6:00 p.m. [Opening Remarks]

- Thank you. Good evening. I’m delighted to be here tonight to discuss the future of Myanmar.

- And I’d like to thank the World Affairs Council for arranging this evening’s program. Of course I’m delighted to be in conversation with Pat and James, and all of you.

- I’d like to talk for a moment about The Asia Foundation and our work in Myanmar and other countries that have undergone democratic transitions.

- Let me start with a brief introduction to The Asia Foundation.

- The Asia Foundation is a non-profit international development organization, which has been working to expand economic opportunities and strengthen democratic institutions in Asia since 1954.

- We currently work in 17 countries, with an international staff of 820 professionals, and a budget of $125 million.

- We work closely with Asian institutions and partners in each country.
where we operate, and we’re fortunate to receive financial support from a wide range of public and private donors.

- We work on some of the most intractable issues in some of the most challenging places on Earth, including conflict-affected and fragile regions like Afghanistan, the Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Southern Thailand, and Timor-Leste.

- Over the years, the foundation has worked with virtually every Asian country that has undergone a democratic transition. Based on decades of experience, we believe we are now in a unique position to make an important contribution in Myanmar.

- The Foundation has a long history of work in Myanmar, dating back to the 1950s. We were forced to close our officer there in 1963, but since 2007 we have been able to re-establish a limited presence through our Books for Asia program. Over the past five years, the Foundation has donated more than 80,000 books valued at $3.2 million. These have been distributed to schools, universities and libraries throughout Myanmar, and have been enthusiastically received.

- Last year our staff held nearly a dozen in-depth consultations with a wide range of political, academic, and civil society leaders in Myanmar. These staff explorations culminated in a special delegation that I led last October to meet the President of Myanmar, U Thein Sein. While the Myanmar government is currently being overwhelmed with offers of assistance from international donors, the President and his senior ministers had a very clear agenda of their needs and priorities for the country’s economic development, political reform and rule of law.

- Last September, we were also pleased to host Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at our San Francisco headquarters during her first visit to the U.S. after decades of detention. She spoke to a group of Bay Area political, civic, and business leaders following a private meeting with our
Board of Trustees.

- We are now in the process of reopening a resident office in Yangon to support the country’s democratic transition and development.

- As we approach this exciting task, we recognize the fragility of the current reforms and the rapidly changing, somewhat volatile political environment. I am sure that we are all aware of the ongoing religious and ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, including the recent rioting that escalated into the deaths of 32 people. So there are many challenges ahead.

- but before we look forward, I want to give you a brief look at the past, starting From 1962, when a military coup against the elected civilian government resulted in the establishment of an authoritarian regime that quickly isolated the country from the rest of the world.

- As you may remember, in 1990, still under martial law, Myanmar held its first multi-party elections in three decades. The National League for Democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s party, won 82 percent of 485 Parliament seats. However, the government nullified the results and this refusal to honor the results was condemned internationally. During the following decades, the military-led government suppressed civil liberties and jailed thousands of political prisoners.

- 21 years later, in 2011, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest and Thein Sein, a former general, who had served as prime minister became president of Myanmar. He surprised the world by delivering a sober, critical assessment of the stark realities of Myanmar's condition, acknowledging the daunting challenges it faces, corruption, and the country's failure to resolve the ongoing ethnic conflicts along the country's border.

- For many outside observers and for the people of Myanmar, the speed and breadth of the reforms initiated by the U Thein Sein government have been amazing. As some of the sober realities now start to set in, there are growing worries about the durability of the multi-faceted reform process now underway.
• This evening, I’d like to discuss what we see as three of the most critical challenges or hurdles on Myanmar’s path to democracy. Very briefly, these include strengthening the core institutions of democratic governance, growing a culture of democracy, and managing subnational conflict.

6:10 p.m. [Remarks for 20 minutes]

1. Let me start with the core institutions of democratic governance

• **While Myanmar’s new Constitution provides a framework for democratic governance**, the country faces enormous challenges in trying to re-instate democratic practices after half a century of military rule.

• **The political powers formerly concentrated within the senior leadership of an authoritarian regime are now distributed among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.** For the first time, judicial and quasi-judicial bodies have been established and given the power for constitutional review. In addition, the new constitution provides a framework for devolution of authority to 14 states and regions.

• **Unfortunately, There is very limited institutional and technical capacity** to give life and meaning to this new constitutional framework or to implement some of the reform measures being adopted. To cite just a few examples: there is still no clear division of labor between the national parliament and provincial legislatures; the process of organizing and administering free and fair elections is extremely unclear; and there are very few trained judges to staff the newly empowered courts. In short, there are serious challenges to implementing many aspects of a truly democratic system of governance.
• Virtually every governance institution operates under severe challenges, with a thin layer of senior management capacity masking deep-seated institutional and human resource constraints.

• The Parliament Secretariat is illustrative. While the newly-elected Myanmar parliament has begun to grapple with serious questions, such as the rules for foreign investment, press freedom and censorship, and standards for environmental regulation. Its day-to-day operations are constrained by rudimentary systems, lack of professional staff support, and a shortage of library and legislative reference materials. The secretariat has very limited email and other electronic communications capacity and lacks even the basic ability to produce records of parliamentary proceedings.

• To help address some of these needs, the Foundation delivered a special collection of more than 600 volumes to form the core reference material for the Parliamentary Library. The donations came at a special request from the Parliament, and the books will provide parliamentarians with information about key policy, economic and political reform issues facing the country.

2. A second major challenge for Myanmar is to develop what Aung San Suu Kyi has referred to a “culture of democracy.” It is one thing to create the formal mechanisms of democratic governance, but vibrant functioning democracies require an active and engaged citizenry. In Myanmar, there is a critical need for broadening citizens’ understanding of the rule of law. Civic education, democratic process and access to information are vital pre-requisites for informed public debate on the reform agenda.

• The support of the civil society organizations is critical to shaping a democratic society in Myanmar. This view is echoed by Myanmar President U Thein Sein who has stressed the need to
“resurrect democratic culture” which he said has been lost for a long time in his country. He emphasized this in his public remarks in the U.S. and again during my meeting with him in Naypyidaw.

- **In this regard, it is heartening to observe a developing civil society movement in Myanmar.** Of particular importance is the space and scope accorded local civil society groups to engage in voter and civic education efforts and to observe and report on the pre- and post-election environment and election-day proceedings. Early indications suggest that the government may be amenable to local voter and civic education initiatives but less disposed to independent election monitoring and observation.

- **Looking ahead, the credibility of the 2015 elections** will rest on a number of factors, including the role of political parties and civil society organizations in the electoral process.

- The Foundation has a strong track record of support for non-partisan civil society voter and civic education, reform advocacy, and election observation coalitions.

- In Indonesia, for example, we have supported the People’s Voter Education Network, which produces voter information materials; encourages candidates to make specific policy pledges; and during National Assembly elections has deployed more than 80,000 observers to prevent fraud.

- **Of course, access to information and a free press are vital prerequisites for civic engagement.** In the span of little more than a year, the Government has added the concept of media freedom and broader freedom of information to the vocabulary of its reform agenda, and taken a series of measures that have the potential to widen the scope for media freedom and redefine the role of the state media.
• Censorship has been gradually relaxed and journalists and writers are prepared to tackle issues that would previously have been avoided as too sensitive. With bans on Internet access to social media websites lifted in 2011, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube now serve as forums for candid dialogue on a broad range of public policy issues.

• In fact, yesterday marked the first day that privately-owned newspapers were allowed to begin publishing in Myanmar. Four new dailies hit the newsstands yesterday, with another eight hoping to follow soon. Not all of them are likely to survive, but the advent of these new, independent media outlets after 50 years of state press monopoly is obviously a major step forward in the democratization process.

3. The third major challenge for Myanmar is managing subnational conflict.

• Peace and order in the ethnic border areas are critical to long-term stability and development of Myanmar. Among the most diverse and complex regions of the country, the border regions are poorly understood by outsiders, including the national government and the political-military elite.

• Ethnic minorities that live in the Burmese states bordering Thailand, China, India, and Bangladesh have suffered generations of unrest. Economic hardship, security challenges, and the failure of successive governments to address the root causes of these conflicts has created an entrenched environment of distrust between the government and the ethnic populations.

• It is important to remember that more than 40 percent of Myanmar’s people belong to ethnic minority (non-Burmese) groups. These groups have never been fully integrated into the
Burmese state, with their exclusion serving as a constant source of tension, instability, and uncertainty for the government and the country as a whole. With this combination of conflict, political tension, acute development needs, and complex local dynamics, the border regions hold the greatest risk of derailing the country’s overall reform process should conflict resume on a wide scale.

- **The recent reform process has brought some striking changes, but the situation remains precarious.** Former Minster of Railroads and recent appointee to the President’s inner cabinet U Aung Min is pursuing a series of unprecedented ceasefire agreements with nearly a dozen armed insurgency groups in various parts of Myanmar. Despite these peace-building efforts, there is renewed conflict in Kachin State as well as the recent violence between Muslim and Buddhist groups in Rakhina State, home of the stateless Rolinga population.

- **In this complex and highly volatile environment,** the Foundation hopes to make a positive contribution by undertaking an in-depth, up-to-date and politically and technically grounded analysis of subnational conflicts and local-level state-society dynamics in the border areas of Myanmar.

I’ll add that after nearly 65 years of protracted conflicts, Myanmar is closer than it has ever been to a comprehensive cessation of internal armed violence. However, the ultimate success of the peace process will hinge on establishing an inclusive dialogue on key political issues of contention, an effective platform for ceasefire monitoring, and the provision of both humanitarian relief and economic development investments.

- **In short, immediate efforts are needed on multiple fronts to move the 19 conflict regions from tenuous ceasefire agreements to enduring peace plans.**
The Asia Foundation has extensive experience working in regions affected by clan rivalries and ethnic violence. In the Mindanao Province of the Philippines, The Asia Foundation has worked continuously with reformers striving for democratic development and peace. Because of our access to all sides of the long-running conflict in Mindanao, we were selected in the late 2000s to join the International Contact Group for negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Now that a framework for peace has been struck, we are advising in what is still a first step in a long, complex process of working through long-lasting disputes.

We expect to draw on our Philippines experience as we begin to help address longstanding conflicts in Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

Outside help from international organizations can make a positive contribution to Myanmar’s ongoing reform process. But ultimately, it is the leaders and people of Myanmar who will win or lose the country’s hope for a democratic future. The good news is that both president Thein Sein and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, seem genuinely committed to the reform process. The job for those of us who care about Myanmar’s future peace and prosperity is to provide thoughtful, sensitive and sustained support for their efforts. I am very proud that The Asia Foundation has been invited to play a small, but hopefully meaningful, role in this process.

6:40 p.m. [Transition]

I’d like to stop here; I know Pat and James would like to have a conversation, and I’d like to take your good questions.

6:41 p.m. [Moderated Questions and Answers]