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Whatever Happened to Myanmar as the “Outpost of Tyranny”?

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Both the United States and Myanmar have come a long way since Secretary of State designate Condoleezza Rice characterized Burma/Myanmar in that memorable, but destructive phrase, “outpost of tyranny”, that reinforced the hard-line policy that the United States pursued in a bipartisan manner under both the Clinton and Bush administrations. In this moment of euphoria about both transformed Myanmar and US policies, lest we forget: the US goal was regime change, and nothing short of that objective. In pursuit of that policy, the Executive branch and the Congress were in a reasonable degree of harmony.

David I. Steinberg, Distinguished Professor of Asian Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, explains that “At this remarkable moment, US-Burma/Myanmar relations are the best that they have been since the independence of the Union of Burma in 1948.”

The Obama administration explored six foreign policy conundrums soon after its inauguration. Of those, Burma received a great deal of concentrated attention, in part because by March 2009 the Burmese junta had sent an unmistakable signal to Washington of their interest in exploring avenues of cooperation. The Obama administration responded with a positive message: the United States would consider signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) that the United States had not signed because of Burmese entry, vigorously opposed by the United States, into that organization in July 1997.

The stage was therefore set, the actors in place, but the action required new scripts, and if the first act started slowly, the pace picked up thereafter. Burma/Myanmar policy was bound in the United States in internal political considerations involving the Congress and the State Department. The new, articulated Burma policy of the United States, released in September 2009, carefully balanced Congressional concerns with Burmese possibilities. “Pragmatic engagement” kept the multiple and complex sanctions in place while encouraging high-level dialogue. This policy was voiced over the objections of many in the expatriate Burmese and human rights communities. Although never publicly expressed in blunt terms, it was in fact, a movement from “regime change” to “regime modification.” The Burmese regime for its part had to take ameliorative actions within its stated “discipline-flourishing democracy” roadmap—ones that would open space between citizens and the state, but ones that would still keep the military in effective and ultimate power.

The stage-managed elections of November 2010 may have encouraged the junta that they had achieved another step in their “roadmap” toward democracy, but it did nothing for international credibility. But the release of Aung San Suu Kyi a week later—a release that had been planned by the junta for at least a year—unleashed the process and made US action possible. The remarkable inaugural address by President Thein Sein on March 30, 2011, set the tone for reform; it expanded Burmese horizons, was a major shift by any measure, and has been recognized as such by both Burmese and foreigners.



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The carefully orchestrated visit of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in early December 2011—publicly approved by Aung San Suu Kyi and thus outflanking any potential Congressional criticism—set in motion vigorous actions by numerous states that sent high-level delegations to Myanmar, and speeded the process of change by all concerned. The official Chinese reaction was, as might be expected, proper and cautious, but more informally, and yet officially approved, was the concern that her trip “undermined the Chinese wall in Myanmar,” as the Chinese *Global Times* put it. Coming after the Burmese stoppage of Chinese construction of the Myitsone Dam on September 30, 2011, the previously signed “comprehensive strategic security partnership”—the first with Myanmar—was severely strained. China regarded US policy in Myanmar, and in the rest of East Asia, as the second “containment” policy of the US against an expanded Chinese role in the region.

The continued release of political prisoners and other reform measures allowed the United States to move ahead with what was to be, in informed circles, openings and a gradual reduction in oppressive US sanctions. So the Obama policy has proven to be an effective support mechanism to Burmese change. Foreigners or Burmese who have advocated sanctions believe that they were the *deus ex machina* of Burmese changed attitudes; but that position is hubris. There have been inside the *tatmadaw* (Burmese military) conscientious officers and others who have long recognized the need for reforms, but under the authoritarian military command system together with a military head of state who would brook no criticism or even unsolicited advice, change was impossible. The reforms instituted by President Sein, in part a result of his openness and accessibility even to his critics, have been remarkable achievements to date.

This is not their end. In the more pluralistic political system, policy no longer is immediately implemented. It has more hurdles to be overcome, legislation that has to be passed, and the reforms’ fruition will be difficult due to a lack of capacity throughout government. A still weak, although growing, civil society is evolving, and no doubt sources of intense resistance in the bureaucratic periphery remain. Minority issues have yet to be resolved, not only in immediate actions, but even conceptually in terms of the fair, in some Burmese sense, distribution of power and resources in that multi-ethnic society, and especially with the Rohingya, a Muslim group without legal minority status.

At this remarkable moment, US-Burma/Myanmar relations are the best that they have been since the independence of the Union of Burma in 1948. That is remarkable, and the shared credit should go to both Burmese and Obama administration officials. But foreign policy is a continuing process, a never-ending reaffirmation and reconsideration of options and situations. The United States will not replace China’s influence in Myanmar, but it can help balance and assist Burma regain its traditional and positive neutralist foreign policy that has generally served the country well.

Some foreigners regard the ultimate test of the success of the Obama opening to Burma/Myanmar as the 2015 general elections. If held today, the evidence is that the opposition National League for Democracy would be the dominant force, not the state-supported Union Solidarity and Development Party, with minority parties prevailing in some areas. How the Burmese will treat those elections, and how the United States will react to them are salient issues that must be addressed. Aung San Suu Kyi has publicly said that she wants to be president. She is constitutionally prevented from being so (or being vice president). How will the United States react if she is prevented from assuming a role that she wants, and may indeed consider natural given the importance of her father? Will the United States continue to rely on her as the lodestone of US policy toward Myanmar? This is indeed an issue of importance requiring careful consideration in the next two years. So the drama continues. If a climax has been reached, the denouement has yet to occur.

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