



# PRINCIPLE, OR PRAGMATISM?

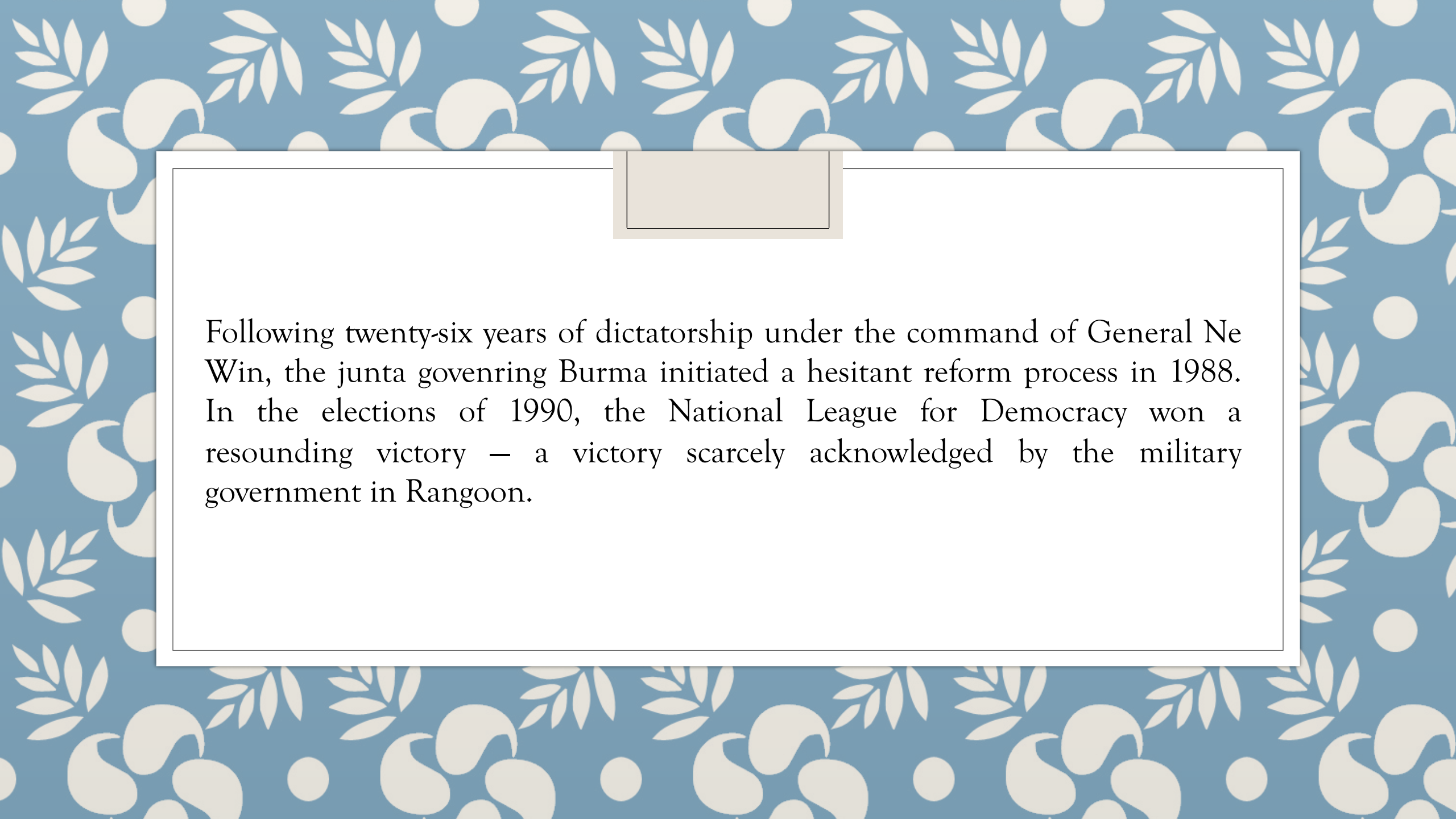
ASEAN, Europe, and the Matter of Burma

Alexander Ripley, Dalhousie University

10 June 2015



# THE PROBLEM

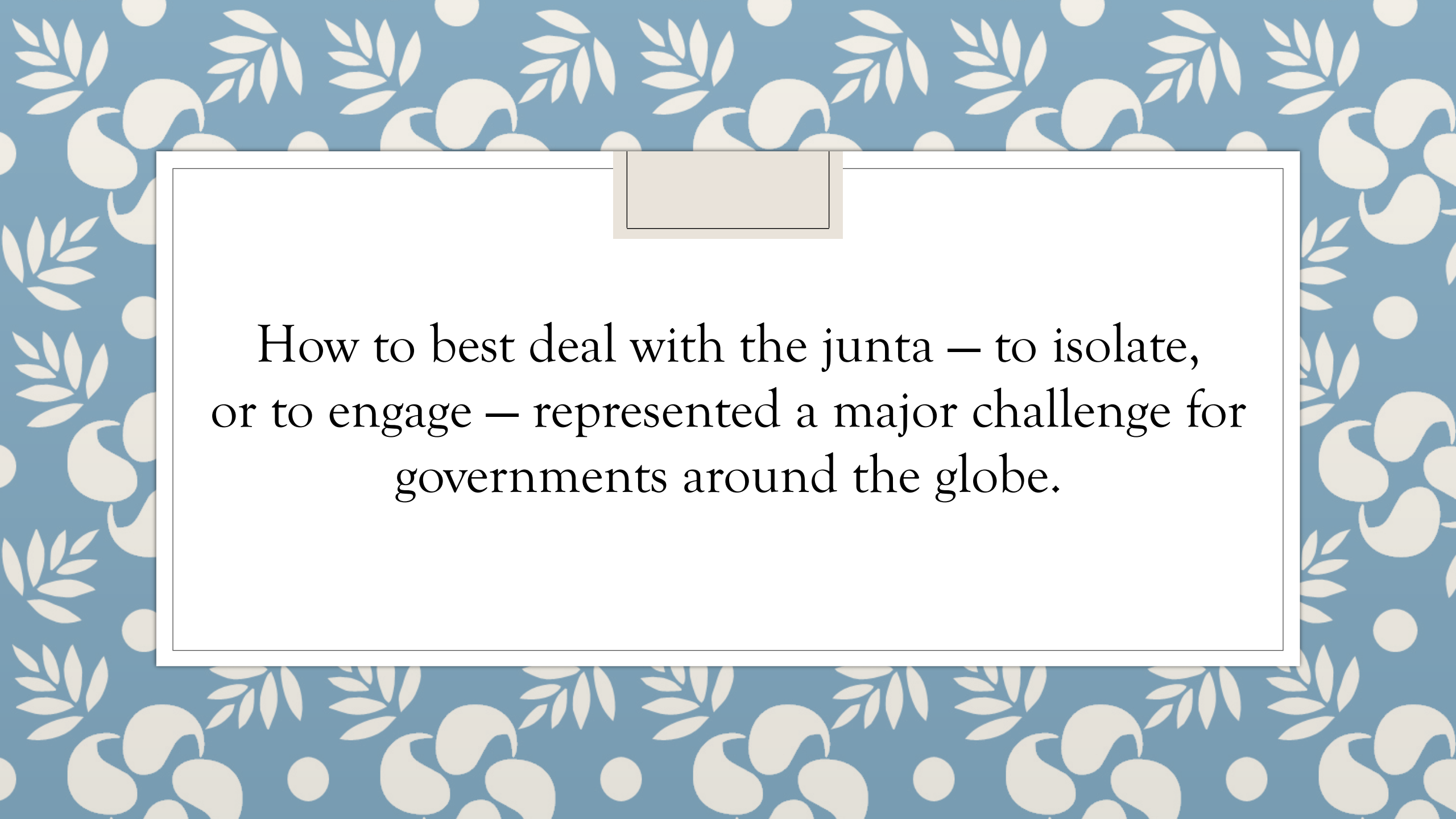


Following twenty-six years of dictatorship under the command of General Ne Win, the junta governing Burma initiated a hesitant reform process in 1988. In the elections of 1990, the National League for Democracy won a resounding victory — a victory scarcely acknowledged by the military government in Rangoon.

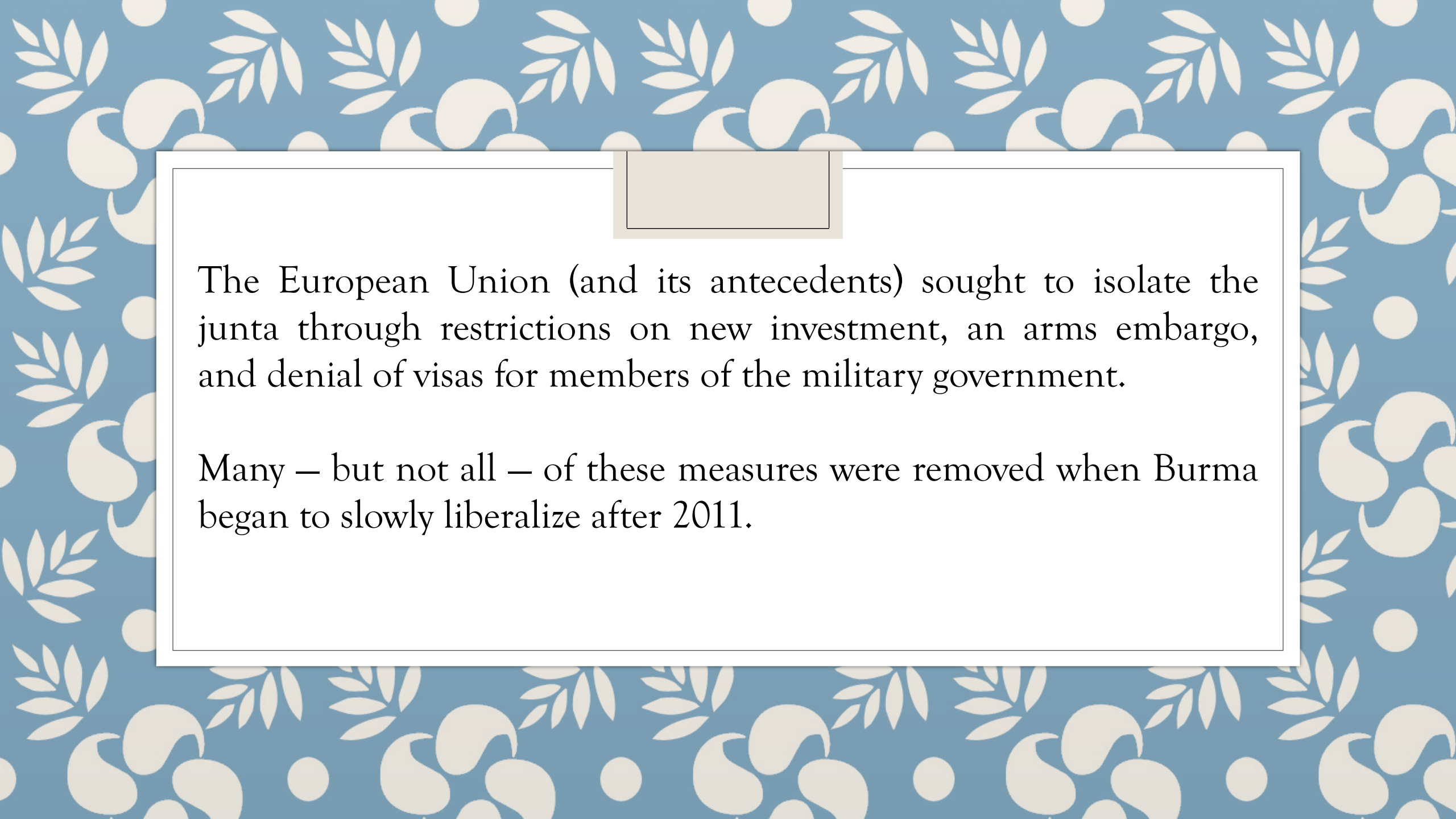








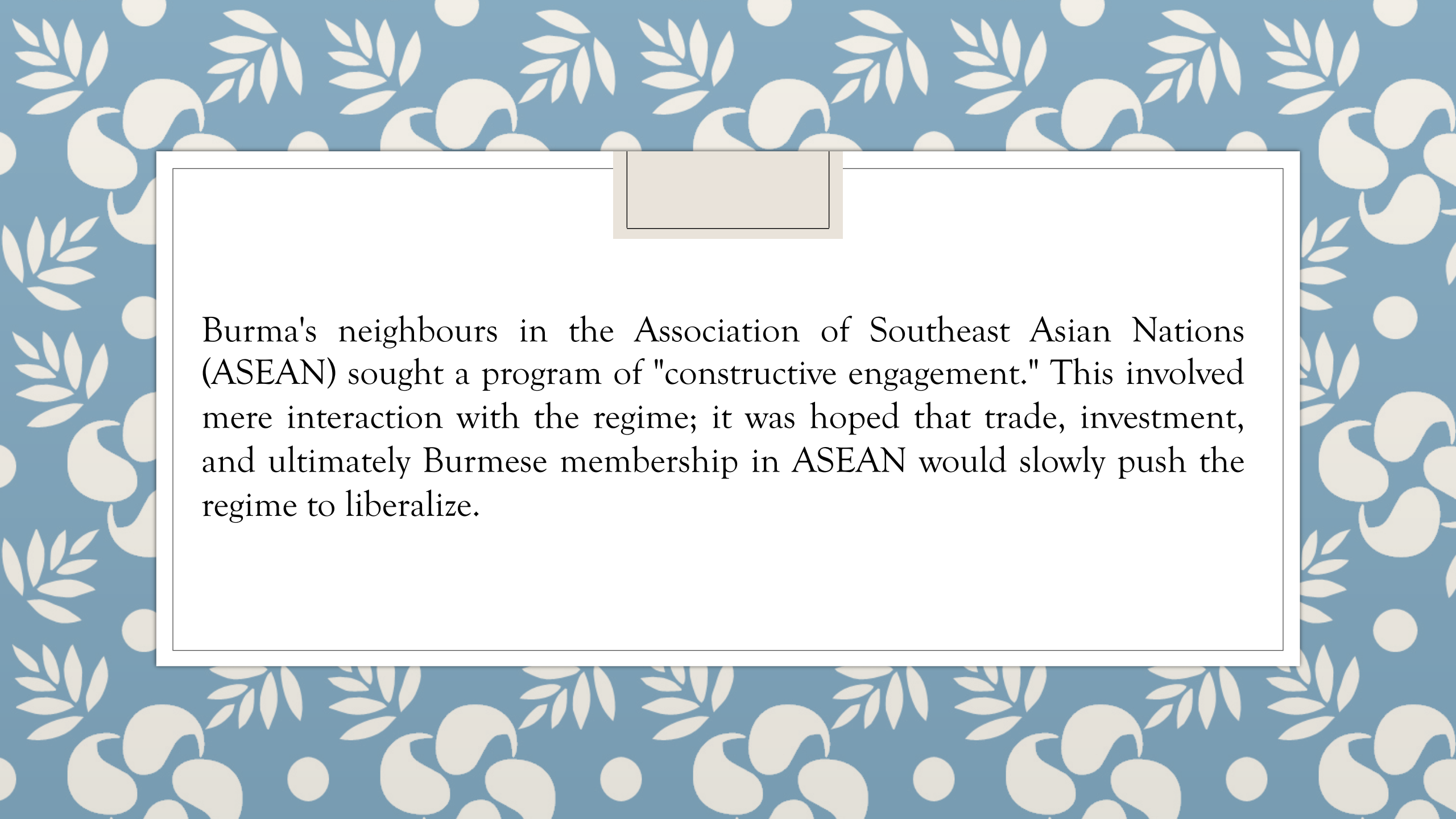
How to best deal with the junta – to isolate, or to engage – represented a major challenge for governments around the globe.



The European Union (and its antecedents) sought to isolate the junta through restrictions on new investment, an arms embargo, and denial of visas for members of the military government.

Many – but not all – of these measures were removed when Burma began to slowly liberalize after 2011.





Burma's neighbours in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) sought a program of "constructive engagement." This involved mere interaction with the regime; it was hoped that trade, investment, and ultimately Burmese membership in ASEAN would slowly push the regime to liberalize.




# EXPLANATIONS

Most commonly see the divergent regional policies vis-à-vis Burma accounted for through constructivist arguments:

ASEAN motivated by its powerful norm of non-interference to constructively engaged, while the EU shapes its policy around a commitment to universal human rights norms.





Constructive engagement:  
in ASEAN's best interest?



# STRATEGY & SECURITY





MYANMAR (BURMA)

LAOS

THAILAND

VIETNAM

CAMBODIA

PHILIPPINES

MALAYSIA

BRUNEI

INDONESIA

Philippine Sea

South China Sea

Andaman Sea

Yangon

Hanoi

Bangkok

Manila

Phnom Penh

Ho Chi Minh City

Davao City

Kuala Lumpur

Singapore

Pontianak

Padang

Jambi

Balikpapan

Palembang

Bengkulu

Banjarmasin

Kendari

Ambon City

Sorong

Bandar Lampung

Jakarta

Makasar

Bandung

Pati

Surabaya





**NEPAL**

**BHUTAN**

**BANGLADESH**

**MYANMAR  
(BURMA)**

**LAOS**

**THAILAND**

**VIETNAM**

**CAMBODIA**

**PHILIPPINES**

**TAIWAN**

**INDIA**

**SRI LANKA**

**MALAYSIA**

**BRUNEI**

*Bay of Bengal*

*South China Sea*

*East Chi*

Chengdu

Wuhan

Shanghai

Hangzhou

New Delhi

Chongqing

Changsha

Guiyang

Kunming

Fuzhou

Taipei

Kolkata

Chittagong

Guangzhou

Kaohsiung

Hanoi

Hyderabad

Yangon

Manila

Bangkok

Phnom Penh

Ho Chi Minh City

Bengaluru

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COMMERCE





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CENTRAL BANK OF MYANMAR



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တစ်ကျပ်





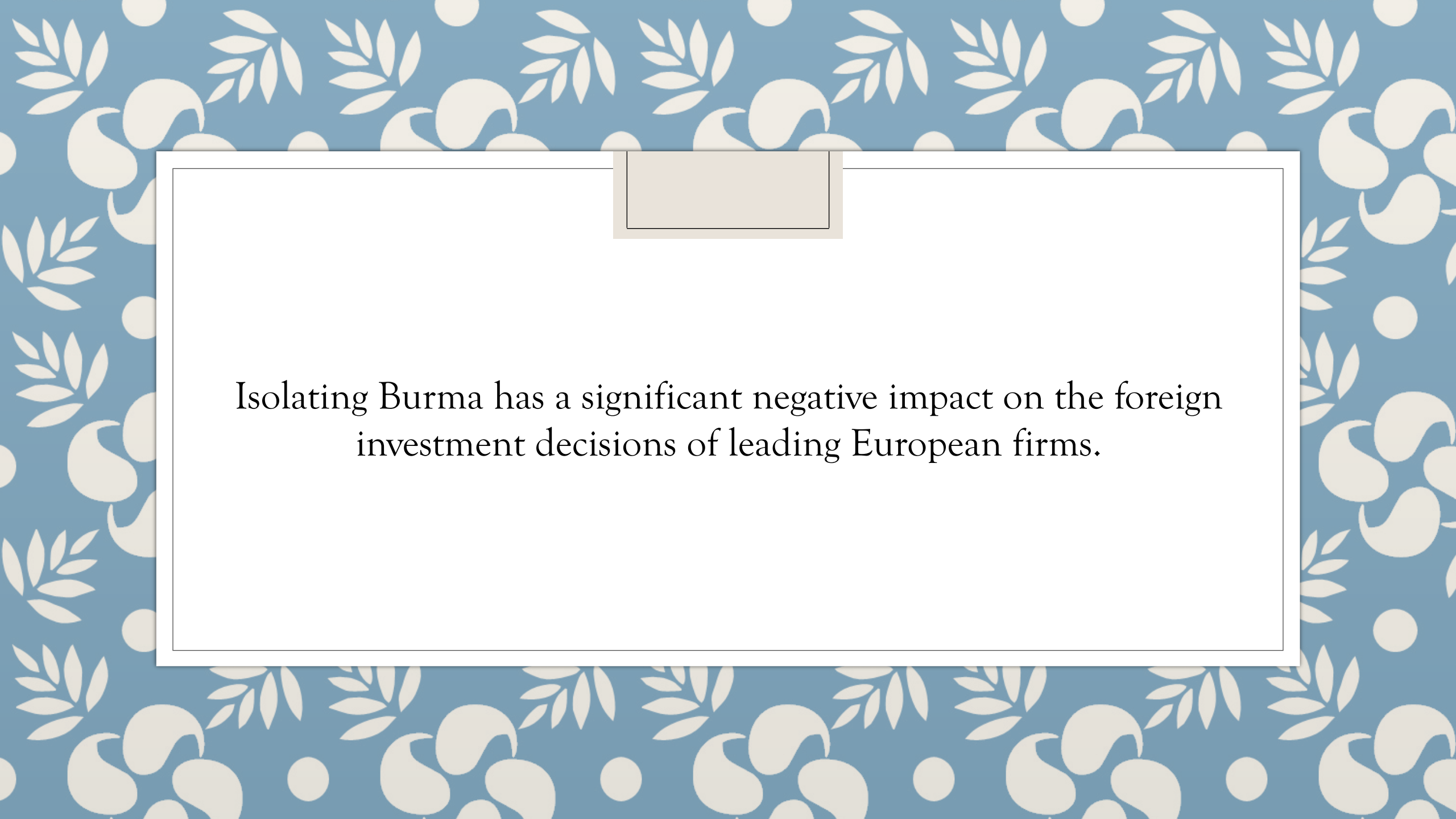
# PREVENTING SPILLOVER



## EUROPE

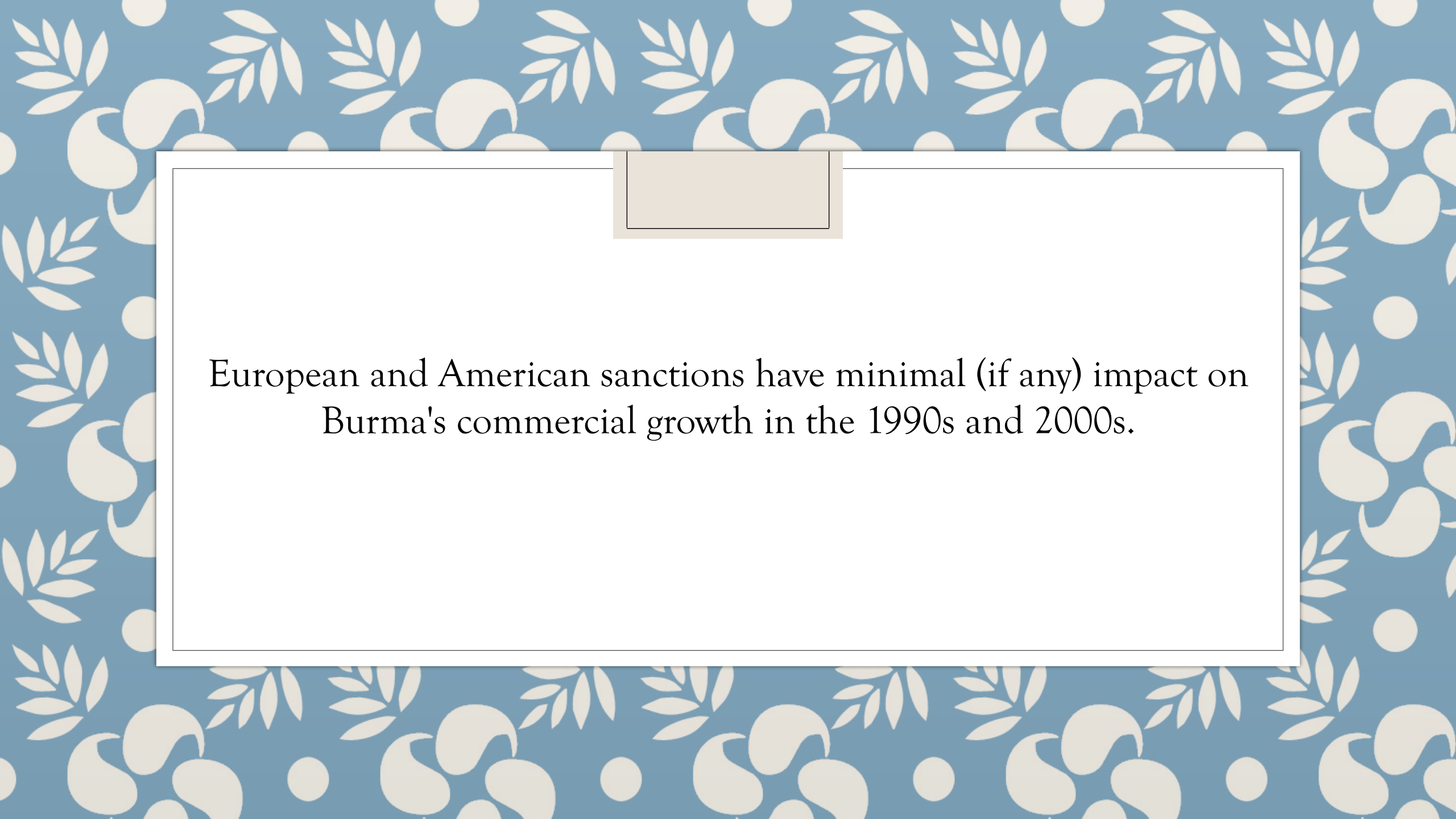
Isolating Burma is *not* in Europe's interest strategically or, particularly, commercially.

The constructivist angle appears best suited to describing two decades of EU Burma policy.



Isolating Burma has a significant negative impact on the foreign investment decisions of leading European firms.





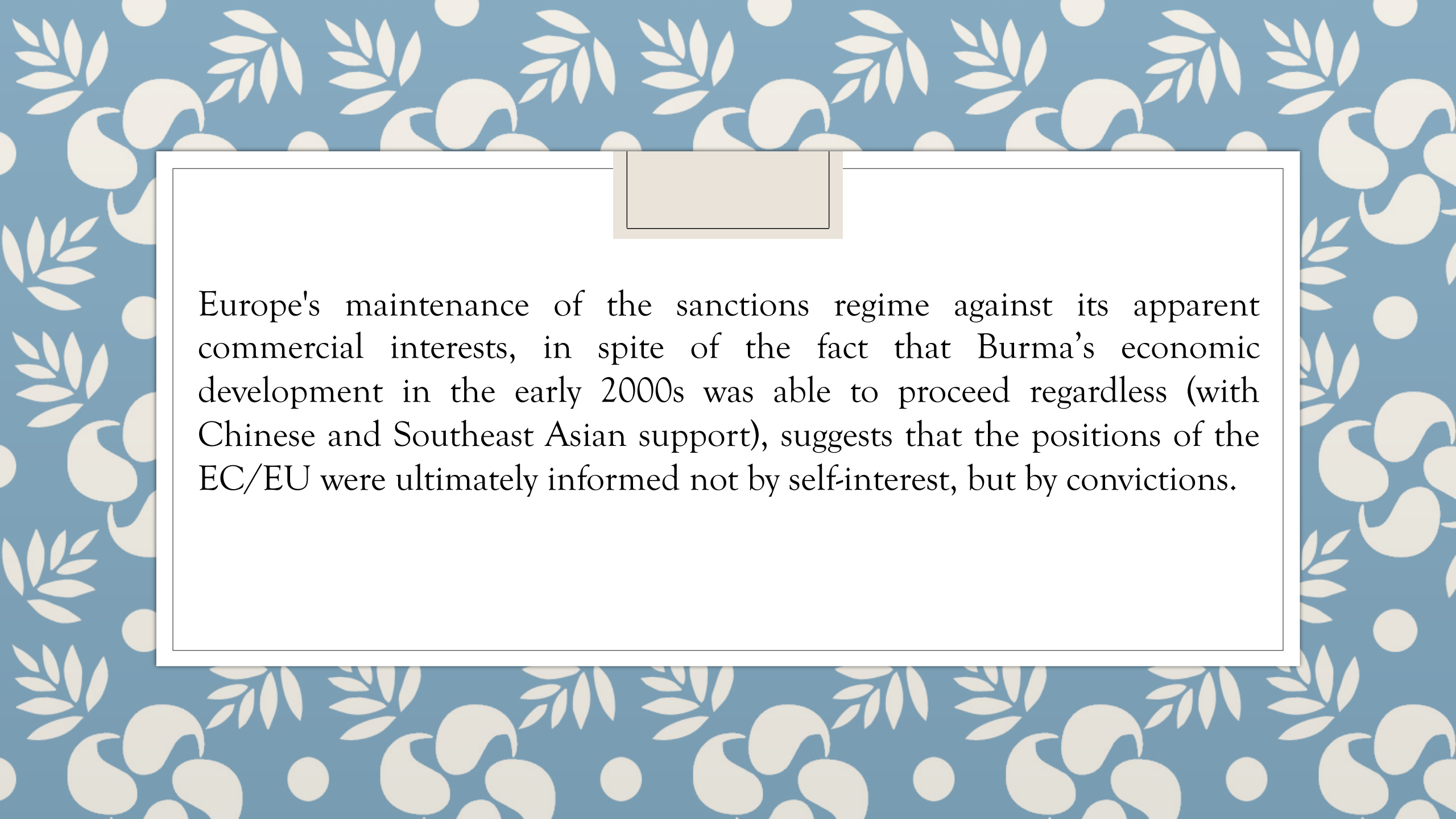
European and American sanctions have minimal (if any) impact on Burma's commercial growth in the 1990s and 2000s.



# CONCLUSIONS

The inconsistent commitment to the sovereignty principle suggests that norms alone cannot explain why ASEAN reached out to Burma in the 1990s. The strategic and commercial concerns I outlined helped to drive engagement with Rangoon.

Ultimately, state interests – not ideas or principles – would dictate the evolution of the Association's relationship with the reclusive Burmese junta.



Europe's maintenance of the sanctions regime against its apparent commercial interests, in spite of the fact that Burma's economic development in the early 2000s was able to proceed regardless (with Chinese and Southeast Asian support), suggests that the positions of the EC/EU were ultimately informed not by self-interest, but by convictions.



