s was an ideological red herring.⁶ A corollary of the Westphalia system and the Universal Declaration of Human rights is that states have an obligation to observe the principles of respecting the territorial integrity of other states, of not interfering in the internal affairs of other states, and respect for the norms of international law. The so-called ASEAN way, which summarises the norms of mutual non-interference in each other's affairs of the countries of South East Asian, is similar to the five principles of peaceful coexistence enunciated at the Bandung Conference of non-aligned states in 1956, is an extended restatement of those principles first established in 1648.

ASEAN is the primary institution to manage conflict in South East Asia. Itself a product of the Cold War, and a desire by five South East Asian governments in 1967, in the midst of the American war in Vietnam, to manage their mutual relations peacefully. ASEAN came into its own in the 1990s when it expanded to include all ten of the major

⁵ See William Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and so Little Good* (London: Penguin, 2007). Ironically, Myanmar may have been spared a great deal of debt and dictation by international institutions thanks to the application of Western economic sanctions.

⁶ For that old, and now hackneyed debate, see Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel E. Bell, eds., *The East Asian Challenge to Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

countries of the region. Furthermore, it reached out via the ASEAN+3, the Asian Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Dialogue processes to create a web of relationships from South to East Asia and beyond. As a realist sceptic of ASEAN ó I must admit I predicted its collapse after the resolution of the issues surrounding the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia between 1978 and 1988 ó I did not expect this development.⁷ The continued, even expanded, existence of ASEAN supports the adage of another former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, that öto jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.ö

Amongst the myriad potential conflicts which might, and from time to time do, emerge among and between the countries of South East Asia ó border conflicts, ethnic and religious tensions, environmental issues, resource and territorial claims, population flows, etc. -- there is always the danger that outside powers will be drawn in, or seek to use, South East Asian issues for their own ill considered advantage. Since the end of American involvement in the Vietnamese civil war, perhaps better termed the Vietnamese war of reunification, extra-regional forces, except under explicitly adhered to United Nations mandates, have not been directly involved in South East Asian conflicts. This cannot be said for other regions of the world such as Europe, Africa and the Middle East. To reiterate my central question, has this freedom from external intervention been a result of astute statesmanship within the region? Temerity on the part of the outside powers? Is the continuation of this pattern bound to persist? How is it possible to ensure a peaceful future, given the turbulent past?

ASEAN and regional security

The ASEAN Regional Forum is perhaps ASEAN's greatest achievement. In a world which has seen the growth of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) as the bedrocks of security in Europe, and the efforts of the

⁷ For a discussion of realist and neo-realist, as opposed to constructivist theories, see Sarah Eaton and Richard Stubbs, öIs ASEAN Powerful? Neo-realist versus Constructivist Approaches to Power in Southeast Asiaö. *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 2006), pp 135-155.

states of African and Latin America to create regional organisations in their respective areas, Asia looked remarkably conflict prone and disorganised in the post-Cold War climate of the 1990s. With no foreign troops permanently stationed in any South East Asian country, those who concluded that American military might was what created stability also concluded that the security of that part of Asia was at risk. However, there are alternative routes to security and stability. As a consequence, the core countries in ASEAN established the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a way of engaging the major powers concerned with Asian stability in an ongoing dialogue about security. The Forum's ministerial meetings have now taken place nearly twenty times and its membership has grown to include India, North Korea, Timor Leste and other states as well as the United States, the European Union and Russia.

Confidence building and dialogue over security issues, both traditional and non-traditional, in Asia have been the goals of the ARF. Expanding its efforts to go beyond confidence-building to preventive diplomacy has proven more difficult because the ARF operates, like its smaller core, ASEAN, on the principles of unanimity and consensus. That is both its strength and its weakness, for when consensus is not reached, the organisation, which in reality is just a meeting of officials or ministers with many issues on their minds, is powerless to impose or even propose a solution. It remains a forum which succeeds primarily by avoiding or evading the most difficult issues of contention.

That is not to say, however, that the ARF is useless. It is obviously useful as evidenced not only by its remarkable continuity but also by the keenness with which countries in the region and beyond have sought to join it. As former ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino points out, ". . . ARF participants are willing to engage in cooperative activities that deal with non-traditional, non-military security issues that are threats to all. . .⁸ but are unwilling to allow it to assume a role in resolving larger, and I would say core, security issues in the Forum process.

⁸ Rodolfo C. Severino, *The ASEAN Regional Forum* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p. 104.

For a sceptic of the effectiveness of regionalism to supplement balance of power politics, or more formal military or security alliances, in Asia, if not the rest of the world, the ARF has proved to be a more effective venue for creating regional understanding and cooperation than might have been expected. Witness the expression of concern over the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel at the Forum's meeting in July, 2010, in Vietnam. As a mechanism by which the smaller states of Asia can act to ease the relations between the major powers, especially China, the United States and India, the ARF has proved its worth to its founders.

It has been concluded by some observers that the ARF will continue until the disputes and tensions in the Asia-Pacific . . . dissipate to such an extent that regional stability [is] perceived as being guaranteed and confidence-building no longer necessary.⁹ The ARF could also disappear if the opposite were to take place, and regional disputes and tensions of the kind that the ARF cannot reach consensus upon, yet grow to become the causes of war, something never to be ruled out despite the increasing interdependency of the world. As long as the states of Asia and beyond keep building their armies, navies and air forces in the name of national security, the risk of major war and its horrific consequences for the peoples of Asia, cannot be ruled out.

To my mind, the ASEAN+3 meetings, the three being Japan, China and South Korea, and the ASEAN Dialogue process, being exchanges between the 10 members of ASEAN and individual states with a commitment to ASEAN security, are as important as the ARF. The exclusive Asian nature of the ASEAN+3 meetings is essential for finding solutions to East and South East Asian issues without the often distracting and perhaps unhelpful interests of external powers which wish to exploit Asian differences for their own advantage. The fact that the United States has only bilateral security treaties with a few states in East and South East Asia, and there is no overarching security treaty such as created by NATO, might be considered a contribution to peace in Asia.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 137.

However, for all of ASEAN's achievements, one should not make the mistake of some academic writers on security in East and South East Asia and believe that it is more than an institution to facilitate dialogue.¹⁰ It is not yet an instrument through which states can conduct their core security and other relations with their neighbours. Just as no wise entrepreneur would consider investing capital into a South East Asian economy because it was a member of ASEAN and therefore a potential beneficiary of its free trade regimes, so no government sees the organisation as a partner, or for that matter an adversary, in its relations. Even the European Union, which is by treaty committed to a common foreign policy, is unable to achieve that alleged ideal, as witnessed by the dissent from Germany over the interpretation of the UN resolution on creating a 'free fly zone' over Libya as meaning ground support attacks by NATO. ASEAN member states have never considered the prospect of a common foreign policy on core security, fiscal and monetary issues.

Historical legacies and contemporary politics

However, let me return to the title of my remarks 'South East Asia: the Past in the Future'. I chose that title, and these preliminary remarks about ASEAN and regional security in Asia, because I see the major issues of war and peace in East and South East Asia as growing out of the past. The phenomenon that the ASEAN Regional Forum often attempts to manage has its roots in earlier history. While new problems and issues arise, as a consequence of economic and social change within, and between societies, the ways in which they are interpreted is often *not* in the light of their own immediate reality, but in terms of previous understandings of historical relationships and the attitudes which grow out of them. The past does not dictate the future, but it does provide the stuff which fuels conflicts, and creates irrational demands. Nationalism, and the willingness of political elites to generate nationalist claims for domestic political reasons, provides the energy which pushes contentious issues to the potential of armed conflict.

¹⁰ See, for example, Jian Yang, 'China's Security and Policies', in Stephen Hoadley and Jurgen Rutland, eds., *Asian Security Reassessed* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 86-105, especially 99-101.

When ASEAN was formed in 1967, the primary issue at stake was how to re-integrate Indonesia back into harmonious relations with its immediate neighbours in the context of the Cold War, especially the American, Philippine, and Thai involvement in the Vietnam War. Though Myanmar, then known in English as Burma, was invited to join, the government of General Ne Win declined, perceiving the grouping as a pro-American, anti-Communist, and perhaps anti-Chinese, front. Indonesia had, under the government of President Sukarno, pursued a policy of armed confrontation against the formation of Malaysia by the British as that former imperial power continued its long retreat from Asia. The confrontation policy, only half-heartedly endorsed by the Indonesian army, came to end effectively when Sukarno was removed from power following a failed, but still controversial, coup attempt, which left by apparent accident, General Suharto in power. Suharto led the government until 1998.¹¹ Brunei entered ASEAN in 1984, six days after receiving its formal independence from the United Kingdom. Thus the core of ASEAN's initial six members – Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei – compose what we think as insular and peninsular South East Asia, to which Thailand was appended to make up the hexagon.

The emergence of East Timor, or Timor Leste, as the eleventh sovereign and smallest state in South East Asia, but not yet a member of ASEAN, is testimony to the resilience of the colonially constructed nation-states of the insular areas of the region. Declaring its independence only in 1975, its population, now a little over a million resisted the new states absorption into Indonesia. In the face of continuing conflict, a referendum was held in 1999 under UN auspices and Indonesia and other states recognised its independence in 2002.

Contrasting histories of South East Asian states

The insular and peninsular core states have different formative histories from those of Thailand and the other four states of mainland South East Asia that joined

¹¹ See R. E. Elson, *Suharto: A Political Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially Chapters 5 and 6, pp. 99-166.

ASEAN in the 1990s. None existed in their current form before the arrival of European colonialists which drew their borders and demarcated their terrains. One might argue that that is true also for the now extant borders of mainland South East Asia, but kingdoms existed there which the Europeans had to defeat, or threaten to remove, in order to impose their will, whereas the emergence of colonial rule in insular and peninsular South East Asia was rather more by stealth than by conquest, consolidation rather than bifurcation, finding willing collaborators in many places who helped in the construction of the modern nation states which today exist. These are quintessential instances of nations created by states, not states made by nations. The reverse is the case on the mainland, resulting in different historical legacies and shaping different contemporary processes. Though some might contend that I overly simplify, I think this broad brush approach can be justified.

The contrasting historical formations of the states of insular and peninsular South East Asia make for rather less potential for armed conflict among the resulting governments. Their disputes were made in Europe and, in that sense, are not seen as core to state existence. Moreover, the diverse nature of the populations of these states, religiously, ethnically, and culturally, makes them all sensitive to the potential for internal conflict to create potential international conflicts which could, if allowed to carry their potential course, lead to severe repercussions for their own domestic political stability and regime survival. Hence, conflicts have tended to be muted and allowed to lay fallow once the leftist ideological drive that pushed Sukarno's severe nationalism was laid to rest following his ouster from power. Claims previously heard, such as the Philippine claim to Sabah, have been allowed to dissipate without raising serious political problems from nationalistic pressures for irredentism or the slaying of ancient grievances. When in recent years domestic political turmoil has prompted concern, such as the anti-Chinese riots which occurred in Indonesia in the late 1990s, others sought not to capitalise on such conflicts, perhaps for fear of creating problems beyond their control.

Remarkable, in comparison with the criticism that Western governments are happy, freely and repeatedly, to give is the restraint that South East Asian states normally

demonstrated in the face of violent political issues in neighbouring countries. Note the reticence of the Malaysian government, despite the country's Muslim majority population, to comment on the separatist rebellion among Thai citizens of Malay ethnicity and the Islamic faith just across their common border. Relatively minor maritime border disputes, except in the South China Sea, which also involve China and Taiwan, have been easily resolved by reference to the International Court at The Hague or submitted to arbitration as a technical matter, not a contentious political question with years of history behind it. These are indeed new states, not in the way in which modernisation theorists meant in the 1950s and 1960s, but in the sense of states with no pre-modern predecessors defining their history.

Mainland states

The same cannot be said for the states of mainland South East Asia, Thailand included. These are states with long histories. They have historical parallels in their development with the major states of Europe, as Victor Lieberman, in his masterful two volume study, *Strange Parallels*, makes abundantly clear.¹² Such long histories have significance in terms of modern politics. While colonial state building imposed European derived juridical and territorial straightjackets on mainland South East Asia, as it did in the remainder of the globe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it did not create the institutional memories which drove the nationalist politics of those countries in the twentieth century and still drive them today. When the Vietnamese and Myanmar people consider their relations with China, for example, it is not as a relationship which commenced with the coming of or culmination of Western imperialism, and modern citizenship law and issues of minority rights and economic inequality, or earlier the spread of Communism. They see it going back to a military and state-to-state relationship which the Vietnamese consider as commencing with Vietnam's independence in 938 AD, more than a thousand years ago. For the Myanmar people, it is

¹² Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830 Vol. I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

a relationship going back to 1287 AD when Mongol armies from Yunnan invaded the declining Bagan dynasty's territory, bringing to an end the first Myanmar Empire.¹³

Similarly, if we examine the history of relations between the major mainland states of Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar we find histories connected to each other from centuries past. The Myanmar king, Bayinnaung, who acceded to the throne in 1551, immediately began a conquest of all of the Thai speaking peoples between the Shan State of what are now Myanmar and Laos, as well as all of Siam.¹⁴ This is remembered today in modern Thailand, along with the sacking of Ayutthaya by the Burmese king Alaungpaya in 1760, as proof of the dastardly behaviour of the Burmese throughout history. When Myanmar was on the cusp of independence in 1948, Thai officials contemplated how they would have in future to defend themselves from their allegedly offensively inclined neighbours once they were out of the control of the British. That, and fear of the possible coming to power of the Communist Party of Burma, was the basis upon which Thailand pursued a border buffer policy, assisting anti-Myanmar state rebels, until the late 1980s. Thai friends in the 1960s told me that their mothers warned them if they did not behave as children, the Burmese, like ogres, would come and get them. Short haircuts in Bangkok were called 'Burmese cuts' after the removal of the long hair of the Siamese taken to Myanmar as slaves by the conquering armies. Today, statues of Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya, along with Anawrahta, the founder of Bagan, adorn the parade ground of the new Myanmar capital at Naypyitaw, as well as along the Thai-Myanmar border and at various towns in the interior. When armed clashes occurred between Myanmar and Thai troops, in one of the periodic phases of border tensions between the two countries, most recently in 2001, the Myanmar press began to refer to Thailand as Yodaya, a pejorative reminder of the sacking of Ayutthaya by Bayinnaung a quarter of a millennium before. States and nations have long memories.

¹³ See D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London: Macmillan, 4th edition, 1981), pp. 151-181 and pp. 201-210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 147.

Recent Thai-Cambodia conflict

One can find other examples of historically rooted or at least historically justified antagonisms, in mainland South East Asian history. D. G. E. Hall, in the first history of South East Asia includes a chapter entitled 'The Rape of Cambodia'.¹⁵ Cambodia, being much weakened economically, territorially, and militarily by repeated attacks by the expanding kingdoms of Siam and Vietnam, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, further weakened by domestic political rivalries, came under the sway of both its more powerful and expansionist neighbours. The great empire of Angkor was much reduced and Cambodia was threatened with extermination. Khmer kings turned alternatively to the Vietnamese and the Siamese for support and each in turn were willing to impose their military might on their smaller neighbour. At the best of times, the king of Cambodia was effectively placed in power by the Vietnamese and consecrated by the Siamese monarch. Fortunately for the Khmer state, there came the intervention of the French who announced they would occupy the country in 1861, when it had effectively become part of the domains of Siam. Without the period of French occupation, the country would probably have been assimilated into today's Thailand, just as the separate kingdom centred at Chiangmai in the north was absorbed more than a hundred years ago. Cambodia's borders today are the result of subsequent agreements between the French and the Siamese governments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, agreements the Thais feel were imposed upon them by a militarily superior colonial power.

What is the relevance of this issue today? It is that the legacy of this history has been acted out recently in armed conflict between Thai and Cambodia armed forces over the issue of the control of the border between the two countries near a Hindu-Buddhist temple built in the ninth and tenth centuries during the height of the Khmer Empire. The existence of this temple is, to the Cambodians, evidence of their long and proud history, and to the Thais of their subjugation of the Khmers in the more recent past. The issue hinges on maps drawn up in the colonial era, and in 1962 the International Court of

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 459-466.

Justice in The Hague declared that the temple was within Cambodia. That should have settled the matter, but it was not to be. The court did not decide exactly where the border lies, and hence the dispute simmers over a piece of land 4.6 kilometres square which, at the end of the day, is not worth the life of one human being, let alone the many lost in recent border skirmishes. This tragic loss of life makes a mockery of an historic religious shrine dedicated to peace and tranquillity over which blood has been shed. In 2008, as a result of domestic political differences in Thailand following the military coup which removed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from power in 2006, the border became a subject of contention again, and the conflict has escalated such that by April this year, several years of off-and-on again armed clashes had taken place, including the alleged use of landmines and cluster bombs, by one or both sides.

So what has been the position of ASEAN in attempting to resolve this dispute? The answer up to now might be considered 'very little', although ASEAN has managed to keep the issue from expanding and becoming an international issue drawing in outside powers. Thailand has military ties with the United States and China is a strong backer of Cambodia. In February the chair of ASEAN, now Indonesia, held a meeting between the two sides in the dispute and announced that observers would be sent on behalf of ASEAN to help ensure a moderation of the conflict leading to a specific conclusion, but when it came time for them to arrive, Thailand refused to countenance their presence. Insisting that it was a bilateral matter between the two neighbours, no role for ASEAN existed. The position was reached despite the fact that earlier in February the UN Security Council urged a ceasefire on both sides and referred the matter to the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting later in the month for resolution. As of now, the issue remains unresolved and is likely to remain so until at least after national elections most likely to take place in Thailand in July this year.

Myanmar and liberal interventionism

While the major powers in the UN Security Council seem content to allow ASEAN to deal with this intramural conflict over the Thai-Cambodian border, Western

members of that body have indicated in recent years that Myanmar is a country they believe requires forms of liberal intervention in order to bring it back into the comity of nations. Myanmar is a country I know better than the others of South East Asia. I have lived there for extended periods off and on since 1978. Knowing the country as I do, and following its politics closely, I have concluded that probably more nonsense is written about the internal affairs of the country than one would think humanly possible. Journalists, exiled political activists, and Western diplomats seem to check their reason, and their attachment to truth, to produce the most fanciful and mendacious accounts of the country's affairs. It is a country which indeed has many problems but little credit is given for the improvements which have taken place since the collapse of the old socialist regime in 1988. Ethnic insurgency, that was once rife in one-third of the country, has been brought to a halt, though the potential for renewed fighting is still present. The first steps have been taken on the formation of an elected government which, if a new constitution is allowed to operate, will see a retreat by the army from day-to-day civil power, and the economy is slowly expanding, despite the persistence for more than two decades of various forms of economic sanctions applied by Western powers.

Western governments, which had provided aid and assistance to the government of the Burma Socialist Programme Party and its military predecessor, the Revolutionary Council, since 1962, turned against the government following the collapse of its autarkic policies, endorsement of a market economy, opening to foreign investment, and promise to eventually establish a multiparty political system in the ethnically strife torn country. Since the mid-1990s, led by the United States, Western governments have applied increasingly rigorous economic and travel sanctions on the government of Myanmar at the behest of the leader of the National League for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. I do not have time and space here to go into the details of these matters. However, the standard reiteration of the political history of Myanmar as normally read in the international press is highly contentious and can be contested.¹⁶

¹⁶ For an extended account which notes the controversial issues in this narrative, see Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, London: Hurst, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2009), Chapter 6 and Addendum, 375-506.

Having been labelled by the Bush administration in 2006 as one of four ‘outposts of tyranny’ together with Iran, Cuba, and North Korea, in January 2007 the United States and United Kingdom governments introduced a draft resolution in the Security Council calling on UN action to address the internal affairs of the country because of their alleged consequences for neighbouring states. None of the neighbouring states, Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, or Thailand, agreed with that position. Though all of Myanmar’s neighbours have border problems with the country, as they do with all of their neighbours, none has ever accused the government of Myanmar of wilfully mismanaging or viciously dealing with these issues. In the end, the joint US/UK draft resolution was defeated as it faced a veto by both China and Russia, the first such double veto by the two states since 1972.

The Western powers on the Security Council, this time including France, sought a second entree for liberal interventionism in Myanmar in May, 2008, in the immediate wake of Cyclone Nargis. That unprecedented storm took the lives of more than 130,000 people in the Ayeyewady Delta of lower Myanmar. Even before the waters of the storm could subside, unfounded accusations were being made in the world press about the allegedly nefarious government of Myanmar. Rather than examining what the government was doing, and had done before the storm struck, the wife of the American president erroneously claimed that the government had deliberately kept news of the impending storm from its people. The claim was made that the government was denying access to the storm struck areas by international relief workers even before anyone had a chance to assess the situation on the ground.¹⁷ What a group of Land Cruiser based, non-Burmese speaking, NGO and UN personnel, unfamiliar with Myanmar might do in a waterlogged, road less, delta was, of course, a question no one bothered to ask.

Western naval forces were quickly brought just outside Myanmar territorial waters. The French foreign minister then, Mr. Bernard Kouchner, called for the

¹⁷ For the government’s response, see Robert H. Taylor, ‘Responding to Nargis: Political Storm or Humanitarian Rage?’ forthcoming.

implementation of the liberal interventionism slogan of R2P, responsibility to protect. R2P was a doctrine developed to allow for international intervention in the most horrific of humanitarian crises brought about by human action such as genocide or ethnic cleansing, as occurred in Rwanda. No such claims could be made responsibly in the case of Myanmar following Cyclone Nargis. The Western claim that large numbers would die following the storm if international assistance led by the West was not allowed proved to be unfounded. In the face of the threat forcibly to land American, British and French forces into the Myanmar delta region, ASEAN responded by organising its own response, in conjunction with other Asian states, especially China and India. Thus was created the Tripartite Core Group, composed and headed by the Myanmar government with ASEAN and the UN. Cooler heads soon prevailed in the West and in the international aid community, but for a few days the possibility that the Myanmar army would be resisting a Western military incursion in the midst of massive storm damage seemed to be a probability. The "ASEAN way" while not necessarily determining of the outcome of this near international crisis, the first potential unwelcome landing of Western forces in Asia since the end of the American war in Vietnam, contributed to forestalling what could have been a disaster. Now three years after those events, it is hard to remember that "regime change" was being called for, just as it is today in countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Conclusion

The "ASEAN way" merely reiterates what is the basis of world peace under the current international system. No amount of rationalisation about failed states and liberal interventionism can disprove the argument that the imposition of a political character on another state is imperialism. Those states which attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of other states in the name of so-called "liberal values" are ignoring at their peril, and the peril of others far weaker than themselves, the fundamental point that there can be no human right greater than life, and that war, no matter how it is dressed, whether in tyrannically simplistic claims or in jargonistic ideological obscurity, is the denial of peace. If there is anything that the politics of East and South East Asia has told us about the

conduct of international affairs in the post-Cold War period, it seems to me it is that adherence to the norms of the international system, internationally and domestically, unrevised by the most powerful states to fit their own interests, is the best way of ensuring continued peace and prosperity of East and South East Asia.