the resolution to a vote, which has exposed fault lines. In 2011, the General Assembly reaffirmed its support for the mandate by a vote of 96 to 28, with 60 abstentions. Yet, no members of ASEAN voted in favor, and Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia voted “no.” ASEAN members, along with China and India, also opposed calls by UN special rapporteur Quintana for an international commission of inquiry for which the US and Europe have expressed support.

At issue, though, is a differing understanding of the nature of the challenge. The government of Myanmar is focused on the ends: it is now firmly locked onto completing its “seven-step political roadmap to democracy,” aimed at ending the country’s international isolation. The West is focused on the means: political repression and systematic human rights violations – a position perceived as rolling back the political clock to 1990. Meanwhile, ASEAN is pursuing its agenda of regional integration. The Secretary-General’s good offices role is thus caught in the precarious position of having to balance opposing positions, both within the country and between Myanmar and the broader view, the issue is not its own capacity to engage, but the government’s disposition towards this engagement. Proposals by the Secretary-General for the establishment of a United Nations field presence in support of the good offices mandate, for example, have yet to be agreed to by the government of Myanmar.

The second constraint facing the UN – the limited political tools at the disposal of the UN – is due to deep divisions within the international community on how to respond to the situation inside Myanmar. While some states, particularly in the West, frame the issue in terms of dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and human rights, others emphasize respect for sovereignty, oppose on principle country-specific human rights resolutions and view Myanmar’s democratic transition as a domestic matter. At the same time, underlying national and regional interests of China, India and ASEAN members are also guiding their positions in UN fora.

Between 1994 and 2008, the mandate was extended by consensus of the General Assembly, but three years ago, Myanmar succeeded in putting the resolution to a vote, which has exposed fault lines. In 2011, the General Assembly reaffirmed its support for the mandate by a vote of 96 to 28, with 60 abstentions. Yet, no members of ASEAN voted in favor, and Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia voted “no.” ASEAN members, along with China and India, also opposed calls by UN special rapporteur Quintana for an international commission of inquiry for which the US and Europe have expressed support.

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