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U.S.-Burma Relations: “Pragmatic Engagement” Greets “Discipline-Flourishing Democracy”

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On November 3, 2009, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell became the highest ranking American official to travel to Myanmar since the 1995 visit of then-U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright. To reinforce this message of outreach, President Obama later engaged Prime Minister Thein Sein on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit meeting in Singapore. The initiative to pragmatically engage the ruling junta in Naypyidaw has been in most part received well – not least by Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi herself.

American interests in the dialogue process are: unconditional release of Ms. Suu Kyi and all political prisoners; an end to conflicts with ethnic minority groups; accountability for past human rights violations; initiation of a genuine dialogue among all representative stakeholders in Burmese society; and attention to proliferation concerns arising from Burma’s shadowy military relationship with North Korea. Further, cooperation on counter-narcotics, health, environmental protection, and the recovery of the remains of World War II-era missing American soldiers have been identified as initial confidence-building areas.

Re-opening ties and conditional preliminary re-engagement, however, is likely to be the easy part. Given the limited scope for winning near-term concessions on the unconditional release of Ms. Suu Kyi, the administration is increasingly likely to find itself caught between a rock and a hard place in domestic opinion, particularly if initial gestures in areas such as counter-narcotics and health is not matched by Burmese sincerity in the conduct of a relatively free and fair election later this year.

In this regard, understanding the ruling Burmese junta’s strategic motivations for re-engagement provides a useful insight into its worldview and, more importantly, assists in identifying the delicate near-term decisions that await the Obama administration’s conditional engagement strategy.

CROWDING WASHINGTON IN: AS A COUNTER-WEIGHT AND LEVER

Burma has rarely, if ever, played pawn or puppet to a foreign power. Rather, with a view toward self-preservation, at moments of peril it has dissociated itself from alien strategic designs or hunkered down in its inland capital cities. In modern times, Burmese statecraft has oscillated between the poles of paranoiac isolationism and quietist neutrality.

During phases of growing assuredness, Burma has preferred to augment its neutrality through the strategic search for external balancers. Typically, this pursuit has taken the form of crowding-in its continental-sized neighbors and, to a lesser extent, the great powers, so as to make the region automatically self-balancing and allow Burma to adjust the strategic balance. Consequentially, Burmese leaders may seek the weight of U.S.

Sourabh Gupta, senior research associate at Samuels International Associates, explains that the United States is “increasingly likely to find itself caught between a rock and a hard place in domestic opinion, particularly if initial gestures in areas such as counter-narcotics and health is not matched by Burmese sincerity in the conduct of a relatively free and fair election later this year.”



influence as an additional buffer and lever to diminish Chinese influence to Burma's advantage.

Additionally, the Burmese state has been weighed down by secessionist rebel movements and a pro-democracy opposition movement: the foremost security dilemmas for the ruling junta have been internal. Phases of peak regime instability, consequently, tended to occur when periods of internal turmoil overlapped with either unbalanced relations with its giant neighbors or with outright hostility displayed by one of them. This kind of instability does not exist in early-2010.

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Further, with Ms. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party a pale shadow of its former self, ceasefires or vertical splits engineered among most ethnic groups, the regime's coffers lined with gas revenues and receivables, and with China and India vesting significant political equities in their Burma relationship, foreign interactions lacking asymmetric gains, including the U.S. conditional engagement policy, will likely be entertained only at the pleasure of the generals. This is likely to serve as the most pressing challenge to the Obama administration as it reaches out to the regime in Naypyidaw.

FASHIONING A MUTUALLY PRODUCTIVE EQUATION

Both the United States and Burma are likely to find that their mutual coordination depends on working out a beneficial trade-off for each party's foremost priority. For Washington, this concerns the release of political prisoners and the unhindered participation of all Burmese political stakeholders – Ms. Suu Kyi included – in the forthcoming elections; for Naypyidaw, significantly enhanced U.S. market access for Burmese-origin light manufacturing and labor-intensive production so as to relieve pressures within its overcrowded farm sector and redirect the surplus labor towards an outward-oriented and faster-growing small-and-medium scale enterprise sector.

Delicate decisions await the Obama administration in the near term. It is unlikely that a campaigner as charismatic as Ms. Suu Kyi will be allowed to participate in the prospective 2010 elections. The political space accorded to Ms. Suu Kyi (and perhaps her NLD party) in the run-up to the elections is also likely to be tied to her success in serving as the spokesperson for reducing the sanctions imposed on the junta now that she has reversed course and affirmed this intent in writing to Senior General Than Shwe.

Given concerns over what is likely to be a tainted election as well as the timing, pace, and scope of sanctions removal, the United States should perhaps place the fledgling engagement process and the electoral timetable on separate tracks that might loosely overlap but are not forced to coincide. If a graduated glide path to western markets, conditioned on a release of political prisoners and sequential steps towards civil society opening, allows for participative politics to take hold, pragmatic engagement will serve a useful purpose.

It bears noting that democracy sponsored from overseas has rarely, if ever, led to the creation of a more open society in a military-led, poor East Asian state – let alone to the unraveling of the regime in power. Rather, what has hollowed out state control in such authoritarian kleptocracies has been the inability of its command-driven elites to manage the complexities and consequences of a liberalizing economy. As noted recently by Senator Jim Webb, a decorated Vietnam war veteran and the first American political leader to visit Myanmar in a decade, it was the removal of the U.S. trade embargo in 1994, more than any other positive or negative inducement, that served to catalyze a more open and tolerant society inside Vietnam. Perhaps a similar action might help create social and political space in Burma and end the isolation of its long-suffering citizens.

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