Quality of Partnership
Myanmar, ASEAN and the World Community
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Report of the
Asian Dialogue Society

Information and Resource Center
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This report, *Quality of Partnership: Myanmar, ASEAN and the World Community*, is part of a sustained dialogue process that was initiated in 1990 and devoted to the shaping of “One Southeast Asia” as a common home. Right from the beginning, the concept of “enhanced interaction” has been at the heart of regional integration between the founding members of ASEAN and the newer members of the community. Going beyond the unilateral approach of “constructive engagement”, the new concept implies a shared responsibility based on *Shared Destiny* among the nations of Southeast Asia.

The *ASEAN-Vietnam Interaction for Progress* process was initiated in 1991 as a catalyst to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation between antagonistic nations caught in the cold war divide, which had affected our region for four decades. Vietnam became a member of ASEAN in 1995, a decade ahead of an original road map towards membership. Engaging Cambodia and Laos on the same path of regional integration produced the report *Dictate of Partnership: Cambodia, Laos and ASEAN in One Southeast Asia* in 1996, while *Cambodia in ASEAN: Partnership for Peace and National Reconciliation* set the framework for Cambodia’s reemergence as a nation in peace with herself within one regional family.

This report on Myanmar could have been completed in 1994 when we started our flexible engagement in the country, and could have suggested the way for the country’s return to normalcy within the world community, had the contending factions transcended their long-lasting differences. The report’s rationale, which goes beyond any political road map, is to produce the ultimate clarity of an unavoidable Myanmar solution that is based on national reconciliation and concord between and among the main contending factions in the country. The destinies of ASEAN and Myanmar are closely linked. We believe that unless we improve the quality of the partnership among ourselves the road to reform and reconstruction will be long and hard and the journey painful for all of ASEAN.
With the broadening of the ASEAN framework to include the three dialogue partners of East Asia (China, Japan and South Korea) and India, the dialogue process in Asia is maturing. It is imperative that these nations decisively contribute to the long-term stability of the region. The small wars along Myanmar’s borders are a form of contained balkanization and it is not in the interest of Myanmar or Asia that a process towards stabilization be derailed. Asia cannot afford to lose Myanmar and Myanmar cannot afford to lose Asia.

From the beginning, M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra has been the perfect guide in this whole dialogue process. An inspiring leader, he has imparted his strong convictions to a growing community of intellectuals bound by a sense of regional solidarity and goodwill and a commitment to contribute to the shaping of One Southeast Asia. Most of the members of the newly formed Asian Dialogue Society have been associated with the One Southeast Asia project since the Information and Resource Center (IRC) initiated it. Although they have come together as individuals in their own capacities for the purpose of this latest dialogue process, their collective experiences and knowledge were brought to bear in the making of this report.

Our dialogue process has always benefited from consultations with intellectuals and statesmen of the region. For this particular report, we drew from the wisdom of a number of prominent regional leaders, the most notable of whom is His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, who shared his vision not only as an Afro-Asian leader of the Bandung Generation but also as a great Southeast Asian leader.

The support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of Japan has been crucial to the success of this dialogue process. While we gratefully acknowledge the cooperation extended by the foundation and our friends, the views expressed in the report are entirely those of the Asian Dialogue Society. Neither do they necessarily reflect the views of the institutions the individual members are associated with.

As citizens and friends of Southeast Asia, we hope that this report can serve as a catalyst to the process of national reconciliation in Myanmar. We make no proprietary claims. The report has outlined only some basic
principles because we believe that the task of working out the details should belong to the major stakeholders who could view the report as a possible point from which to move the process forward. For it is they, and indeed the people of Myanmar, who are ultimately the real owners and potential beneficiaries of the ideas and recommendations expressed in the report.

The Asian Dialogue Society report, in the spirit of “creative mutuality”, is addressed to the Myanmar leaders and people as well as ASEAN and the international community, so that a common ground can be established in which dialogue and debate can produce understanding, respect and tolerance and mark the beginnings of a society based upon free and humanistic institutions. This latest process is part of a natural continuum in the search for quality partnership.

M. Rajaretnam
Convener

*These reports can be viewed on our new website www.asiandialogue.com
The Report

INTRODUCTION

1. As the fortieth anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) approaches, Southeast Asia can be justifiably proud of its achievements.

2. Individual regional states have made progress in economic, social and political development. Once polarized by the Cold War and threatened with “balkanization”, the region is now at one under ASEAN’s banner and moving towards more extensive and intensive regional cooperation in a very broad spectrum of issue-areas. Long-standing regional problems, such as Cambodia and East Timor, have been resolved. Conflicts still exist, but are mostly limited in scope and consequences.

3. As with other parts of Asia, Southeast Asia suffered from the 1997-98 financial and economic crises. But recovery came relatively quickly. With its large population base and diverse natural resources and provided it continues to commit itself to regionalism and regional problem solving, ASEAN still has potential for longer-term growth and development. Strengthened by efforts at economic and political reforms in a number of regional states, it remains an integral part of the Asia-Pacific region that is likely to continue leading global economic expansion for some time.

4. In recent times, several Southeast Asian countries have undergone democratic transitions, which have not always been the experience either in the region’s more distant past or in many other corners of the world.

5. But there are some very clear warning signs which should be heeded. For they involve challenges to the region’s peace, prosperity and
political development and need to be addressed by the region as a whole.

6. Peace is affected by a number of factors: international terrorism and the international political fallouts of 9/11; continued arms build-ups by some regional states; domestic military campaigns against rebel or dissident groups, which have cross-border, transnational or regional repercussions; and arms smuggling.

7. Related to peace is the question of human security. Peace can be sustained and made sustainable only if there is freedom from fear and freedom from want. To put it another way, human security means that the people are both protected from threats to their rights, safety and livelihood and given opportunities for developing their human faculties and achieving advancement as human beings. In Southeast Asia, human security is at present affected by a number of factors. These include environmental degradation; the spread of narcotics and diseases; human trafficking, forced prostitution and child labor; a proliferation of small arms; the manifold problems caused by, or connected to, mass displacement and migration; and, perhaps most importantly in the long term, uneven progress in improving educational systems and other forms of human resource development.

8. Where the economy is concerned, past resilience and present attributes cannot hide the fact that Southeast Asia is faced with structural problems. One is vulnerability to fluctuations of global markets. Another is competition, especially from China and India, for markets and foreign direct investment. Another is the disparity in the levels of development, both among and within the countries of the region. Yet another is constraints against more rapid and more evenly distributed human resource development.

9. Political development is inextricably linked to peace and prosperity. Despite democratic transitions in individual countries, there are many disconcerting signs and setbacks. In some cases, continuing failure to bring about political reform prolongs conflicts between central governments on the one hand and dissident, rebel or separatist
groups on the other. These, in turn, threaten human security and create conditions for more problems with neighboring countries. In other cases, lack of progress in political reform is hindering the task of economic development. Often, corruption is widespread and deep-rooted; the necessity for transparency, accountability and the rule of law in the governance of both public and corporate sectors is ignored; and the pressure and incentive to introduce measures that can bring about sustainable development and more equitable distribution of wealth and income are not forthcoming.

10. At the regional level, ASEAN constitutes an important diplomatic community, regularly interfacing with most of the major actors and playing roles in various international and regional arenas. It remains the core of the only region-wide framework for security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, the ASEAN Regional Forum or ARF. Intra-ASEAN collaboration is becoming more extensive and intensive, especially in the economic sphere. ASEAN’s continued commitment to regional cooperation was underscored by the recently declared Bali Concord II, in which the group adopted the idea of an ASEAN Security Community and an ASEAN Economic Community. The spirit of ASEAN lives.

11. But it cannot be denied that some of these issues related to the peace, prosperity and political development of the region often test the spirit of partnership among the regional states. Differing positions regarding the US’ unilateralism come to mind. The American war on terror is a challenge to ASEAN unity. Not only does it encourage tendencies towards closer bilateral security cooperation between the US and some regional states, but it also undermines some of the fundamental principles of internationalism and regionalism ASEAN holds dear, including commitments to a multilateral international order and a regional order free from external interference.

12. Where economic cooperation is concerned, there is a clear propensity on the part of some ASEAN countries towards increased bilateral dealings with extra-regional powers, especially in the form of free trade areas. It is still unclear what impact this will have on the future of regional integration, or indeed the global trade system.
13. Another issue that comes to mind is arms procurements on the part of certain regional states. Cross-border conflicts, arising from spillovers of domestic problems, also strain regional friendships. So do the recent outbursts of nationalistic fervor against globalization, in general, and more prosperous neighbors, in particular.

**PART I: The Spirit of Partnership**

14. We are citizens and friends of Southeast Asia, drawn together by a common concern with problems relating to the region’s peace, prosperity, political development and partnership.

15. Underlying these concerns is our commitment to One Southeast Asia. In 1997 the ASEAN leaders adopted *ASEAN Vision 2020*, which they have reaffirmed on a number of occasions, most recently at the 9th ASEAN Summit at Bali.

16. This vision seeks to realize an “ASEAN Partnership in Dynamic Development”, aimed at forging closer economic integration within the region; a “Stable, Prosperous and Highly Competitive ASEAN Economic Region”, in which there is a free flow of goods, services, investments and capital, equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities; and the evolution of ASEAN into a “Community of Caring Societies”.

17. We are under no illusion that we have the time, the resources and the monopoly of wisdom to succeed where governments and leaders have not. We simply wish to make a contribution, based upon our collective experience, knowledge and commitment to ASEAN regional cooperation, towards the making of a better Southeast Asia. For us, a better Southeast Asia means a more compassionate and democratic Southeast Asia, a more peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asia, where political development goes hand in hand with social and economic development and where the region’s body politic is infused with the spirit of partnership and cooperation.
18. The next few years will be of critical importance for ASEAN. In this period, the global environment is likely to be deeply affected by international terrorism, continuing crusades against it and weapons of mass destruction, as well as international, regional and domestic conflicts and tensions arising therefrom. Reverberations of the World Trade Organization (WTO)’s failure at Cancun will be widely felt. Competition for markets, capital, technology and other resources will be more intensive. Those on the wrong side of the digital divide will be at an even greater disadvantage. Transnational problems, particularly drugs and contagious diseases, will become more severe.

19. In this context, it is imperative that ASEAN further enhance its role as a diplomatic and security community, to exert a constructive, moderating influence in global affairs. It must increase its collective political and economic bargaining power so as to be able to continue as a major actor in the international arena. It must promote its collective attraction as a major economic partner in order to compete more efficiently with others and to mobilize more effectively global resources for regional development. And it must collaborate more closely with one another and others to combat transnational problems that beset the region.

20. These tasks will not be easy. One necessary condition for their accomplishment is that the regional states first put their collective and individual houses in order.

21. At the regional level, greater political will is needed. For, firstly, ASEAN needs to enhance the efficacy of its mechanisms for conflict management and resolution. Secondly, it has to provide the ASEAN Secretariat with power and resources more commensurate with its growing responsibilities. And, thirdly, it must implement many of the projects already agreed upon in principle, particularly those aimed at reducing the disparities between the older members and the new.

22. Furthermore, the foundations of regionalism should be deepened and strengthened by bringing about greater cooperation in education and culture, more people-to-people exchanges, and more extensive roles for different elements of the civil society. Since interfacing with the
outside world is a necessity, organizations and mechanisms which can contribute towards the making of both a better region and a better international image for ASEAN should be encouraged. These should include regional human rights and humanitarian instruments as well as institutions which can promote the region’s best practices in governance, management, education, training, health services, community development and environmental and cultural conservation.

23. The Bali Concord II should lead to a reemergence of ASEAN’s political will to achieve these objectives.

24. At the national level, reform is the key, not only to promoting the ASEAN countries’ collective and individual relations with the rest of the international community, but also to ensuring that their scarce resources are put to the best possible use. Reform is needed to bring about domestic peace and to reduce conditions for domestic violence. Reform is needed to reduce corruption and to enhance good governance. Reform is needed to enable governments to meet the people’s basic requirements, to protect their fundamental rights, to promote their participation in political, economic and social activities at all levels, and to bring about greater opportunities for their advancement.

25. The progress of reform is encouraging in some countries, disappointing in others. At present, the situation in Myanmar is of the greatest concern.

26. Myanmar is an integral part of Southeast Asia and should play a meaningful role in ASEAN regional cooperation. The principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference served the region well in the past, when great power interventions constituted clear and present dangers and when intra-ASEAN cooperation was in its early stages. But the world has changed, societies have become interdependent, and dividing lines between domestic and international affairs are now far less clear than before.

27. Thus, while respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity must continue to guide foreign policy, the value and saliency of
non-interference as a governing principle for the conduct of relations among nations should be qualified in accordance with these changes. Most importantly, it should not be used as a justification for failure to address a host of domestic problems which manifestly affect the security and well-being of other countries, or a shield to allow widespread political, social and economic abuses to take place. Since she became an ASEAN member in 1997, Myanmar’s domestic problems have become the region’s problems and hence must be addressed as such.

28. Myanmar, of course, cannot be held accountable for all, or even most, of the Southeast Asian countries’ numerous collective and individual shortcomings. Nevertheless, one thing is clear. The impasse in the process of national reconciliation in Myanmar, the government’s incarceration of opposition leaders and pacification campaigns, the lack of progress in addressing the challenge of social and economic development, and delays in curbing sources of drug production and distribution located inside the country all have grave regional consequences.

29. ASEAN’s international image has been adversely affected at the very time when international goodwill, resources and cooperation are urgently needed for the region’s sustained economic recovery and development. Dialogues with ASEAN’s partners, particularly the European Union, have been impeded. And, just when greater collective political will and a sense of partnership is needed, problems of border incidents, gun running, displaced persons, illegal labor and drug abuse affect relations with neighbors. Even China is not immune.

30. These problems are too serious to be ignored. For the reasons stated earlier, ASEAN cannot take refuge behind the principle of non-interference and dismiss them as Myanmar’s domestic affairs and are therefore of no concern to the rest of the region. These problems are also problems for the region, and it is incumbent upon the region to help Myanmar alleviate and resolve them.

31. Furthermore, there is a need to address the Myanmar question with some urgency. In 2005 she is due to begin her chairmanship of the ASEAN Standing Committee and in 2006 to host not only the Annual
Ministerial Meeting (AMM), but also the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMCs) and the ARF. A *sine qua non* for the success of these meetings is ministerial representation from all dialogue partners and ARF participant countries. Both ASEAN and Myanmar must be given every opportunity to achieve success.

32. Myanmar continues to be an active member of ASEAN. It also remains party to a number of international agreements and continues to interface with the outside world on a more or less regular basis. Indeed, over the last few years, during which international pressure increased, she has chosen to cooperate more fully with a number of international organizations, including the UN system and the ILO.

33. It is imperative that ASEAN encourage Myanmar to continue to be committed to its regional and international obligations.

34. One reason is that such commitments will ultimately benefit the ordinary people of Myanmar, as they give rise to opportunities for the country’s social and economic development.

35. Another reason is that it is in ASEAN’s interest for Myanmar to have diversified relationships with the outside world, and not to rely on collaboration with one single power. An expansion of China’s regional and international role, in a manner commensurate with her growing economic power and interests, is to be welcomed. Close cooperation between Myanmar and China is also to be welcomed. But this cooperation should contribute to the region’s peace and prosperity as a whole.

36. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Myanmar is an integral part of Southeast Asia. Her geopolitical importance as the land bridge between Southeast Asia and South Asia and beyond, her relatively large population and natural resource base, the quality of her educated manpower, and her tradition of non-aligned diplomacy are great potential assets for ASEAN regional cooperation. It is imperative that these are nurtured and utilized for the good of both the people of Myanmar and the region. But this can be done only if Myanmar is at
These potential assets cannot be developed in isolation. A benign regional environment and access to external resources, particularly capital and technology, are needed, and only a strong and vibrant ASEAN can assist Myanmar in this regard.

To make itself stronger, ASEAN needs a strong Myanmar as a fully participating member of the regional community. Conversely, to become a stronger nation, the Myanmar people need a strong ASEAN. This symbiosis of strengths can be attained only if there is political reform in Myanmar that leads to true national reconciliation, comprehensive domestic peace, increasing prosperity based upon sustained social and economic development, and stronger partnership with the rest of the region.

To put it another way, political reform, peace, prosperity and partnership are the keys to ASEAN’s and the Myanmar people’s common future.

Now is the time for the ASEAN members and their friends, particularly China, Japan and South Korea, who are joined together in the ASEAN+3 cooperative framework, as well as India, to work together more comprehensively and systematically to help bring about sustainable political reform, peace and prosperity in Myanmar.

Developments in recent months have brought both hope and disappointment.

Many were encouraged by newly appointed Prime Minister Khin Nyunt’s speech of 31 August 2003, describing a “road map” for the “process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system” and for “building a modern developed and democratic nation” in Myanmar. But there has been a noticeable lack of progress in reconciliation since then, particularly where the position of Aung San Suu Kyi and other National League for Democracy (NLD) members is concerned. Until and unless the “road map” becomes an itinerary, involving all parties concerned, with specific time frames and
specific details provided for every stage of the journey towards national reconciliation and democratization, the impasse will not be broken, and the Myanmar military government’s commitment and credibility will continue to be questioned.

43. Many were also briefly encouraged by ASEAN’s position vis-à-vis the situation in Myanmar, as announced in the Joint Communique of the 36th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh in June 2003, which appeared to be an abandonment of its hands-off policy. The foreign ministers “urged” Myanmar to “resume its efforts of national reconciliation and dialogue among all parties concerned leading to a peaceful transition to democracy” and “looked forward to the early lifting of restrictions placed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD members.”

44. But the change now seems more apparent than real. Just over three months later at the Bali summit, the ASEAN leaders lent unconditional “understanding and support” to Prime Minister Khin Nyunt’s road map. One wonders whether the language used at the Bali summit might have sent a wrong signal to the Myanmar government.

45. If so, prospects for genuine political reform will have been seriously undermined, with adverse ramifications for ASEAN. Myanmar’s domestic problems, which have regional consequences, will remain unresolved. Moreover, should there be no progress in political reform by 2006, ASEAN AMM, PMC and ARF meetings may well be in severe difficulties. ASEAN’s credibility will be at stake.

46. 2006 need not be a time bomb ticking away. It could be a golden opportunity for both ASEAN and Myanmar to demonstrate to the world what progress the region and the Myanmar people are capable of achieving, given the necessary political will and the requisite encouragement. It could be a golden opportunity for Myanmar to achieve national reconciliation, which would herald a renaissance in the relationship between a forward-looking and reformed Myanmar and the international community, with the Myanmar people reaping benefits from access to global markets and sources of capital, technology
and assistance. It could be a golden opportunity for the region to deliver what *ASEAN Vision 2020* firmly promised and the Bali Concord II equally firmly confirmed—the making of a peaceful, prosperous, vibrant and compassionate ASEAN community based upon “Partnership in Dynamic Development” and composed of “Caring Societies”.

47. The question is: “What is to be done?”

**PART II: National Reconciliation in Myanmar**

48. As concerned citizens and friends of Southeast Asia, we have drafted a set of proposals which we believe can help address the problems. We believe that these proposals can make a contribution towards a more peaceful and prosperous Myanmar which is a full regional partner, lending vigor to as well as drawing strength from the structure and processes of ASEAN regional cooperation.

49. These proposals drew inspiration from great Southeast Asians of the past. They include those whose roles in the Afro-Asian Conference of 1955 inspired the “Spirit of Bandung” and the founding fathers of ASEAN, whose collective foresight and vision are forever enshrined in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967. They also include General Aung San, one of the fathers of modern Myanmar, whose idea of regionalism was far ahead of his time.

50. General Aung San was an extraordinary visionary. A Myanmar patriot and a staunch nationalist, he saw no necessary conflict between nationalism, regionalism and internationalism. He rejected isolationism, and instead envisioned for Myanmar a role in international affairs marked by engagement. He wanted a strong and united Myanmar with an open democratic polity, one which rejected any form of racial discrimination and accommodated the interests of its various minorities. He also believed in Asia’s underlying cultural unity and championed Asian, East Asian and Southeast Asian cooperation. Idealistic without ever being a starry-eyed idealist, he believed that regional cooperation could compensate for Myanmar’s weaknesses.
in the defense and economic spheres. He felt that Myanmar’s destiny lay within the community of Southeast Asian and Asian nations, with whom it shared deep and historical bonds.

51. For him, there is no natural antithesis between internationalism and nationalism, and regionalism can provide a symbiosis between the two. While Asians first had to perform the “primary and practical task of putting our home in order,” regional and international cooperation was also imperative. “Someday,” he once said, “it may prove necessary and possible for us to have, say, something like a United States of Indochina comprising French Indochina, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and our country. This is not an idealistic conception. It is one...commended by historical developments of these countries having several points of affinity with one another.... We must understand internationalism and learn to cultivate the right spirit of internationalism. By cooperating with other nations for multilateral interests, we can have the benefit of the world’s best in every possible way and thus our life will become infinitely higher and richer. By keeping to ourselves, we might be always balancing the ends and meeting, finally, more likely than not, our own doom.”

52. He went on to emphasize that this internationalism, which he called “the internationalism of creative mutuality”, was “indeed in accord with the highest interests of nationalism. For only if there comes to be such internationalism it will mean not only abiding peace and universal freedom, it will mean incalculable progress, for then we shall avail ourselves of the best that can come out of the creative human labour of all mankind.”

53. Today, these words, spoken half a century ago, remain as relevant as ever. Inspired by General Aung San’s concept of “the internationalism of creative mutuality”, we would like to outline briefly our own assessment of the situation in Myanmar and then put forward our recommendations for addressing the problems therein.

54. In September 1988, following weeks of unrest and popular protest that culminated in the fall of the one-party Socialist regime, the Myanmar
Armed Forces (MAF) or Tatmadaw took over state power in the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The new regime introduced a multi-party electoral system and a market-oriented economy in place of the one-party political system and the centralized command economy, subsequently allowing ten legal political parties to be formed and a nascent private sector to emerge. The military government also managed to reduce considerably the intensity of armed conflict with ethnic and ideological rebels by arranging ceasefire agreements, which came to involve seventeen armed groups.

55. Myanmar joined ASEAN in July 1997, thereby formally discarding the old policy of self-imposed isolation from regional groupings. The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) replaced the SLORC in November 1997 and to this date continues to rule Myanmar, with the mission of supervising the political transition towards what it calls “disciplined flourishing democracy”.

56. Leadership changes, ceasefires and abandonment of self-imposed isolation did not bring about political and economic transformation. Myanmar has not been able to benefit fully from potential peace dividends and newly forged links with the international economy. This is mainly due to the impasse in the national reconciliation process, which hitherto has not involved all the main stakeholders. In addition to the SPDC, these include the National League for Democracy (NLD), other legal political parties, and various groups representing the aspirations of ethnic nationalities, of which there are seven major groups, beside the Bamar or Burman majority and the militarily powerful Wa.

57. This impasse was created in 1990. That year, the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the martyred hero General Aung San, won more than 80% of the seats in a general election supervised by the SLORC. But the latter did not hand over power to the NLD, and its successor, the SPDC, has maintained this rebuff. Stern measures taken against “opposition” leaders, especially Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, set into motion vicious cycles of confrontation between the military leaders and the NLD.
58. In 1993 the SLORC attempted to legitimize and institutionalize its preferred political order by convening a National Convention (NC), which was mandated to draw up the basic principles of a new constitution. But this effort came to naught when the NC was suspended in March 1996, the NLD delegates having walked out in November 1995. In the border regions, ceasefire agreements did not bring peace to all areas. Elements within several ethnic groups refused to give up their armed struggles for self-determination and had to face a series of military campaigns waged by the central government. These campaigns, in turn, caused periodic bouts of tension and conflict with immediate neighbors.

59. Issues of repression and abuses of human rights became critical in Myanmar’s relations with the West, which imposed increasingly constricting economic sanctions and relentlessly criticized and condemned the regime. Official development assistance (ODA) from prospective donor countries and multilateral lending institutions was reduced to a trickle, Myanmar goods boycotted, and Western multinational corporations openly discouraged from investing in the country.

60. These pressures often provoked strong countervailing responses from the military leaders and, at least until recently as mentioned earlier, made them even more reluctant to cooperate with the international community. They suspended the policy of economic liberalization and adopted a strategy of self-reliance, supplemented by some assistance from and selective trading with friendly neighbors such as China, India and some ASEAN states.

61. The domestic political situation in Myanmar, the West’s attempts to change it, and the military leaderships’ responses to these pressures impeded the country’s social and economic development and retarded the process of its integration with the region and the rest of the world. Without assured access to markets and to foreign sources of capital, technology and assistance and without a sustained political will to engage in the practice of problem solving in collaboration with others, Myanmar is presently faced with an enormous catalogue of problems,
and these have consequences and implications beyond her borders.

62. The economy is inefficient, with distorted domestic markets and a high rate of inflation. There is a chronic shortage of foreign exchange and a widening gap between official and free market exchange rates, with the differential vis-à-vis the US Dollar being 150 times at one point. Indeed, the virtual loss of the US Dollar as the preferred currency for trade in goods and services due to US sanctions has severely affected both foreign trade and the tourism sector. The banking sector is still in a severe crisis after a run on major private banks in early 2003.

63. The existence of economic problems of such magnitude means a drastically reduced capacity to address social problems, which are no less serious. Public health services are lacking in both scope and quality. HIV/AIDS is a growing problem that has not been effectively tackled and has become a major concern of Myanmar’s neighbors. Resources for education have been curtailed for both political and economic reasons, resulting in a brain drain, misallocation of human resources and a deterioration of standards. There are many internally displaced persons in parts of the border region, where armed conflicts have yet to end, and they, together with those afflicted by economic hardship elsewhere, are potential refugees to neighboring states.

64. On 31 August 2003, newly appointed Prime Minister Khin Nyunt announced in a speech that the military leadership had a seven-point program, or “road map”, for transition towards a version of democracy that purportedly reflects the realities and objective conditions of Myanmar state and society.

65. The starting point, as well as the crucial component, of this program is the reconvening of the NC. To this end, the SPDC has reconstituted the following three mechanisms:

- The 18-member National Convention Convening Commission with the SPDC Secretary-2 as Chairman, the Chief Justice as Vice-Chairman, and ministers, a deputy minister, senior civil and military officials as members.
• The National Convention Convening Work Committee, with 35 members consisting of deputy ministers and senior civil servants, and the Chief Justice and the Attorney General serving respectively as Chairman and Vice-Chairman.

• The National Convention Convening Management Committee, with 43 members consisting of deputy ministers, senior military and civilian officials, and the Auditor General serving as Chairman.

66. According to the program, there is to be “step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic system”. A new constitution would be drafted “in accordance with basic principles and detailed principles laid down by the National Convention”. A national referendum would be held to adopt the new constitution. “Free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (legislative bodies)” would follow. Then Hluttaws would be convened to elect “state leaders, the government and other central organs” so that the task of “building a modern, developed and democratic nation” could be addressed.

67. While, as mentioned earlier, the “road map” has serious shortcomings in that it does not provide time frames or other details for the process of transition, the NC is unlikely to provide a solution in itself. The three NC mechanisms are controlled entirely by the government. This means that the military leadership is likely to exert decisive influence in three critical areas. One is the composition of the NC and the selection of its delegates. Another is the modalities of its deliberations and operations. And the third is the fundamental principles concerning the nature of the state, the separation of powers and the role of the military, which are to be incorporated in a future constitution.

68. If this scenario is correct, then the political impasse will be prolonged. For it is no secret that the military leadership prefers a unitary state governed by a powerful, indirectly elected president, with an institutionalized political role for the military under a powerful commander-in-chief who could constitutionally assume control of state power in an emergency. Such a system is not acceptable either
to the NLD, which prefers a parliamentary democracy along the lines of the 1947 Constitution, or to ethnic groups, who prefer a “federal” arrangement in which the Bamar is regarded as only one of many ethnic groups forming a federal union.

69. Furthermore, if the NC process does not involve all the major stakeholders right from the beginning and allow them to participate meaningfully in decision-making in these three critical areas, a number of other contentious issues are likely to be raised once more, consequently rendering progress even more difficult. The NLD may continue to insist, as a precondition for proceeding further, that the result of the 1990 elections be honored and persist in seeking recognition for its Standing Committee Representing the People’s Parliament, which is seen by the military leadership as an unacceptable attempt to run a parallel government. Ethnic groups not involved in ceasefire agreements are likely to voice concerns about their right to participate and to seek safeguards against a denial of this right.

70. Another stalemate, especially one coming so soon after the seven-point program was announced, serves no one’s interest. The military leadership, as the author of the program, will bear the full brunt of regional and international criticisms. The NLD and the non-ceasefire ethnic groups will continue to receive external sympathy and support, but will have lost an opportunity to change, through dialogue and negotiation, a system which they cannot—at least in the near future—change through other means. And the Myanmar people will continue to suffer. These are realities which cannot be denied.

PART III: Recommendations

71. A political impasse such as this is a result of a vicious cycle of conflict, confrontation and distrust, characterized by the contending parties’ suspicion of one another’s motivations and actions. To break the impasse, the vicious cycle must be stopped, that is, the contending parties must have confidence in one another. In building that confidence, the best place to start is to take into consideration how things are, not
72. One very clear aspect of the prevailing reality in Myanmar is power. Neither the SPDC nor its main pillar of support, the Tatmadaw, can be wished away. Another very clear aspect of the prevailing reality is the seven-point program. The military leadership introduced it and insisted upon using it as the blueprint for political settlement. Hence, they must be held responsible for the success or failure of its implementation.

73. This program should neither be rejected outright nor be given a blanket and unconditional endorsement. There are many reasons for believing that the SPDC’s vision of democracy may be too “disciplined” to be workable. Ultimately, there should be participatory democracy in Myanmar, as well as in all other Southeast Asian countries. This should mean, at the minimum, a constitutional system characterized by accountability in governance, the rule of law, voluntary popular participation, free elections, and freedom of speech, association and assembly, a system in which a number of independent institutions exist to serve and protect the rights and liberties of all citizens. At the same time there is the necessity of accepting prevailing realities. Therefore, the seven-point program could be used as the starting point for breaking the vicious cycle that underlies the present political impasse.

74. The program must first be made acceptable to all major stakeholders. To do so, the following four key tasks have to be addressed:

- Transforming the program by introducing institutional arrangements, which right from the beginning can make the process outlined in the program inclusive and representative.

- Providing the program with specific time frames and details.

- Providing safeguards and guarantees for all major stakeholders.

- Eliciting regional and international support for different stages in the implementation of the program.
75. The establishment of a Council of National Reconciliation and Concord (CNRC) is central not only to the performance of these tasks, but also to the process of national reconciliation as a whole. This CNRC, composed of eminent persons and representatives from all major stakeholders, is to be a body with the moral authority and mandate to guide the process of transition. The exact number of its members is not a critical factor as long as it is large enough to be more or less representative and small enough to be manageable. Fifteen would be a reasonable number, with 4 nominated by the military leadership, 4 by the NLD and other political parties, 4 by all the ethnic groups, and the remaining 3 being eminent persons chosen on the basis of consensus by the first 12 representatives. Nor does this formula have to be hard and fast. Perhaps it could be 5-4-3-3 or even 6-3-3-3. The Council should elect 2 co-chairpersons who take turns in chairing the sessions.

76. One premise underlying the process of forming the CNRC is that all major stakeholders are free to select their representatives and to vote on the eminent persons of their choice. This means that all political party leaders must be unconditionally released from formal or informal detention. This also means that there should be a general ceasefire and a general amnesty and that representatives of all ethnic groups, including those who have not previously entered into a ceasefire agreement with the government, must be allowed the freedom of movement, speech and assembly.

77. Another premise is that all major stakeholders are prepared, as a first step, to make the necessary tradeoffs in the spirit of compromise. Certain guarantees for personal safety must be assured. But, apart from these, all major stakeholders should not impose preconditions for the formation of the CNRC. Thus, for instance, the military leadership should not insist on total control. The NLD should not insist that the verdict of the 1990 election entitles it to take over the reins of government. Instead, it should indicate its commitment to supporting decisions duly reached by the CNRC and, when the time comes, to rejoining the NC. And the non-ceasefire ethnic groups should refrain from taking positions which could be seen as threatening Myanmar’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.
78. The primary role of the CNRC is, firstly, to reassess the nature and role of the NC, irrespective of existing decisions and commitments. Secondly, it must promote general consensus on a number of key priorities, principles, procedures and rules. Thirdly, it must oversee the establishment of various institutions and to monitor their operations. Fourthly, it must mobilize regional and international support and assistance for institutions and activities related to the national reconciliation process.

79. More specifically, the Council’s responsibilities should cover the following areas:

- Advice on the composition of the NC, the selection of its members, and the modalities of its deliberations and operations;

- Monitoring the constitution-drafting process. After the reconstituted NC has completed its task of producing the set of basic principles for the new constitution, the CNRC should provide advice on the formation of the constitution-drafting body and the time frame for the drafting process;

- Advice on the constitution referendum process;

- Establishment and monitoring of an independent and impartial national election commission. Here, the CNRC should provide advice on the principles concerning constitutional guarantees of the commission’s independence and impartiality, the selection of commissioners, the commission’s power and responsibility, and budgetary and manpower resources necessary for its operations;

- Establishment and monitoring of other independent institutions. The CNRC should provide advice on the setting up of independent institutions, especially those related to the protection of human rights and civil liberties;

- Establishment of principles, procedures and rules regarding relations among major stakeholders during the national reconciliation
process, including guidelines for a ceasefire, a general amnesty and guarantees of safety where necessary;

- Setting priorities for humanitarian assistance, repatriation and rehabilitation of displaced persons and longer-term development programs;

- Mobilizing regional and international support for all institutions and activities related to the national reconciliation process, including a national election commission, humanitarian assistance programs, repatriation and rehabilitation of displaced persons and longer-term development programs.

80. The CNRC may not be a satisfactory arrangement for those who wish to see rapid and far-reaching changes. But it does reflect the power realities in Myanmar. A crucial point to be considered is that, once set up and running, the Council’s moral authority will be enormous, especially if it begins to interface with the international community on a regular basis. Its advice on such questions as guarantees of human rights and civil liberties, the contents of the constitution and the time frame for drafting it, the holding of a referendum and the organization of a general election, will be indispensable in legitimizing the national reconciliation process.

81. One can afford to be cautiously optimistic that all major stakeholders will respond positively to these proposals.

82. Under this formula, the military leadership is not required to hand over the reins of power immediately and the structure of its seven-point program remains intact. During the constitution-drafting process, it will still be able to play a role in a number of important areas. It can contribute to decisions regarding a range of issues, from the structure of the state and governance and the role of the military within it to interim provisions regarding the length of the transition period and the power-sharing mechanisms to be put in place during this period.

83. Moreover, this formula ensures that whatever emerges from the
national reconciliation process in general and the constitution-drafting process in particular will be a Myanmar solution reached in the Myanmar way, and not a solution imposed from outside. The country’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and national honor will be upheld. And, perhaps most importantly, this formula presents a real opportunity to reinvigorate Myanmar’s relations with the international community and to give the country a real opportunity to gain access to global markets and global sources of capital, technology and assistance. This access, in turn, would help to make possible the peace and prosperity the military leadership envisions.

84. For the democratic opposition and the ethnic groups, the formula provides political space where there has been none, participation where there has been exclusion, and opportunities to bring about real and meaningful changes through dialogue and negotiation. Moreover, in the CNRC they have both a mechanism to guarantee their safety and an institutionalized channel for interfacing with the international community.

85. This formula will break the political impasse and bring about national reconciliation.

86. The major stakeholders must be free to work out what is best for their country. But, once the CNRC formula is accepted, there is no reason for undue delay. There should be a period of 12 to 18 months for the drafting of the constitution, which perhaps could be completed by the end of 2005. If this can be done, then a referendum on the constitution could be held soon afterwards, and if the constitution is approved, interim provisions for the political transition could immediately be implemented and the general election scheduled.

87. The CNRC is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for national reconciliation and political transition. To sustain the process, it will be necessary to have support and encouragement from outside.

88. It must be reiterated that it is in ASEAN’s interest to help ensure the success of the process of national reconciliation and political transition
in Myanmar. Therefore, it must play a proactive role in the spirit of “Enhanced Interaction”.

89. One priority is Myanmar’s troubled border regions. Working in collaboration with the UN, other international organizations and the Myanmar stakeholders, the group can put in place regional mechanisms for arranging and monitoring ceasefires, providing humanitarian assistance, repatriating and rehabilitating displaced persons, and initiating development projects at village or community level. Particular attention should be paid to the task of curbing and eradicating the production of drugs through a number of programs, including crop and income substitution. ASEAN must help transform the border between Myanmar and Thailand from one of contention to one of partnership and cooperation.

90. Another priority is Myanmar’s social and economic development, which is necessary for sustaining national reconciliation and political transition. Once the process begins in earnest, meaning the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political detainees, the establishment of a general ceasefire, and firm steps taken to set up the CNRC, ASEAN should also play a role in this area. The group should convene international meetings, perhaps initially in the ASEAN+3 framework, to map out an ASEAN+3 Plan of Action to mobilize regional and international resources for the development of Myanmar in the context of the development of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). Priority should be placed on human resource development, the construction of communication and transportation networks, and the creation of a sub-regional power grid system.

91. ASEAN should also set up an ASEAN-Myanmar Economic Integration Initiative, which in the first stages will study ways and means of strengthening and multiplying economic linkages between Myanmar and the rest of ASEAN and, through these, Myanmar’s linkages to the world. The implementation of both the Action Plan and the Economic Integration Initiative should be consistent with the progress achieved in the national reconciliation process.
92. The international community must also lend a hand. Where Myanmar’s troubled border regions are concerned, considerable financial, organizational and manpower resources are needed to oversee the ceasefire, mobilize humanitarian assistance, repatriate and rehabilitate displaced persons, and put in place micro-development projects, especially those related to the eradication of drug production and distribution. Here, the international community must provide immediate assistance for humanitarian reasons.

93. Western countries may not be able to lift all, or indeed most, of the economic sanctions immediately after the process of national reconciliation begins. This is as much a reality as the military’s dominance in Myanmar. But there is no reason why they cannot plan their future actions. They can keep in close touch with various regional initiatives, especially where projects related to the GMS are concerned. They can also plan for potential projects by working with international organizations and multilateral lending institutions. To bring about sustainable development, Myanmar needs not only ODA, but also advice and encouragement in many areas, ranging from reforms of the agricultural, banking and financial sectors, to education, information and communications technologies, human resource development and planning for infra-structural development.

94. Once progress is made in the protection of human rights and civil liberties, the constitution drafted and the referendum scheduled, Western countries should lift all sanctions and help to begin the process of reintegrating Myanmar into the mainstream of international political, social and economic life.

CONCLUSION

95. General Aung San’s wise words about “the internationalism of creative mutuality” have never been more relevant.

96. The people of Myanmar should understand that there is no inherent contradiction between nationalism and internationalism, that
Myanmar’s national interests are best served by cooperating with the international community.

97. Nor is there an inherent contradiction between national interests and regionalism. The governments of ASEAN have for too long held narrow conceptions of the principle of non-interference, taking refuge behind it to justify their lack of willingness to address critical domestic problems which affect the region’s security and wellbeing. While the principle has relevance to interventions from outside the region, they should understand that this does not conflict with the notion of enhanced interaction between member states of ASEAN, that there must be a regional approach to address domestic problems which have regional consequences. Neighbors should care for one another.

98. Western countries have displayed their spirit of internationalism by demonstrating their concerns over the situation in Myanmar. Thus, when necessary and appropriate, they must match their words with deeds. When there is evident progress in Myanmar’s national reconciliation, they must prove their commitment to internationalism by mobilizing their own and the international community’s resources to sustain that progress.

99. These are our recommendations. We believe them to be realistic and principled. They can help begin the process of political reform in Myanmar, bring peace and prosperity to the country, and forge increasingly close bonds of partnership between Myanmar, ASEAN and the rest of the world. A partnership ultimately underpinned by democratic values. A partnership of quality.
Asian Dialogue Society

The Asian Dialogue Society is an informal group of people brought together to address certain issues emerging over the last few years that could affect the course of political and economic developments, particularly in Asia. The members of the group come from diverse intellectual backgrounds, but they share a belief in the right of individuals and societies to live a life free of want and fear and in the indispensability of dialogue and debate not only in the resolution of conflicts but also the maintenance of peace.

M.R. SUKHUMBHAND PARIBATRA, Chairman

A scholar, politician and philanthropist, Sukhumbhand Paribatra has been a Democrat Party Member of Parliament for Bangkok since 1996, serving as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1997 and 2001. He holds degrees from Pembroke College, Oxford University, and Georgetown University. Before being elected to Parliament, he was an associate professor at Chulalongkorn University, serving as Director of its Institute of Security and International Studies (1987-93). While an academic, he held many positions, including those of Advisor to the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister, Chatichai Choonhavan, and Chairman of the Ministry of Commerce’s Advisory Committee on International Commerce. He has also held the posts of Vice-President and President of the Social Science Association of Thailand and is a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, and the International Council of the Asia Society, New York. Since 1986, he has been Chairman of the Chumbhot-Pantip Foundation, one of Thailand’s largest philanthropic organizations. Since 1999, he has served as Chairman of S.E.A. Write Award, the only regional literary awards in Southeast Asia. In 1994 he was selected one of Time magazine’s “Global 100”, a list of potential leaders for the twenty-first century.
M. RAJARETNAM, Convener

Rajaretnam is Director of the Information and Resource Center, a private think tank and consultancy which he established in Singapore in 1985. His interests include the political economy and cultures of Asia and international relations. He completed his secondary and tertiary education in Singapore and obtained an M.A. in Far Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan. He was a research fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, and a former Executive Director of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs. He has worked actively in most parts of Southeast Asia and from 1994 to 1998 he was concurrently advisor and coordinator of the Institute of Policy Research’s (Malaysia) Asian Renaissance Project, studying the ideas and contributions of great Asian thinkers. Under the IRC, he has initiated a number of projects on Southeast Asia, including the Asean-Vietnam Interaction For Progress project and the Study Group on Cambodia and Laos. His most recent work under the IRC is a series of projects on Myanmar in ASEAN.

AMITAV ACHARYA

Amitav Acharya is Deputy Director and Head of Research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is on leave as a Professor of Political Science at York University, Toronto. He has held fellowships at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore (1987-89), Harvard Asia Center (2000-1), and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University (2000-1). He taught at the National University of Singapore (1990-92) and is a member of the Eminent Persons/Experts Group of the ASEAN Regional Forum. Acharya has published more than 100 academic papers, including four books, an Adelphi Paper for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and more than 60 journal articles and book chapters. Among his latest publications are Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order (Routledge, 2001) and Regionalism and Multilateralism: Essays on Cooperative Security in the Asia Pacific (Eastern Universities Press, 2003).
Zakaria Haji Ahmad is with the Strategic Studies and International Relations Programme, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). He received his B. Soc. Sci. from the University of Singapore, his MA from McMaster University and his PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has served in the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) and as Deputy Director-General of ISIS Malaysia, and previously taught at the Universiti Sains Malaysia and at the University of Malaya. At UKM, he had been Head of the Political Science Department and the Strategic and Security Studies Unit, and as Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences. From 2001-2003, he served as the Tun Abdul Razak Distinguished Chair in Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University. Professor Zakaria has published extensively on the public and international affairs of Malaysia, Southeast Asia and Pacific Asia.

Jose T. Almonte was National Security Adviser and Director-General of the National Security Council in the Cabinet of former Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos from 1992 to 1998. He graduated from the elite Philippine Military Academy in 1956 and has won many military awards, including the Distinguished Conduct Star for gallantry with the Philippine military contingent in Vietnam from 1966 to 1969. He retired from the Armed Forces in 1986, after having served as its Deputy Chief of Staff for Civilian-Military Relations. General Almonte was also conferred his country’s highest award, the Ancient Order of Sikatuna, for outstanding government service from 1992 to 1998. The Polytechnic University of the Philippines awarded him an honorary doctorate in public administration in 1995.
DEWI FORTUNA ANWAR

Dewi Fortuna Anwar is Deputy Chairman for Social Sciences and Humanities, The Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and Director for Program and Research at The Habibie Center. Born in Bandung, West Java, Dr Anwar grew up in her home village in West Sumatra, where she did her primary and secondary education. She completed her secondary and tertiary education in London, England. She obtained a BA (Hons) in history and an MA in Southeast Asian Area Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University of London. She obtained her PhD from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia in 1990 with a thesis entitled “ASEAN as an Aspect of Indonesian Foreign Policy”. Dr Anwar briefly held the position of Assistant to the Vice President for Global Affairs (May-July 1998) and then that of Assistant Minister/State Secretary for Foreign Affairs (August 1998-November 1999) during the Habibie administration. Dr Anwar is a Member of the International Council of the Asia Society, New York, and a Board Member of The Asia Australia Institute in Sydney.

H.R.H. SISOWATH SIRIRATH

Sisowath Sirirath, soldier, diplomat and politician, is the Co-Minister of Defense of the Kingdom of Cambodia, a position he has occupied since 1999. He graduated in Political Science from Sophia University in Tokyo in 1970. Earlier, he went to the Universite de Phnom Penh and various military schools in the United States and South Vietnam. He worked for Radio Phnom Penh as news anchorman when he was still a teenager. In 1970, he became Official Interpreter for the Government of Cambodia and about a year later joined the military, from which he retired in 1975 with the rank of major, after earning a string of decorations. Prince Sisowath has also served his country as an aide to His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk. As a diplomat, he was Cambodia’s Deputy Chief of Mission to the United Nations between 1983 and 1991 and its Permanent Representative between 1994 and 1998. He was first elected to the Cambodian Parliament in 1993 and again in 1998.
SHIGERU TSUMORI

Shigeru Tsumori, a former diplomat and civil servant, is currently Professor of International Relations at Toyo Eiwa University in Tokyo. Born in Osaka, Tsumori graduated from the Faculty of Law, Kyoto University. He joined the Japanese civil service after passing the Higher Diplomatic Service Examination. He was Private Secretary to Masaharu Gotoda, Chief Cabinet Secretary, Prime Minister’s Office; Director of Asian Regional Policy Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Counsellor in Moscow and Minister in Bonn; Consul-General in Berlin with the title of Ambassador (in charge of Berlin and all the former DDR States); Deputy Director-General of European and Oceanian Affairs Bureau; Ambassador in Kuwait (1998-2000) and Myanmar (2000-2002). He has also served as a professor at the Osaka University School of International Public Policy. He authored *Reflections on the Ethnic Conflict in the Balkans* and co-authored the *Report on the Activities of Japanese INGO* and is a regular contributor to Japanese monthlies on Asian and regional security issues.

THAI QUANG TRUNG

Thai Quang Trung is a Vietnamese master-planner in education and human resources development. As the regional programme coordinator (Southeast Asia) of the Hanns Seidel Foundation (Germany) since 1987, he has to his credit more than one hundred capacity building projects developed in conjunction with the ASEAN Secretariat, UNEP, UNCTAD and other regional institutions. Trained in archeology and history of art at the Sorbonne University, he is passionate with works on heritage conservation. A Graduate from Science Po (Paris) and a former Rockefeller scholar at the Graduate Institute of International Affairs (Geneva), Thai Quang Trung has been affiliated with various regional think tanks, including the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore). He is also a founding member of the Information & Resource Center.
Information and Resource Center (IRC)

The IRC, which is based in Singapore, was established in 1985 and is a private research center that is devoted to strategic, prospective and cultural issues in the Asia-Pacific. Its work and networking are all aimed at contributing to the understanding of the issues concerning the region. The IRC initiated the One Southeast Asia project in 1990 in order to engage the transition economies of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. In 1995 it initiated the Asian Renaissance project, which attempted to rediscover Asian civilization through the study of some of its better-known thinkers. The IRC cooperates with a number of international and regional research institutions and philanthropic organizations. (For further details of IRC’s record visit our website www.asiandialogue.com)

Contact details:

35 Selegie Road #09-14/15
Parklane Shopping Mall
Singapore 188307
Tel: (65) 6312 5321  Fax: (65) 6312 5302
Email: ircenter@pacific.net.sg
Study Group Reports

In the 1990s the Information and Resource Center published a number of reports by its study groups to promote the One Southeast Asia concept. They are out of print but have now been made available on our website at www.asiandialogue.com

1. *Shared Destiny: Southeast Asia in the 21st Century*
   Report of the ASEAN-Vietnam Study Group
   February 1993

2. *Towards a Southeast Asian Community: A Human Agenda*
   *A Statement on a Future Southeast Asian Community to the Leaders and Peoples of Southeast Asia*
   23 August 1996
   (Includes the *Southeast Asia Beyond the Year 2000: A Statement of Vision*
   31 May 1994)

3. *Dictate of Partnership: Cambodia, Laos and ASEAN in One Southeast Asia*
   Report of the Study Group on Cambodia and Laos (SGCL)
   16 November 1996

4. *Cambodia in ASEAN: Partnership for Peace and National Reconciliation*
   Report of the IKD Study Mission to Cambodia
   May 1997
The fact is that, as we all know, events in the world are organically connected with one another, and whether we like it or not we are influenced by them…. We all know that conceptions of independence and sovereignty are now losing their former absolutism.

Someday it may prove necessary and possible for us to have, say, something like a United States of Indo-China comprising French Indo-China, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and our country. This is not an idealistic conception. It is one that may well be commended by historical developments of these countries having several points of affinity with one another ethnically, strategically, economically and otherwise….

We must…cultivate the right spirit of internationalism. By cooperating with other nations…we can have the benefit of the world’s best in every possible way and thus our life will become infinitely higher and richer. By keeping to ourselves we might be…meeting…our own doom. This sort of…internationalism of creative mutuality is indeed in accord with the highest interests of nationalism….

It will mean not only abiding peace and universal freedom, it will mean incalculable progress.

General Aung San, 1946