NAVIGATING THE GREAT POWERS:
MYANMAR AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN SECURITY STRATEGIES

by

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Abstract

Small states face a unique predicament in the international system, and have been faced with the necessity of developing a range of strategies to ensure their survival in the midst of great power struggles. In the literature on Southeast Asia, scholars have developed a number of ways of conceptualizing the complex strategies used at the individual and regional level by small states in this region to pursue their security, including triangular politics, complex balancing, omni-enmeshment, and hedging. Through an examination of the case of Myanmar, this thesis finds that in certain situations, the actions taken by states simply do not fit with these conceptualizations; moreover, the pursuit of these security strategies at the bilateral level may be in tension with their pursuit at the multilateral level. This paper argues that the lack of fit and bilateral-multilateral divide are due to assumptions of homogeneity related to the goals and circumstances of states found in the literature on Southeast Asia. In particular, these models of state strategies in do not leave adequate room for countries with different conceptualizations of security and regional order. Similarly, they do not anticipate or explain actions in a country where China is both the main economic and security partner, but rather assume partnerships with the United States. These gaps must be addressed and the models of state strategies extended if analysts are to have a full understanding of countries like Myanmar, as well as broader regional dynamics.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, K. Meredith.
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<tr>
<td>ARF</td>
<td>ASEAN Regional Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>CLMV</td>
<td>Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
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<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<td>SLORC</td>
<td>State Law and Order Restoration Council</td>
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Dedication

To my parents
1 Introduction

International relations theories have long focused on the ways in which great powers ensure their security and survival. Small states, however, have found themselves in a unique predicament, and have been faced with the necessity of developing a range of strategies to ensure their security and regional order in the midst of broader great power struggles. In the literature on Southeast Asia, in which the development of these arguments has been particularly robust, scholars have argued that the paths chosen by these small states do not conform well to the traditional strategies conceptualized by the international relations literature – such as balancing and bandwagoning – and have accordingly developed alternative ways of describing the more complex tactics used by small Southeast Asian states, including triangular politics, complex balancing, omni-enmeshment, and hedging.

The case of Myanmar provides a useful lens through which to analyze at these models. Prior to its recent reforms, its actions did not fit cleanly into the conceptualizations of Southeast Asian security strategies. In particular, Myanmar’s pariah status from the international system following its 1988 crackdown on student protestors, which involved a combination of regime self-isolation and sanctions by the United States and others, forced it to depend a great deal on China for economic and security support. However, the country’s recent steps towards democratic reform, and the accompanying removal of sanctions and barriers to trade and investment, have opened up a range of new possible partners in the West, and with that, new strategic options for pursuing its security. Since these reforms began, Myanmar’s actions seem to align more closely with a hedging strategy. The country is strengthening its economic and security relationships with other powers, and at the same time seeking to reduce its dependence
on, while retaining an important relationship with, China. That said, the conceptual fit remains imperfect.

The case of Myanmar highlights two issues with respect to the models of Southeast Asian strategies: first, in certain situations, state strategies simply do not fit with the conceptualizations; and second, the pursuit of these security strategies at the bilateral level may be in contradiction or tension with their pursuit at the regional or multilateral level. This paper argues that the lack of fit and bilateral-multilateral divide are due to assumptions of homogeneity related to the goals and circumstances of states found in the literature on Southeast Asia. In particular, these models of state strategies in Southeast Asia do not leave adequate room for countries with different conceptualizations of security and regional order. Similarly, they do not anticipate or explain actions in a country where both the main economic and security partners are China, rather than one being the United States.

This paper will proceed first with a discussion of the models and logics of Southeast Asian security strategies. It will then discuss the importance of understanding Myanmar’s security strategy, and how Myanmar pursued its security at the bilateral and multilateral levels in the pre- and post-transition periods. Lastly, it will discuss the conceptual issues raised by the case and what must be addressed in the models if analysts are to better understand the pathways chosen by Myanmar, and other countries in the region which find themselves in similar strategic situations. While the existing models may not be inaccurate in and of themselves, the literature must be extended if it is to provide a thorough conceptualization of the security dynamics in Southeast Asia, and of small states more generally.
2 Previous Literature on the Strategies of Non-Major Powers

In the international system, there is a logic to the behaviour of small states and the strategies available to them. In the broader international relations literature, arguments have emerged highlighting the greater need on the part of small states to pay attention to their external environment and constraints, due to their sensitivity to that environment and the high costs of being exploited (Elman, 1995, 175-176). Their strategies will thereby reflect this consideration of “external exigencies” and the structural constraints they face (Elman, 1995, 177-178). While this has been considered at the general level in international relations theories, a more extensive development of the arguments related to small state strategies has flourished particularly strongly in the literature on Southeast Asia.

Indeed, while Southeast Asian states face a dilemma in ensuring their own stability and survival in the midst of the great powers, they have achieved some degree of success in shaping their own destinies despite their relative weakness. While regional outcomes are heavily impacted by the decisions of the great powers, “the small states of Southeast Asia, individually and collectively, have facilitated the creation of this regional order by making certain policy and strategic choices easier and less costly for major powers” (Goh, 2007/08, 155-156). In conceptualizing the situation of these states using a rational choice approach – that is, explaining “both individual and collective (social) outcomes in terms of individual goal-seeking under constraints” – it can be seen that, in the abstract, small states have had a range of options as to how they may choose to pursue this security and regional stability (Snidal, 2002, 74; italics in original).
The range of approaches that can be used by small states in the region includes realism-based strategies like balancing or bandwagoning, other forms of self-help, and triangular politics. In the subset of literature focused specifically on Southeast Asia, however, scholars have found that the dichotomy of balancing or bandwagoning does not adequately capture the complex strategies pursued by small Southeast Asian states (Goh, 2007/08, 114-118). This literature has instead focused more heavily on three additional choices developed by these small states: complex balancing, omni-enmeshment and hedging, which may be pursued both at the regional level and at the level of individual countries. Overall, while some of these draw from realist logics, others contain elements of neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism.

2.1 Southeast Asian Security Strategies

2.1.1 Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Other Forms of Self-help

Southeast Asian states could conceivably choose to pursue their security in the manner found in realist theories of balancing and bandwagoning. Kenneth Waltz argues, for instance, that balancing against the stronger state is the tendency generated by the anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979, 126). This means that a state “assume[s] direct responsibility for preventing an aggressor from upsetting the balance of power,” for instance by sending clear diplomatic signals, forming a defensive alliance to contain a threat, or mobilizing additional resources of its own (Mearsheimer, 2001, 156). Alternatively, a state could bandwagon by allying with the likely winner, which may be the stronger side that is threatening them (Waltz, 1979, 126-127). Evelyn Goh argues, however, that despite realist predictions that “Southeast Asian states, as secondary states that are relatively free to choose, ought to “flock to the weaker side” so that they can balance against the dominant power in the system,” we do not see
alignment with China by these countries to balance the United States, nor do we see direct balancing against China (Goh, 2007/08, 115-116).

Other forms of self-help may also be available to the states of Southeast Asia. States may choose, for instance, to pursue a strategy of self-isolation and autarky, or to become a client state of one of the major powers. Formal alignment may be pursued – Thailand and the Philippines, for example, have the status of major non-NATO allies with the United States (Goh, 2005, 43) – however this does not account for the majority of the states in the region. While the literature has sometimes suggested that countries like Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar (the CLMV countries) are to varying degrees client states of China (Haacke, 2006, 26), this is often done with the assertion that these states’ alignment with China is largely due to lack of options, and in such a way as to separate these countries from inclusion in discussions of the broader regional strategies (Goh, 2007/08, 115; Goh, 2005, 5).

2.1.2 Triangular Politics

Drawing again from realist reasoning, small states may choose to manipulate strategic triangles and opportunistically seek security from major powers. In the abstract, the idea of a strategic triangle is used “to convey a strategic interplay of interests among three nations,” and the patterns of competition or cooperation that emerge from them (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2008, 42). Outside of Southeast Asian, this has been applied to the case of North Korea, which leverages strategic distrust among the great powers to reduce the possibility of coordinated action, even in situations where the international parties agree on the appropriate policy. Here, the country can manipulate the U.S.-China-North Korea triangle or the South Korea-China-North Korea triangle to achieve its goals (Park and Snyder, 2013, 288).
Triangular politics or “the use of bilateral relations with one major power as leverage to improve relations with another” has also been discussed as a component of the broader process of complex balancing, to be discussed below (Goh, 2007/08, 133). It could also be used on its own, however, without the other elements of indirect balancing such as enmeshment for the purposes of socialization. As Goh describes it, the logic of triangular politics is that while some Southeast Asian states support U.S. military predominance, “they can engage in triangular politics by cultivating military or strategic relationships with China in an effort to signal to the United States to invest more to avoid losing regional influence to the Chinese.” This approach could be used to attract increased U.S. military aid, trade or economic assistance (Goh, 2007/08, 136-137). Importantly, this strategy assumes that the state in question has some freedom of action to provoke or gain attention from the two major powers in the triangle.

2.1.3 Complex Balancing

Complex balancing is a second strategy which may be used by Southeast Asian countries to advance their security interests. While deriving to a certain extent from realist logics of balancing, this strategy differs in that it does not anticipate complete balancing against the United States or China; indeed, Goh notes that most Southeast Asian countries “could form strong military alliances with the United States and their neighbors if they wished, but instead they pursue a more subtle balancing strategy” (Goh, 2007/08, 132). Complex balancing instead envisions countries as indirectly balancing China and attempting to sustain U.S. dominance in the region (Goh, 2007/08, 131-132). This strategy is distinguished by its aim of facilitating this preferred vision of regional order in particular through “forging a regional balance of influence that goes beyond the military realm” (Goh, 2007/08, 132). In this sense, this strategy specifically
favours U.S. preponderance in the region, but aims to allow balancing and strategic relations to be expressed through political and economic – rather than purely military – pathways (Goh, 2007/08, 139).

Like omni-enmeshment, to be discussed below, the goal of a complex balancing pathway is in engendering a regional order predicated on U.S. superpower predominance, with China brought into the great power fold at level below (Goh, 2007/8, 119). The underlying logic is that through carrying out such a strategy, Southeast Asian states may be able to indirectly deter potentially aggressive acts by China, while at the same time facilitating a continued U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia. There are two elements of this strategy: indirect military balancing by individual states, and regionally-based complex balancing that goes beyond the military realm (Goh, 2007/08, 132).

At the regional level this would entail three related processes. First, ASEAN would pursue a diversification of the major states with a stake in regional security, including non-military realms such as economics, through economic institutions and free trade agreements (Goh, 2007/08, 139-143). Second, it would attempt to institutionalize the major powers’ role in regional strategic issues to channel their engagement or power, for instance through the ARF (Goh, 2007/08, 144). Lastly, it would work towards normalization, that is, a shift in the focus to the balance of influence rather than power by broadening the scope of balancing behaviour to include more non-military elements (Goh, 2007/08, 146). At the level of individual countries, this strategy would include policies aimed at the “facilitation of U.S. deterrence and by the building up of internal capacities through U.S. assistance, leveraging of the antiterrorism issue, and playing of the China card” (Goh, 2007/08, 138).
2.1.4 Omni-enmeshment

Southeast Asian countries may also choose to use omni-enmeshment strategies to pursue regional security and stability. As defined by Goh, enmeshment refers to “the process of engaging with a major power so as to draw it into deep involvement into international or regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships, with the long-term aim of integration” (Goh, 2007/08, 120-121). Important to this strategy is its liberal institutionalist logic, in which deepening interdependence and giving major powers a stake or interest in regional security, through encouraging multiple major powers “to develop closer economic and political relationships with Southeast Asia as a whole, and to build stronger political and defense relationships with individual countries” can help to diversify the region’s sources of economic and strategic stability, foster linkages between the major powers themselves, and protect against a situation in which major power competition leads to an unstable multipolar regional system (Goh, 2007/08, 121-124). This strategy is thus distinguished by its intent to “tie [major powers] down with regional membership, and to bind them to peaceful norms of conduct,” rather than choosing sides between the competing great powers (Goh, 2007/08, 154).

Drawing on liberal and constructivist ideas about the impact of institutions and norms, respectively, omni-enmeshment seeks to promote regional order by legitimizing the roles and inclusion of various powers in regional security; by institutionalizing, regulating and coordinating interaction; and by promoting cooperative security through norms like the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Goh, 2007/08, 130). While this strategy does not go as far as achieving a security community, the process seeks to redefine the target state’s interests and possibly its identity (Goh, 2007/08, 121). Effectively,
this strategy seeks to give a range of major powers a stake in the region such that they have an incentive and ability to choose cooperative rather than destabilizing actions (Goh, 2007/08, 122-123).

There are two key motives underlying this strategy: Southeast Asia enmeshes the U.S. to avoid a potential drawdown from the region; and enmeshes China with the hopes that institutional membership will act against any possible aggression (Goh, 2007/08, 129). This is an institutionally-focused strategy, which at the regional level is primarily carried out through ASEAN channels, such as the practice of having “dialogue partners,” the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN+3 process (Goh, 2007/2008, 124). At the level of individual countries, it is seen through the “deliberate cultivation of multiple strategic relationships with major powers in the region” or approaches “where policymakers have tried to turn the geopolitical reality of great power penetration to their benefit” and view the pursuit of diversified bilateral relationships with great powers as integral elements of their regional security policies (Goh, 2007/08, 126-127).

2.1.5 Hedging

Hedging is another model employed by scholars to describe the security policies of Southeast Asian countries. Hedging, in the abstract, “refers to taking action to ensure against undesirable outcomes, usually by betting on multiple alternative positions,” particularly in the face of uncertainty (Goh, 2005, 2). In Southeast Asia, it can be taken to mean “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation where states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious
expense of another” (Goh, 2005, 2). Such a strategy includes both engagement and indirect balancing policies intended to reduce the target state’s ability to constrain it (Goh, 2006, 1).

The focus of this strategy is on keeping multiple strategic options open in the face of present strategic uncertainty and the potential emergence of a future security threat (Roy, 2005, 306-312). In short, “the “hedger” does not simply adopt a containment or balancing strategy as opposed to engagement, but rather employs a mixture of the two, as “insurance” against the uncertain present and future intentions of target states” (Goh, 2006, 1). Engagement in the Southeast Asian context, in particular, is done with the hopes that such a policy will help China to develop a sense of partnership with ASEAN and encourage it to respect ASEAN norms, including consultation, consensus and cooperation (Roy, 2005, 310-311; Ba, 2006, 158). At the same time, states pursue low-intensity balancing with the United States with the aim of preventing acts of Chinese domination (Roy, 2005, 310).

Goh argues that hedging policies in Southeast Asia comprise three main elements: first, soft balancing to persuade major powers like the United States to act as counterweights to China; second, complex engagement of China with a view to socializing it into international rules and norms; and third, enmeshment of a range of powers to give them a stake in a stable regional order (Goh, 2005, viii). At the regional level, for instance, ASEAN has used bilateral and multilateral engagement to create a constraining web of interdependence and “persuade China to think differently and less confrontationally about regional security and its relations with the ASEAN states” (Ba, 2006, 161). At the level of individual countries, examples of such policies might include close defense cooperation with the United States without going so far as a military alliance; or undertaking a formal alliance relationship with the United States while making it
very clear that such a relationship is not directed at China (Goh, 2005, 25-26). Singapore, for example, has engaged China but has also facilitated a U.S. military presence in the region by permitting access to the airbase and wharf facilities in the country; it has not, however, pursued an outright alliance with the United States “for fear of upsetting its immediate neighbors or China” (Goh, 2005, 25).

2.2 From the Individual to the Collective

As noted, while the above strategies may be chosen by the individual Southeast Asian states in their pursuit of security and stability, these may aggregate to become a collective pursuit of security at the regional level. In particular, we can conceptualize ASEAN, the institution, as the main actor in carrying out the multilateral efforts related to these strategies. Despite being composed of the individual countries of Southeast Asia, ASEAN as a whole acts as a coordinating mechanism for reaching multilateral consensus about regional issues and security, and pursuing multilateral responses to them (Ba, 2009, 161). Alice Ba treats ASEAN in this way, for example, in describing the organization’s relations with and engagement of China (Ba, 2006).

Despite being able view the organization as a unitary actor in international relations, at the individual level not all states involved in ASEAN will pursue identical strategies, and the steps that are taken by a state at the bilateral level may not be fully aligned with the goals and strategies being pursued at the broader regional level. Goh argues, for instance, that states may pursue their strategies in quite distinct ways, based on their priorities and situations (Goh, 2005, 29). The strategy an individual state pursues, and the way in which it pursues it, may depend on its circumstances and its ability to maneuver (Goh, 2005, 4). This may lead to scenarios in which
the strategy taken by an individual state runs in tension with or contrary to the broader regional strategy being pursued.

Moreover, it is important to be aware that these strategies are not mutually exclusive, but rather may be complementary or overlapping. Triangular politics, for example, may be an element of a complex balancing strategy (Goh, 2007/08, 137), and omni-enmeshment may be an element of a hedging strategy (Goh, 2005, iv). Similarly, while complex balancing in Southeast Asia may tend to favour U.S. predominance, “it also is more widely targeted at integrating balancing policies and diplomacy into a broader, complex, balancing strategy to manage regional order, rather than simply the balance of forces between the major contending powers,” thus overlapping with enmeshment (Goh, 2007/08, 139). Despite this conceptual fuzziness, these strategies can be distinguished by their underlying logics and aims: triangular politics by its use of leverage to achieve gains, complex balancing by its seeking of a preferred structural outcome, omni-enmeshment by its desire to enhance stability by binding major powers through regional institutions and peaceful norms of conduct, and hedging by its logic of maintaining options in the face of strategic uncertainty.
3 The Relevance of Understanding Myanmar’s Strategy

Myanmar is an appropriate case for study because it highlights conceptual issues regarding the general applicability of the abstract models of Southeast Asian security strategies as well as the bilateral-multilateral divide within them, but also because its security strategy is important to understand in its own right. Myanmar is geopolitically significant, and the strategy it chooses could have broad regional impacts; furthermore, its recent reforms have offered the opportunity for changes in alignment. In this context, Myanmar must navigate the interests of the great powers, but may also harness the geopolitical importance placed on it by them, as well as its current ability to change its strategy, in order to better achieve its security aims.

3.1 Myanmar’s Geopolitical Significance

Despite being a small state, Myanmar’s geography places it in “an important geostrategic location that connects the Indian subcontinent with China and the Indochina Peninsula” (Fan, 2012, 8). As such, its security strategies must contend with the geopolitical importance placed on the country by the United States, China, India, and Southeast Asian countries. Prior to 1988, for instance, the policy of the United States was focused on economic assistance to alleviate poverty, as well as military assistance for the purposes of addressing opium production, which at that time was the main source of heroin destined for the United States (Steinberg, 2010, 114). After the events of 1988, however, its policy towards Myanmar focused largely on human rights and democracy, with “sporadic attention to the wide variety of issues in that country” seen in this

1 Although Japan has had a close relationship with Myanmar since World War II, and has been a considerable provider of foreign aid and investment to the country (James, 2004, 544), its role will not be addressed in this paper.
context (Steinberg, 2007b, 220). The more recent approach of the United States under the Obama administration takes place within the context of its so-called “pivot” to Asia and its desire to foster stronger ties with ASEAN. Jurgen Haacke argues that under Obama, American policy on Myanmar has had much to do with U.S. apprehensions about the rise of China, whose foreign policy it has tried to influence “by shaping the latter’s regional environment, not least by revitalising relations with alliance partners and friendly states” (Haacke, 2012, 55-56).

Likewise, China’s policies with respect to Myanmar have been crafted with geopolitical considerations in mind. Its past support for Myanmar’s military government has been heavily rooted in its desire to ensure Myanmar’s political stability and further its interests such as maintaining border security, particularly in the context of Myanmar’s ethnic conflicts; protecting Chinese investments in Myanmar; gaining access to natural resources, in particular Myanmar’s large supply of water, energy, timber, gems, boulders and minerals; and promoting Chinese energy security, including through access to the Indian Ocean (Haacke, 2012, 57; International Crisis Group (ICG), 2009, 10-14; Li and Lye, 2009, 259-260; Sun, 2012a, 61).

For India, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean are of high geostrategic concern; its policies towards Myanmar thus reflect the importance of energy security and counterbalancing China in Southeast Asia (Sinha, 2009, 1-2). In particular, while India largely ignored Myanmar prior to 1988, and denounced the military government after this date (Lall, 2006, 431), concerns about China’s influence led India to “diametrically [shift] its policies from reproach in the first few years following the military coup of 1988 to assistance towards the military in Myanmar” (Steinberg, 2007b, 221). Sino-Myanmar military cooperation has similarly been a concern for Thailand, and while Thailand was one of Southeast Asia’s proponents with respect to
engagement with Myanmar, issues such as drug trafficking, illegal fishing and ethnic insurgencies along the border “flare up from time to time in Thai-Myanmar relations” (Ganesan, 2006, 138-144).

Lastly, Myanmar is seen in geopolitical terms by ASEAN. While ASEAN and Myanmar had minimal relations prior to 1988 (Ganesan, 2006, 138) the organization controversially admitted the country in 1997 partly in response to concerns about China’s influence and domination in the region (Ba, 2009, 117-122). Relations with individual countries in Southeast Asia were varied: opinions within ASEAN on admitting Myanmar were initially divided along Muslim/non-Muslim lines, due to concerns about the country’s treatment of its Muslim population, however concerns about China’s role and the vocal criticisms by the United States (particularly with respect to human rights) led to increasing support for its joining (Ba, 2009, 117-124).

3.2 Myanmar’s Internal Reforms

In this geopolitically salient context, Myanmar has begun a tentative process of internal reforms, which have altered its strategic options in the region. Despite the long-standing control of the country by the military junta which came into power in September 1988, and the foreign policy strategy largely focused on self-isolation in tandem with alignment with China, recent years have shown signs of change. In November 2010, Myanmar held its first elections since 1990 (ICG, 2011, 1). Although the international community considered these to be neither free nor fair, positive developments have taken place since Thein Sein’s nominally civilian government took power in March 2011 (ICG, 2012, 2). As Yun Sun describes, “Starting with President Thein Sein’s historical meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, the government undertook a
series of dramatic reform procedures, including releasing political prisoners, relaxing press and internet censorships, implementing new labour laws that allow unions and strikes.” Perhaps most significantly, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was allowed to participate in the April 2012 by-elections, winning 43 of the 45 seats they contested (Sun, 2012a, 52).

These reforms have ended Myanmar’s isolation from the international community, changing the context in which Myanmar is pursuing its security goals. The United States rewarded Myanmar with visits by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as well as President Barack Obama; lifted financial sanctions and import bans; and appointed a U.S. ambassador to the country after a 22-year absence (Sun, 2012a, 53). Others in the West have followed suit. Following the April 2012 by-election, for instance, the European Union (EU) suspended all non-military sanctions (“Burma Profile”) and in April 2013 lifted all but the arms embargo (“EU lifts sanctions on Myanmar”). Thus, the period during which Myanmar has had to depend predominantly on China for international great power friendship seems to be coming to an end, and its recent reforms are creating potential for change in its strategy and alignment.

3.3 Myanmar’s Impact on the Broader Region

This potentially changing strategy is also important to understand because of the impacts it could have on the broader region, both for Southeast Asian countries and for ASEAN. In addition to the starker geopolitical considerations discussed above, whether and with whom Myanmar cooperates will affect regional non-traditional security and economics. Myanmar is a hub for human trafficking and the narcotics trade in Southeast Asia, which contributes to broader human security issues such as the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region (Green and Mitchell, 2007,
It is also an important source of intra-ASEAN labour migrants, destined for countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore (Pasadilla, 2011, 4-7).

Moreover, although it has been an underperforming economy relative to the success of other Southeast Asian countries (Sun, 2012a, 54), Myanmar has the potential to be economically significant in the region. Its resource-rich exports, driven by industries like natural gas, agriculture, timber, jade and minerals, are in demand by other Southeast Asian countries. It has Southeast Asia’s largest natural gas reserves, as well as sizable reserves of offshore crude oil (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 166; Steinberg, 2010, 168-169). Finally, as Myanmar’s economic governance and business climate improve over time, its prominence as a destination for foreign direct investment will likely increase (“Burma”).
4 Myanmar’s Security Strategies

Despite its importance, much of the literature on the topic of small state security strategies does not apply directly to Myanmar’s pursuit of security. An examination of the security strategies it has pursued shows that prior to the recent transition, Myanmar’s past strategies do not fit clearly with any of the conceptual options discussed. Moreover, there has been tension between how its security strategies are being pursued at the bilateral and multilateral levels. Since the transition, Myanmar appears to be pursuing a hedging strategy, although, as will be discussed later, in a way not completely theorized by the existing conceptualizations.

4.1 1988-1997 (Before Joining ASEAN)

4.1.1 Bilateral Relations

During the 1988 to 1997 period, the security strategy employed by Myanmar did not conform well to any of the complex, multilateral strategies described in the conceptualizations by Southeast Asia scholars, in large part due to the country’s seclusion from the international community. Bilaterally, Myanmar faced a dearth of international partners following the 1988 crackdown on democracy protesters and internal coup by the military-led State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Western countries, most prominently the United States, pursued isolation policies. As Holliday describes, “sanctions came rapidly to dominate US policy and were deployed in differing forms by many of its allies” (Holliday, 2011, 105). Economic and military assistance were cut off, and after 1990 diplomatic representation was downgraded to the chargé d’affaires level (Steinberg, 2007b, 222). In this first tranche of sanctions, American trade preferences for Myanmar were withdrawn and an arms embargo imposed, among other things.
1997, a second round of sanctions was implemented, prohibiting new investments or the facilitation of investments in Myanmar (Holliday, 2011, 115).

Other Western countries followed suit, to varying degrees. The EU, for instance, adopted a Common Position towards Myanmar in 1996, which called for a halt to all non-humanitarian aid, the expulsion of military personnel, embargoes on arms and military equipment, visa restrictions and a suspension of high-level bilateral visits to the country. In 1997, the EU also withdrew its agricultural trade preferences for Myanmar (Steinberg, 2010, 177). Australia, as well, took a position of strident opposition after 1988, although it adopted a more nuanced stance in the late 1990s (Steinberg, 2007b, 225).

Isolation from the international community was also pursued by Myanmar itself. This was in part because the American policy, in particular, was one of regime change. As Steinberg describes, the State Department’s semi-annual reports on the situation “most often called for the recognition of the results of the May 1990 elections, swept by the NLD, in effect calling for the resignation of the junta. This was in fact a call for regime change, and the Burmese government interpreted it as such” (Steinberg, 2010, 116). These policy goals, Steinberg says, “produced a nationalistic reaction and the fear of invasion that, however unrealistic to the outside world, is palpable in Myanmar among the tatmadaw\textsuperscript{2}” (Steinberg, 2010, 117).

Indeed, the junta’s primary security concern in the pre-reform period was regime security, meaning a “condition where governing elites are secure from violent challenges to their rule” (Jackson, 2010, 187), or more broadly here the governing leaders’ continued ability to control

\textsuperscript{2} Tatmadaw is the official name of the Myanmar military.
Myanmar’s political and economic direction. As Steinberg and Fan argue, the internal threats to Myanmar’s regime were multilayered:

The real threat to the junta is internal: from a general uprising like 1988 or that of some of the minorities who earlier wanted independence, then some form of federal structure, and who might still settle for greater autonomy; they have, however, no power to oust the present leadership. More importantly, the greater potential threat is from the Burmese people, who have much power if prompted to exert it in the streets because of the government’s egregious policy miscalculations (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 311).

This concern with regime survival was reflected in the main declared objectives of the SPDC, which Haacke describes as “the consolidation of sovereignty, the non-disintegration of the Union, and the non-disintegration of national solidarity” (Haacke, 2010, 115). As Steinberg argues, the military’s claim to continued rule has relied on its singular ability to uphold these: indeed, the SPDC “has held that the cardinal element of its legitimacy as rulers has been the unity of the country that only the military can guarantee” (Steinberg, 2007a, 114). Simply put, after 1988 Myanmar was carrying out a security strategy largely focused on regime survival, in a context in which it had relative few international partnership options to choose from.

In this context of mutual isolation, the actions and policies expected in individual countries pursuing the conceptualized security strategies were simply not feasible. Omni-enmeshment, particularly with respect to cultivating strategic relationships with the United States or other Western powers, was not possible, nor was the facilitation of American deterrence that complex balancing would expect. Triangular politics, insofar as it would expect Myanmar to use its relationship with China to gain additional support from the United States, was also not present in a situation characterized by a lack of engagement by both sides.
Similarly, the soft balancing against China that hedging strategies would expect did not occur, as can be seen through the country’s bilateral engagement with China. Maung Aung Myoe argues that, in fact, “Myanmar’s China policy in the SLORC/SPDC [State Peace and Development Council] period can be better understood in the larger context of Naypyitaw’s relations with other major powers and regional countries,” in which a strong sanctions regime pushed Myanmar to look elsewhere for friends. According to Myoe, Myanmar’s policy with respect to China “has been effective and had achieved its principal goal, which is to secure and consolidate China’s support for the SLORC/SPDC government” (Myoe, 2011, 184-185).

Instead of indirectly balancing against China, Myanmar’s relationship with China has been one of alignment and dependence. The period since 1988 has seen Myanmar aim to secure China’s backing in international and regional forums, and China’s non-interference in Myanmar’s internal affairs (Myoe, 2011, 105-108). During this period, both before and after Myanmar’s admission to ASEAN, its bilateral relationship with China included a number of forms of security and military cooperation, such as mechanisms for border security, high-level military exchanges, and the provision of arms for the Tatmadaw by China (Myoe, 2011, 137-145). China also became an important economic partner for Myanmar, not only as the principal partner for trade and investment, but also for development assistance and economic and technical cooperation in a context of non-engagement by the West (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 208-228; Myoe, 2011, 151).

4.1.2 Multilateral Relations

At the multilateral level, Myanmar’s actions during this period similarly do not fit well in these models, particularly given its late accession to ASEAN. During the 1988 to 1997 period,
Myanmar was not a member of the organization, and was thus unable to participate in the channels or actions that it might use in regional strategies of omni-enmeshment, complex balancing or hedging. On the contrary, Myanmar was arguably an object of security during this period: ASEAN’s decision to admit it may actually fit into the organization’s regional security strategies insofar as it was concerned about China’s growing reach and the situation in Myanmar harming regional order.

Although Myanmar received relatively little attention as a potential member state until 1994, ASEAN’s concerns about the country’s relationship with China began to increase in 1989, as did pressure from Western countries against Myanmar’s human rights issues (Ba, 2009, 117). ASEAN’s expansion – with Myanmar, as well as with the other CLMV countries – was thus done very much with considerations of China’s attractiveness to mainland Southeast Asia. ASEAN “aimed to neutralize openings for foreign influence and domination by closing ASEAN ranks but also by offering old and prospective member states a regional path to security” (Ba, 2009, 105).

Interestingly, ASEAN’s decision to admit Myanmar put it at odds with the United States. Although there were calls for a continued American role in Southeast Asia’s political-security affairs following the end of the Cold War (Ba, 2009, 169), and although the United States made it very clear that it did not want Myanmar to be admitted to the organization, ASEAN voted unanimously to admit the country in 1997 (Ba, 2009, 123). In effect, pressure by the United States made the issue a question of whether or not the West had the right to interfere in ASEAN’s decisions, and “even those most critical of the Yangon regime strongly believed that external Western actors had no right to dictate to ASEAN what it could or could not do” (Ba,
2009, 122). Admission of Myanmar to the organization was thus likely in tension with ASEAN’s broader strategy of engaging and enmeshing the United States in the regional security order.

Furthermore, conversely to what these security strategies might expect, Myanmar’s reasons for joining ASEAN were largely internal. Steinberg and Fan argue that there was a strong fear of separatism provoked by external neighbours or internal minorities, and from this came an assertion that only the Tatmadaw was able to hold the country together against these forces. This element of fear guided foreign policy, and likely played a role in the country’s desire to join ASEAN (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 308). Becoming part of the organization held the possibility of granting Myanmar an additional modicum of legitimacy both within the region as well as internally, and had the potential to increase investments in the country by other ASEAN states (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 336).

4.2 1997-2010 (After Joining ASEAN)

4.2.1 Bilateral Relations

Myanmar’s lack of fit with theoretical conceptualizations of Southeast Asian security strategies continued during the 1997-2010 period. This was in part a result of the fact that, despite Myanmar’s accession to ASEAN in 1997, isolation policies continued among many Western countries. The United States increased sanctions on the country in 2003 in response to an incident in which an NLD caravan, including Aung San Suu Kyi, was attacked and an unknown number killed. These sanctions increased restrictions on higher ranked military members, their families, and senior government officials, and stopped U.S. imports of goods from Myanmar (Steinberg, 2010, 115). In 2008, a fourth set of sanctions imposed in response to
the crackdown on the 2007 Saffron Revolution increased restrictions on investment as well as restrictions on the import of jade and rubies of Burmese origin (Steinberg, 2010, 115).

Resistance to engagement between the United States and Myanmar continued from both sides. When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, leading to devastating damage and some 138,000 dead, the military junta refused efforts by the United States – which had ships off of the coast – to fly in helicopters with relief supplies (Steinberg, 2010, 139-140). This was again predominantly due to concerns about regime survival. As Steinberg argues, “For two decades the United States has advocated regime change and the overthrow of military rule in Myanmar, and there is no question that the junta believed that this would be the best excuse for an invasion” (Steinberg, 2010, 141).

This isolation was not limited to the United States. Relations were also strained with Thailand, which advocated “flexible engagement” by ASEAN with Myanmar after 1997, which would allow for member states to comment on the internal affairs of the country, rather than maintaining a stricter code of non-interference (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 327). Incidents like the 1999 takeover by a dissident group of the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok and the 2000 killing by Thai forces of 10 Karen insurgents, who had taken over a hospital, put further stress on the relationship (Ganesan, 2006, 140). Thaksin Shinawatra was most conciliatory towards Myanmar, but his efforts at democratic engagement with the country were largely rebuffed (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 327). His “Bangkok Process,” proposed in 2004 to help Myanmar in a shift towards democracy, failed when Myanmar openly refused to participate (Ganesan, 2006, 140-141).

In this environment, Myanmar’s relationship with China became ever more important, both at the level of economics and security. Steinberg and Fan argue that “In the context of sanctions
and the nonengagement policy of most Western countries, the development assistance provided by Beijing and the economic and technical cooperation between the two countries have been regarded as one proof that China is that isolated country’s leading backer” (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 220). For instance, between 2004 and 2006 the two countries signed approximately 30 economic agreements, and by 2010 there were more than 100 assistance and economic and technical cooperation agreements between them (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 220). Security relations included cooperation on border security, high level visits between the Tatmadaw and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), arms supply and training of Myanmar military personnel at PLA institutions (Myoe, 2011, 137-148). Support of Myanmar by China also extended into international forums. In 2007, for example, China and Russia used their vetoes to defeat a U.S.-drafted resolution in the United Nations Security Council that would have condemned Myanmar as a threat to regional peace and security (Myoe, 2011, 127; Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 337).

At the same time, Myanmar was conscious of the risk of overdependence on China as a bilateral security partner. While Myanmar was clearly reliant on China for military and economic support, it did take efforts to diversify its suppliers, for instance by purchasing military supplies from Russia, Ukraine, Israel, Singapore, Pakistan, and North and South Korea (Steinberg, 2010, 161), and by working to establish closer military ties with the Indian Armed Forces (Myoe, 2011, 149). In this, we can see an element of nascent hedging, in the sense that the country was attempting to open multiple strategic options in the face of potential risks associated with this dependence. In part, this reluctance to be overly dependent on China stemmed from a generally xenophobic attitude toward outsiders. Steinberg and Fan state that:
Even with the strong position of China in Myanmar, or perhaps because of it, the Burmese junta has attempted to achieve an imperfect balance between unstated but partial dependence on China and articulate autonomous action. In spite of reliance on China and to a far lesser degree India, and having signed agreements related to border issues and trade with some of the contiguous states, Burmese foreign policy has been based on suspicions of all neighborly intent, and the fear of the U.S., and to a lesser degree Western, designs for regime change, control, or influence (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 308).

Thus, although the overall isolation reduced Myanmar’s ability to pursue strategies requiring economic or security engagement with the United States or other major Western powers, such as omni-enmeshment, complex balancing, hedging (in a full sense) or triangular politics, the awareness of issues of dependence on China were there – something which would affect Myanmar’s choices post-reform, when opportunities for engagement were greater.

4.2.2 Multilateral Relations

Despite having joined ASEAN in 1997, Myanmar’s actions during this period not only did not contribute to multilateral efforts to carry out regional security strategies, but also were in active tension with them. In particular, Myanmar’s behaviour became an international embarrassment for ASEAN after joining the organization. The 2003 attack on the NLD and the 2007 crackdown on the Saffron Revolution led to “growing dissatisfaction with Myanmar” by ASEAN (Steinberg, 2010, 176). This displeasure was particularly strong after Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest in 2003; Indonesia proposed involving ASEAN’s current, previous and future chairs to help resolve the situation through the organization’s troika mechanism, a plan which was rejected by Myanmar (Ganesan, 2006, 142).

This situation hurt ASEAN’s international image, and posed a threat to the organization’s ability to engage with the United States and other Western powers – something that it needed to
carry out regional level security strategies. While Myanmar was originally scheduled to hold the ASEAN chairmanship in 2006, it became clear that this would lead to internationally detrimental effects, including a possible U.S. and EU boycott of ASEAN meetings (Ganesan, 2006, 132). ASEAN states had to balance their principle of non-interference with the need to address these Western threats and this, in the end, forced a compromise in which Myanmar would forego the 2006 chairmanship, turning it over to the Philippines instead (Ganesan, 2006, 131).

Again, Myanmar was likely seen as an object of ASEAN’s regional security strategies, rather than an active participant in achieving them. Ironically, despite the fact that Myanmar’s admission into ASEAN was in part expected to reduce it, by the end of the period China’s influence in Myanmar had grown compared with 1997 (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 343). Moreover, international pressure for political change in Myanmar via ASEAN had little effect, and while ASEAN’s principle of non-interference offered a degree of protection for the country’s junta, the organization began to view Myanmar’s membership as a burden, recognizing that “ASEAN cannot support Myanmar in the face of international criticisms that undermine its own credibility and standing in the international community” (Ganesan, 2006, 132-133).

4.3 2010 to Present (Post-Transition)

4.3.1 Bilateral Relations

Since reforms began and Myanmar’s security strategy options have been enlarged by the country’s re-engagement with the United States and the West, its strategy seems to most closely resemble hedging. More specifically, the country appears to be cultivating a middle position, engaging new international partners while seeking to decrease its reliance on China, even as it recognizes that their bilateral relationship will likely remain deep for some time to come.
Notably, Myanmar’s primary security concern of regime survival continues in the post-reform period, even as the country moves towards, at the very least, the appearance of democracy. At present, Myanmar is arguably the Southeast Asian state that is most preoccupied with regime security, leading to the distinctive form of hedging that will be described below. Myanmar’s new constitution, for instance, guarantees 25 percent of the seats in each house of parliament to the military and requires at least 75 percent in favour for any constitutional amendment; it also prohibits those who have had foreign spouses from running for President – targeting leading opposition figure Aung San Suu Kyi (Feffer, 2008). Moreover, some see recent economic reforms such as wide-scale privatization as a move to strengthen the military and its business cronies, and to help them retain power even in the midst of civilian government (“Myanmar’s Ruling Junta Is Selling State Assets”). Similarly, while Myanmar is taking a number of steps to pursue different security strategies in the context of its wider opportunities with Western countries in the post-transition period, it is likely still done with the goal of ensuring the regime’s political legitimacy and stability. Haacke, for instance, argues that “the new relationship with Washington has not only served to help legitimise the incumbent government, but also allowed Myanmar’s leaders to cast aside representations of the country as a pariah state in regional and international society (Haacke, 2012, 59).

Indeed, as the conceptualizations of Southeast Asian strategies would expect, Myanmar has taken advantage of this opportunity to engage with new partners at the economic and security levels. For instance, while President Thein Sein’s first state visit was to China (Moe, 2011), he has since visited a number of Western countries. In 2012, he became Myanmar’s first leader to make an official visit to the United States since 1966 (Aye, 2012), and in 2013 became the first
Myanmar president to visit the White House in that time (Pennington and Pickler, 2013); he has also visited Australia (Petersen, 2013) and made his first European tour (“Burma’s President Thein Sein in first European Tour”).

Re-engagement is not limited to visits, however: Western states have moved quickly to end Myanmar’s isolation from the international community. In April 2012, the EU suspended many of its sanctions against Myanmar, and in April 2013 decided “to lift the last of the bloc’s trade, economic and individual sanctions against Myanmar, hailing a “new chapter” with the once pariah state” (“EU lifts sanctions on Myanmar”). The United States has also eased its sanctions on trade and investment with Myanmar (Hiebert and Killian, 2013). As these sanctions have been dropped, economic engagement by Western countries with Myanmar has increased. The International Monetary Fund, for instance, forecast that foreign direct investment in Myanmar would rise by 40 percent in 2012, to US$3.99 billion (Katakey, 2012). Similarly, trade between the United States and Myanmar has tripled, to a value of $300 million in 2011-2012 (Thwe, 2013), and there has been discussion by both the EU and the United States of re-implementing preferential or duty-free trade access for the country (Nyi, 2013; Kinetz, 2013)

Myanmar has also undertaken bilateral commercial engagement with other neighbours. In November 2012, Thein Sein traveled to Thailand to discuss plans for the two countries’ joint development of the US$50 billion Dawei deep-sea port (“Thein Sein in Thailand for Dawei talks this week”). It also discussed bilateral trade promotion with each of Indonesia and Singapore (Gogan-Keogh, 2013a; Gogan-Keogh, 2013b). Similarly, a May 2012 visit by India’s prime minister led to the signing of a number of bilateral cooperation instruments, impacting trade and investment, border area development, academic cooperation and cultural exchanges, to name a
few (“Joint Statement on the occasion of the State Visit of Prime Minister of the Republic of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar”).

Myanmar has also begun to expand its military cooperation with a variety of potential partners. In February 2013, Myanmar participated as an observer for the first time in the Cobra Gold exercises, which take place in Thailand on an annual basis and are the largest multilateral exercises undertaken by the United States in Asia (Haacke, 2012, 59). In discussing Myanmar’s observer status at these exercises, John Blaxland is quoted as stating that “the authorities in Myanmar clearly want to diversify their strategic security relationships. They have had a very close relationship with China in recent years, India has made overtures, they're part of ASEAN, so the opening up of the opportunity of participating in Cobra Gold is actually a very important step” (Bernstein, 2012).

More general talks about military-to-military ties with the United States have also tentatively recommenced. In September 2012, it was reported that “discreet talks” had been held between civilian defense officials and military representatives of both sides regarding the potential re-establishment of training programmes and exchanges with Myanmar’s military (Robinson, 2012). Other partners such as Britain and France have also begun the process of re-accrediting military attachés to the country, which had been suspended due to international sanctions (Robinson, 2012), and Australia has announced that it will ease restrictions on military engagement with Myanmar, in particular related to military humanitarian aid and peacekeeping (“Australia and Burma open defence talks”).

While Myanmar’s rapprochement with the United States could be indicative of any of the four security strategies discussed, the change in its relationship with China is what seems to
indicate hedging rather than omni-enmeshment, complex balancing or triangular politics. While omni-enmeshment and complex balancing would entail pulling a number of great powers into a web of relationships, part of Myanmar’s new strategy has been to pull further away from China, rather than moving closer. Similarly, the manipulation of strategic triangles might imply rapprochement with China to gain greater aid from the United States, but in fact we saw the reverse.

Indeed, in tandem with Myanmar’s re-engagement with the West, its relationship with China has become somewhat more distanced. Despite the fact that China and Myanmar announced an elevation of their bilateral relationship to a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” in 2011, a number of setbacks have since followed (Sun, 2012b, 73-74). Economically speaking, there are signs that Myanmar’s relationship with China is cooling as its relationship with other countries thaw. The Myanmar government’s decision to suspend the Myitsone Dam joint venture valued at USD 3.6 billion, a move praised by the United States, was seen as a blow to Myanmar-China relations (Chachavalpongpun, 2012, 101-108).

Moreover, while triangular politics or complex balancing might expect that Myanmar is simply playing the “China card” to gain the support of the West, as Pavin Chachavalpongpun argues (Chachavalpongpun, 2012, 99), Myanmar has its own legitimate reasons to desire a reduction in China’s economic and political influence in the country. The decision to suspend the Myitsone Dam project, Steinberg and Fan argue, stemmed from both internal considerations and a desire to rebalance the country’s foreign policy, stating that “the impetus for this action came from Burmese resentment of the dam and may be part of a Burmese effort to restore a semblance of neutralism to its foreign policy – a position that has a long history since Burmese
independence, but always […] in China’s shadow” (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 373).

Chachavalpongpun similarly argues that the suspension was a strategic move to respond to anti-Chinese sentiment in the country, and the need to appear a responsive government to please the West (Chachavalpongpun, 2012, 99). Since the suspension, China has cooled its political relations with Myanmar and the previously rapid growth of Chinese investment in the country has slowed (Sun, 2012a, 52-64).

Despite these issues, Myanmar has not completely reduced relations with China; bilateral visits and other forms of cooperation have continued, a middle ground to be expected in a hedging strategy. After a visit by Thein Sein to China in April 2013, for instance, a press release called for enhanced strategic trust, and the promotion of cooperation in the economic, trade, cultural and multilateral realms (“Press Release,” 2013). With these two facets, an element of hedging can be seen: on one hand, Myanmar is working to reduce China’s ability to constrain it, and the country is clearly hedging against the possibility that its overdependence on China hurts its security. On the other hand, Myanmar recognizes that China remains its main economic and security partner, and is hedging against the possible downsides of pulling away too quickly.

Moreover, as theories of hedging would expect, there have been efforts by both the Myanmar side as well as the United States to reassure China that Myanmar’s increased cooperation with the West is not directed at containing China. At a September 2012 trade fair in China, Thein Sein “reassured leaders there that Burma’s No. 1 investor has nothing to fear from Burma’s new embrace of the US and the West” (“Thein Sein’s China-US balancing act”). Similarly, the United States has attempted to reassure China that its engagement of Myanmar is a
response to democratic changes in the country, rather than targeted at China, despite any evidence to the contrary (Sun, 2013).

Overall, hedging thus fits Myanmar’s post-transition strategy, insofar as the country is engaging external players at least in part as an attempt to rebalance the weight that China holds in its economic and political realms, while at the same time recognizing that their bilateral relationship will continue to be an important one for quite some time.

4.3.2 Multilateral Relations

Myanmar’s new options on the international scene since the beginning of its transition have also led to changes in how it pursues its security at the multilateral level. Similarly to its bilateral relations, and as might be expected from a hedging strategy, there are signs that Myanmar is beginning to engage more deeply with partners like ASEAN, as well as pursue a foreign policy more independent from China within the organization. For example, Myanmar has stated that it supports and is working towards the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community, scheduled to emerge in 2015, which Thein Sein has described as “a milestone towards stable, peaceful and prosperous region” (“President U Thein Sein attended 21st ASEAN Summit plenary session held at Champa Room of Peace Palace in Phnom Penh”). Myanmar also pushed hard to be granted ASEAN 2014 Chairmanship, a position it had to relinquish in 2006 (Chachavalpongpun, 2012, 105).

Since beginning its reforms two years ago, the issues that plagued Myanmar’s previous involvement with ASEAN have dissipated and, as Thin describes, Myanmar:

has been active within Asean, trying very hard to catch up with the grouping in all the three pillars of the Asean Community—economic, political/security and
social/cultural. The government agencies and officials are learning and acquainting themselves with Asean’s various protocols, procedures and key issues. Asean experts are training them to prepare them for taking over the chair next year (Thin, 2013).

There are also signs that Myanmar has shifted away from simply carrying out China’s bidding at ASEAN. Sun argues that as Myanmar re-engages with the international community, China seeks Myanmar’s diplomatic support for its policy preferences in the region, through coordination in multilateral forums like ASEAN+3 or ASEAN+1 (Sun, 2012b, 82). However, Myanmar now has a greater ability to pursue its interests at ASEAN: Myanmar analysts, she says, see their country as one of ASEAN’s traditional leaders and now “free from its over-dependence on China, Naypyidaw no longer needs to struggle between the desire to please China and its ASEAN identity” (Sun, 2012a, 56-63). This is in contrast, for instance, with Cambodia, which has been accused of largely acting as a proxy for China in ASEAN (De Launey, 2012).

Myanmar has in fact showed its willingness to work with ASEAN to prevent aggression from China. In the case of the South China Sea issue, President Thein Sein’s advisor indicated that the country does not intend to blindly support China’s position, stating that “Myanmar determines its position on South China Sea in accordance with its own national interest and the solidarity of ASEAN as the regional organisation” (Sun, 2012a, 63). During the July 2012 ASEAN Summit, Myanmar reportedly did not assist China in blocking references to the dispute in the communiqué, forcing China to rely solely on Cambodia for support (Sun, 2012a, 63).

That said, Myanmar’s behaviour in multilateral forums since it began its transition still does not fully align with the strategy models, including hedging, since it seems to be in part approaching the organization as a way to achieve its own security goals, rather than those of the region. Since beginning reforms, for instance, Myanmar has harnessed ASEAN in its attempts to
increase economic engagement with the West. At the January 2012 ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting, for instance, Myanmar sought the organization’s support in pressuring the West to drop sanctions against the country, as well as in preventing others from convening a regional or international conference on Myanmar outside of the country (“Union Minister for Foreign Affairs U Wunna Maung Lwin attends ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting (AMM) Retreat”). Similarly, Chachavalpongpun argues that Myanmar in part desired the ASEAN chairmanship as it “would undoubtedly consolidate the legitimacy for the current regime of President Thein Sein” (Chachavalpongpun, 2012, 99). Thus, while Myanmar has begun to re-engage with multilateral efforts focused on regional security, it has done so primarily in the context of its own concern regarding regime security, and its individual strategy of hedging against China’s ability to constrain it.
5 Gaps in the Abstract Conceptualizations

The foregoing examination shows that the actions taken by Myanmar in the past do not fit cleanly with the conceptualized Southeast Asian strategies, and while they more closely resemble a hedging strategy in the post-transition period, the case remains different. Moreover, Myanmar highlights the important ways in which the carrying out of security strategies at the bilateral level can actually be in conflict with the pursuit of security at the multilateral level. Two key reasons emerge for these gaps: the models over-assume a level of homogeneity in both state conceptions of security and regional order, as well as in state circumstances with respect to economic and security partners.

5.1 Differing Conceptualizations of Security

First, these issues emerge in part because the various theories of Southeast Asian security strategies are largely explanatory of efforts towards a certain conceptualization of regional security. As Goh describes, particularly in reference to omni-enmeshment and complex balancing, these pathways “are aimed at facilitating a regional order that hinges on a preferred hierarchical power distribution that retains U.S. superpower predominance while assimilating China into the regional great power tier below that of the United States” (Goh, 2007/08, 119). Ba similarly describes ASEAN’s key value-added as its ability to stabilize and regularize regional order by bringing a variety of great powers to the institutional table (Ba, 2010, 116-117). Moreover, Goh argues that despite the fact that states may assess the threats and opportunities posed by these two powers in differing ways, they “share important similarities regarding their strategic thinking about regional order” (Goh, 2007/08, 120).
The case of Myanmar shows, however, that the assumptions made by Goh and Ba with respect to the goals of states are in fact problematic. These models of small state security strategies have been developed with a particular subset of Southeast Asian countries in mind, and while many states in the region – particularly the maritime states – can be said to view their primary security concerns in this way, this cannot be said to be true of some others, in particular some of the CLMV countries. In short, these models of state choices assume a level of homogeneity of state goals that is not reflective of reality; as such, they do not adequately incorporate and explain those cases where the main security motivations of individual states differ from those assumed. This assumption of homogeneity also leads to situations where an individual’s conception of its security conflicts with regional goals and conceptualizations of security, particularly as described in the multilateral strategies of the Southeast Asia literature.

In the case of Myanmar this overall lack of fit between its actions and the previous conceptualizations of Southeast Asian strategies, and the conflict between bilateral and multilateral security pursuits, is reflective of the fact that the country’s main security challenges are internal and its dominant pre-reform focus was largely on regime survival, rather than the kind of regional order that Southeast Asian security conceptualizations expect. That is to say, as an individual country, Myanmar’s strategy has been distinct from those of most Southeast Asian states, in that it has been most concerned about regime security, with others have been most concerned with stability and economic prosperity, leading them to pursue the strategies outlined in the literature. Similarly, the multilateral or regional strategies are designed to ensure this stability, differing again from Myanmar’s primary concerns.
To carry out the majority of the strategies designed to ensure regional order as referred to in the literature, prior to its more recent reforms, Myanmar would have needed to engage the United States. In order to do so, it would have had to pursue a path of regime change, which was the primary policy goal of the United States and Myanmar’s primary security concern. Similarly, Myanmar’s pre-reform pursuit of security as it defined by itself was incompatible with the multilateral pursuit of a regional order predicated on American predominance, as the Southeast Asian strategies entail. In light of U.S. opposition to Myanmar’s admission to ASEAN, incorporating all of the states in Southeast Asia into regional security efforts counteracted the very goals those regional efforts aimed to achieve. On the whole, so long as the theories of Southeast Asian security strategies assume that all states share a particular conceptualization of regional order, the existence of states who view security differently will lead to scenarios in which bilateral strategies conflict with regional strategies, which the models outlined by Goh and Ba are unable to satisfactorily account for.

### 5.2 The Issue of Partners

If the issue regarding Myanmar’s fit was related only to differing conceptualizations of security and isolation by the West, then its post-reform situation should be different and fit more cleanly into these models. However, a second issue arises regarding the main economic and security partners held by the states in question. In particular, this conceptual issue emerges from the fact that the literature on Southeast Asia again makes a set of assumptions regarding the circumstances of the states in question, and this leads to cases which don’t fit, as well as conflicting or seemingly contradictory bilateral and multilateral strategies.
The strategies as delineated assume, for instance, that the states in question actually have the ability to choose between these strategies and engage all of the major powers; they generally also run on the assumption that the main security partner is the United States. However, as Goh herself describes, while the United States has been welcomed in maritime Southeast Asia, it has featured relatively little in the strategic calculations of countries in continental Southeast Asia, namely Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. Moreover, the ability of states to choose between and carry out these strategies will depend on the room it has to maneuver. With hedging, for example, Goh argues that “the greater the room for maneuver that a state perceives itself to have in terms of being less dependent on one or both of these major powers (the United States and China) and more able to influence the regional security environment, the stronger a hedger it tends to be and the more complex its hedging strategy becomes” (Goh, 2005, 4).

While countries like Vietnam and Thailand have achieved greater maneuverability in their strategies and hence more interest and ability to pursue these courses of action, countries like Myanmar have dependent relationships with China and have appeared to form a “subsystem that gravitates toward Chinese influence” (Goh, 2005, 5). In the literature, however, instead of extending the models to understand and explain the impact of these differences in circumstances, authors often use this demarcation between maritime and continental Southeast Asia as an excuse to simply exclude these countries from consideration.

Further, even at present when Myanmar has gained the ability to choose between powers and engage the United States, the logic of a state emerging from a circumstance in which its main security and economic partner has been China differs from those as conceptualized in the strategies in the literature. While Myanmar’s newer strategy shows an element of hedging, it
appears to have more to do with maintaining internal security and resolving the dilemmas that emerge from this very element of dependence on China. Unlike many cases of hedging in which a state has one main partner with respect to economics, and one with respect to security, Myanmar is emerging from a position in which China served as both of these, and part of its security problematic stems from this playoff between China’s dual role.

More specifically, Myanmar’s high economic reliance on China has more recently served to undermine the country’s security, as conceptualized primarily as maintaining regime security, legitimacy and internal unity. Steinberg and Fan argue, for instance, that “Chinese infrastructure projects have been approved and built without consideration of local attitudes or impact” (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 353). Moreover, Myanmar’s overall dependence on and uneven relationship with China in both the economic and security realms has meant that it has also been forced, in some respects, to put up with “China’s de facto interference on the border ethnic groups issue” (Sun, 2012a, 57). This has included, for example, allegations that China has been involved in equipping and providing arms to the United Wa State Army (“China denies equipping Wa army”). More generally, the Myanmar government has been concerned about China’s influence in some of Myanmar’s border regions, as well as about the impact of the personal and business ties between some of these ceasefire groups and China on Myanmar’s overall security (Haacke, 2010, 126-127).

To the extent to which Myanmar’s public opinion or internal unity are detrimentally affected by economic or security relations with China, Myanmar’s conceptualization of security is thus being endangered by the very country that has acted as its main security partner since 1988. In light of this, Myanmar’s pursuit of security has demanded a re-evaluation of this
bilateral relationship and an attempt to take advantage of opportunities with newly available partners. Unlike what the models would expect then, Southeast Asian states in these situations may need to move further away from China – rather than move to enmesh it more deeply – in order to ensure their security needs are met.

Furthermore, while Myanmar has recently gained the ability to pursue a wider range of strategies in its international relations, other states – such as Cambodia or Laos – may still be dependent on China to such a degree that they are unable to do so. This paradox regarding the tension between having China as both an economic and security partner is also increasingly important in light of the fact that over the past ten years China has become an increasingly important economic partner for ASEAN countries (Shen and Chen, 2010, 27). As states in the region are increasingly dependent on China for economic prosperity, their ability to move away from China to pursue many of the elements of these strategies may be hindered. For instance, a state may wish to pursue a complex balancing strategy to ensure U.S. predominance in the region, but be faced with the challenge of being unable to balance against China, particularly at the economic level, or unsure of the consequences of doing so. This issue of partners, then, contributes to a situation in which the models portraying Southeast Asian security strategies only incorporate some of the states in the region, leaving the behaviour of others unexplained.

This conceptual gap could also lead to a situation in which actions taken by states to gain the additional room needed to maneuver leads to seemingly contradictory strategies at the bilateral and multilateral levels. For instance, a state may work to move further away from China in their bilateral relationship in order to gain the room to maneuver necessary to carry out the security strategies in the literature, while at the same time attempting to engage China
multilaterally through ASEAN, and attempting to socialize China into ASEAN norms like non-interference. This paradox of wanting to gain room to maneuver at the individual level while also advancing some level of regional stability, which stems from the heterogeneity of state circumstances and the challenges of dependence on partners, is one which is insufficiently addressed in the literature. This variation in circumstances between the states of Southeast Asia must be incorporated into the models if a full understanding of the region is to be had.
6 Conclusion

The case of Myanmar has thus shown that while a range of models have been conceptualized concerning the security strategies of small states, in particular in Southeast Asia, the actions of these states do not always fit cleanly with these conceptualizations, nor do bilateral strategies always align with those at the multilateral level. These gaps between the theoretical and the empirical highlight the fact that the previous conceptualizations of these strategies do not adequately incorporate the impact of divergent security views of states and their circumstances in terms of economic and security partners. In short, these models fail to incorporate the heterogeneous goals and constraints of these rational actors, and must thus be adapted to accommodate these differences.

First, expanding conceptualizations to incorporate a range of security goals will improve the ability of analysts to understand Myanmar and countries that find themselves in similar strategic situations. Insofar as strategies differ across Southeast Asia, and in particular in the current geopolitical context in which the United States and China may be competing for influence even in the states formerly under more direct Chinese influence, such as Cambodia, conceptualizing how the states of continental Southeast Asia conceive of and pursue their security will be key to understanding the dynamics of the region.

Second, further elaborating these models may be the next step in theorizing about the causal mechanisms underlying security strategies in the Southeast Asian region, as well as with small states more generally. In her 2005 work, for instance, Goh states that “it is beyond the scope of this study to present hypotheses that generalize about which states tend to hedge against
which major powers under what conditions” (Goh, 2005, 4). However, the Myanmar case points to a need to understand this element of causality in state actions and strategies. For instance, the variance might, as Natasha Hamilton-Hart argues, be in part due to differing elite beliefs about the benign nature of American power in the region (Hamilton-Hart, 2012, 13). Incorporating the various causal mechanisms that emerge from differing conceptualizations of security, security partners, and room to maneuver would be an important contribution in this respect.

This expansion, for instance, would help analysts to better understand whether and how countries that have traditionally been within China’s influence seek to move out of dependence, and under what circumstances they attempt to participate more in multilateral security efforts. With the case of Myanmar, for example, expanding this conceptual reach would help analysts to better predict and understand its future actions, recognizing that, given its circumstance, the country “can only push China so far without exciting potential problems” (Steinberg and Fan, 2012, 355). This is particularly important as China’s economic power, in particular, grows in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Lastly, for analysts of small states more generally, this case can serve as a warning against the risks of assuming homogeneity in the goals and circumstances of groups of small states. Intra-regional differences in this respect have been shown to have an important impact on the strategies chosen, and the outcomes achieved by individual states and the multilateral organizations of which they are part. As groups of small states – for instance, in Central Asia or Africa – seek to ensure their stability and security in an uncertain global context, understanding the particularities underlying their individual strategic choices will help scholars to develop accurate insights and explanations of, as well as better predictions about, their behaviour.
Works Cited


