

# Associate Paper

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## The United States and Burma: Troubled Past, Uncertain Future

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### Key Points

- For twenty years, the United States pursued a hard line policy towards Burma that was never going to meet its stated objectives.
- This policy also flew in the face of Burma's critical geostrategic position and growing importance in regional affairs.
- The reform programme launched by President Thein Sein in 2011 was prompted largely by internal developments, and was not in response to external pressures.
- While the Obama Administration cannot take credit for the reform programme, its more nuanced approach towards Burma permitted it to respond promptly and positively.
- After two decades of mutual hostility, there are the beginnings of a more co-operative bilateral relationship, but this rapprochement could easily be derailed.
- The US and other countries can help, but Burma's future will ultimately be decided by the Burmese themselves, in their own time and in their own fashion.

### Summary

For 20 years, the US pursued a policy towards Burma that was bound to fail. The Obama Administration cannot take credit for the reform programme launched by President Thein Sein in 2011, but its more nuanced approach placed the US in a position where it could respond promptly and positively to recent developments. Since Hillary Clinton's successful visit to Burma in December that year a number of measures have been taken to encourage

closer bilateral ties. However, nothing can be taken for granted. The relationship is still fragile and the process of rapprochement could easily be derailed, either by developments inside Burma or by critics of the process outside it.

### Analysis

In 1988, after the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising and took back direct political power, Ronald Reagan suspended the small US aid programme in Burma, imposed an arms embargo and introduced economic sanctions. Under the next three US presidents, these measures were progressively strengthened. Burma was declared ‘an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States’.<sup>1</sup> By the time Barak Obama moved into the White House in 2009, US policy towards Burma was tougher than that against North Korea, despite the fact that Pyongyang was guilty of far worse human rights abuses and posed a much greater strategic threat.

#### **George Bush’s Hard Line**

During the presidency of George W. Bush, Burma was the focus of harsh criticism. In 2003, for example, it was described in the US Senate as ‘a clear and present danger to itself and to its neighbours’.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, Secretary of State designate Condoleezza Rice labelled Burma ‘an outpost of tyranny’ to which the US must help bring freedom.<sup>3</sup> In President Bush’s 2006 State of the Union speech, immediately after references to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Burma was ranked alongside Syria, Iran and North Korea as places where ‘the demands of justice, and the peace of the world, require their freedom’.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the president re-stated his commitment to help the Burmese people ‘in their struggle to free themselves from the regime’s tyranny’.<sup>5</sup>

In stark contrast, official US commentary about Burma’s opposition movement was invariably positive. Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, in particular, was lauded by the Bush Administration and Members of Congress. Indeed, during the Bush era, the US’s Burma policy was heavily indebted to Aung San Suu Kyi’s known and perceived views. US officials openly praised Burmese groups dedicated to the overthrow of the military government in Rangoon (and, after 2005, in the new capital of Naypyidaw). Support was provided to activists through organisations like the National Endowment for Democracy. One Congressman even hinted at US military aid to anti-regime insurgents.

There is no doubt that the human rights abuses perpetrated by Burma’s military regime during, and after, 1988 aroused genuine outrage in the White House, in Congress and among the American public. Even so, it is hard to escape the conclusion that another reason why Burma was singled out for exemplary punishment was because US policy makers felt there were few critical national interests at stake. After the uprising, Burma was seen as isolated,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Burma: Message from the President of the United States’, 16 May 2002, *Washington File*, US Department of State.

<sup>2</sup> Mr McConnell, *Congressional Record - Senate*, 27 October 2003, p. 25754, column 3.

<sup>3</sup> Others named in this category were North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Zimbabwe and Belarus. ‘Rice names “outposts of tyranny”’, *BBC News*, 19 January 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 31 January 2006.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Statement by the President on Burma’, The White House, Washington DC, 1 May 2008.

weak, and of little commercial or strategic importance. Due in large part to its decades-old neutrality in foreign affairs and its autarkic economic policies, Burma had no major friends or allies. It was thus deemed a relatively cost-free target.

It did not take long, however, before the wisdom of this policy was thrown into doubt. Despite constant pressure from the US and its allies, Burma's military regime not only consolidated its grip, but became stronger than it had ever been. The punitive measures and harsh rhetoric aimed at Burma aroused the generals' strong nationalist sentiments and isolationist tendencies, and strengthened their resolve to resist what they saw as interference in the country's internal affairs. Foreign pressures also helped to justify the generals' bunker mentality, and made them even more resistant to political, economic and social change. Fearful of US military intervention, the regime expanded and modernised its armed forces. It may have even considered acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

The hardline policy of the US dramatically changed the region's strategic environment. It drove Burma into a close relationship with China, in turn arousing Indian fears of Chinese "encirclement". Courted by both those powers, Burma was able to play them off against each other, to its considerable advantage. When it joined ASEAN in 1997, Burma became a factor in South-East Asian diplomacy – to the discomfort of the US. From around 2003, Burma's links with North Korea raised the spectre of ballistic missile sales and possibly even nuclear proliferation. Given its vast energy sources, Burma became critical to its neighbours' economic development. It was also a player in international efforts to combat transnational crime.

Due to its uncompromising approach towards Burma, however, the US found it difficult to play a constructive role on such issues. The aim of its policy was to isolate and punish Naypyidaw, but, in some respects Washington had isolated itself.

### ***Barak Obama's "Pragmatic Engagement"***

Shortly after Barak Obama's inauguration in January 2009, the administration undertook a comprehensive review of US policy towards Burma. It seemed to understand that there were few practical ways for the international community to influence an authoritarian government that was deeply committed to its self-appointed role in national affairs, did not appear to care for the welfare of its own people, did not observe international norms and was protected by powerful friends and allies. In September, President Obama adopted a new approach that acknowledged these harsh realities, took account of the regime's nationalistic mindset and posited what seemed to be more achievable goals.

In explaining the new policy, officials were at pains to stress that the United States' fundamental aims had not changed. Washington still wanted a unified, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Burma. It still called for the release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi. The best way of pursuing all these aims, however, was seen to be through quiet diplomacy, in particular a direct, senior-level dialogue. Recognising the political realities — in Washington as much as in Naypyidaw — economic sanctions and travel bans on regime officials and their business "cronies" were kept in place, pending concrete steps by Naypyidaw toward addressing the core concerns of the US.

The new policy lacked the hubris which had characterised the Bush approach. Rather than seeking to impose change on Burma, President Obama placed greater emphasis on the Burmese people deciding their political future for themselves, and attempted to encourage positive movement in that direction. In addition, the US embraced ASEAN as a partner in this endeavour. In July 2009, the US signed the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation, a step the Bush Administration had refused to take, largely because of Burma's ASEAN membership. The Obama Administration hoped that, by co-ordinating their policies, the US and regional countries could have a greater impact on the thinking in Naypyidaw.

Because of these changes, Burma became less of an obstacle to the development of US relations with other Asia-Pacific countries. As far as a constructive dialogue with Naypyidaw was concerned, however, the Obama Administration's hopes were misplaced. In 2010, after several unsuccessful US attempts to engage the military government, Washington acknowledged that this aspect of the policy had failed. Activist groups and members of Congress were quick to remind the president that they had predicted such a result, and to demand a return to the old hard line. Yet, the administration held its nerve. US officials quietly continued their efforts to engage with the government in Naypyidaw. In 2011, this approach was vindicated.

Had the Obama Administration abandoned its more measured approach, it would not have been in a position to respond as promptly and positively as it did to the reform programme launched by President Thein Sein in 2011. Hillary Clinton's visit to Burma that December was a turning point in the bilateral relationship. Afterwards, she announced that the US would loosen its restrictions on United Nations Development Programme, Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Bank activities in Burma. Washington would also investigate options for bilateral co-operation. Possible areas for assistance included narcotics control, education, health, legal reform, and broader capacity-building measures. In January 2012, the US announced that it planned to upgrade its diplomatic representation in Burma to ambassador level.<sup>6</sup>

This dramatic shift in the US position has been widely welcomed, but even experienced Burma-watchers have been unable to agree on what actually prompted Hillary Clinton's visit. It has been variously described as a calculated move to leave behind the discredited policies of the Bush era; an effort to boost President Thein Sein's standing and encourage the domestic reform process; part of a broader attempt by the US to re-engage with the Asia-Pacific region — as outlined in the president's address to the Australian Parliament in November 2011 — and a ploy by the US to score points in its strategic competition with China. Burma's relationship with North Korea has also been of concern.

It is likely that, to a greater or lesser degree, all these factors contributed to the decision to make the visit, but the China and North Korean angles warrant closer examination.

Some observers have claimed that the US is keen to restore relations with Burma in order to counter Beijing's influence, even to help "contain" China. Certainly, the US is now more

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<sup>6</sup> Ambassadors were nominated by President Bush in 1990 and President Clinton in 1991, but on both occasions the US Senate declined to confirm the appointment.

sensitive to China's role in Burma but, as noted above, Washington's interests are wide-ranging and go well beyond Cold War notions of power balances and communist containment. Similarly, Beijing may not be comfortable with the US developing a closer relationship with its prickly southern neighbour, but it knows that Naypyidaw values Burma's independence very highly and would not allow itself to become the puppet of another power. Indeed, for different reasons, China and the US share an interest in a stable, prosperous and independent Burma.

During the Clinton visit, Burma's relations with North Korea and Naypyidaw's reported ambition to acquire WMD were high on the agenda. Washington appears to have accepted 'strong assurances' from President Thein Sein that Burma will observe the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and sever all military ties with North Korea.<sup>7</sup> If this promise is kept, it would have a direct impact on any Burmese plans to buy or build ballistic missiles — the WMD programme of greatest concern to the US. Burma has also undertaken to consider accession to the Additional Protocol. Signing this instrument, which allows for IAEA inspections of suspect facilities, should help settle fears about a nascent Burmese nuclear programme.

### ***Where to From Here?***

There are the beginnings of a good working relationship between the US and Burma, but nothing can be taken for granted. Both sides remain wary of each other. The process could easily be derailed. The US seems to have decided that the best way of encouraging reform is for Thein Sein to succeed in his efforts to reshape Burma, and is taking steps to assist in this process. Past US policies, however, have left a bitter legacy in Burma. The US is still regarded with great suspicion by elements in the government and armed forces. If Washington identifies too closely with a particular project in Burma, or gets too close to any individual, it could harm their prospects. This applies as much to Thein Sein as it does to Aung San Suu Kyi.

Another complication is that, as events unfold in Burma, it will not be difficult for critics to question the trajectory of US relations. They can point to the pro-military constitution, raise doubts about the sincerity of Thein Sein's reform programme and question Aung San Suu Kyi's judgement in working with the Burmese president. Military operations against armed ethnic groups will result in more reports of human rights abuses. Officials used to wielding unbridled authority will not change their behaviour overnight. Corruption, discrimination and the abuse of power are now deeply embedded in Burmese society. Even if Thein Sein had a firmer support base and far greater resources, he is not going to be able to satisfy everyone.

Also, Burma is being held to a standard higher than that applied to other regional countries. The rigged election, undemocratic constitution and other abuses in Burma have been highlighted, while similar developments elsewhere have been paid little attention. Also, as Naypyidaw has satisfied some US demands, it is being presented with additional conditions which must be met before bilateral relations can be fully restored. One key Congressman

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<sup>7</sup> Selth, A., 'Clinton in Burma: The WMD dimension', *The Interpreter*, 6 December 2011.

has declared that sanctions will not be lifted until Thein Sein has resolved Burma's ethnic conflicts, perhaps the most intractable problem Naypyidaw faces. If the goalposts keep moving, the developing relationship with the US could easily break down.

The Administration will thus need to tread very carefully. It will have to remain conscious of local sensitivities and balance what it would like to do in Burma with what might actually be achievable. While not losing sight of the US's principles and national interests, it must allow Thein Sein room to move, and at a pace that is manageable, in both political and practical terms. This will not be easy. The US is a goal-oriented society, often impatient for rapid and decisive change. At the popular level, it tends to invest in individuals who seem to promise neat solutions to complex problems. Also, there are campaigners in Congress, and outside it, who are anxious for all Burma's ills to be solved quickly and in accordance with their own high ideals. This will not happen.

It may not be a very satisfying conclusion, particularly to those politicians and activists rushing to claim credit for progress in Burma, but everyone with a genuine interest in that complex and deeply troubled country will need to be patient. Both the current reform programme and the full restoration of bilateral relations with the US will take time. They will also have to accept that, while the US, other members of the international community and non-governmental organisations can help in many ways, their ability to influence developments in Burma is limited. If the record of the past 23 years teaches us anything, it is that only the Burmese can decide their future, and they are determined to do so in their own way and in their own time.

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