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US–Burma: Where to from here?

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After president Barack Obama took office in January 2009, secretary of state Hillary Clinton announced that the US would undertake a comprehensive review of its policy towards the military government in Myanmar, which for the previous 20 years had been marked by strong rhetoric and political and economic sanctions. This readiness to consider a fresh and potentially more productive approach prompted a fierce debate in the US and elsewhere between those wedded to a strong line against the regime and those who were willing to consider other options.

Hillary Clinton's announcement in January that the Obama administration was reviewing US policy towards Burma has raised hopes that the impasse between these two countries might finally be broken.¹ But there are major obstacles in the way of any new initiative. And even if the international community can exert greater influence in Naypyidaw, real and lasting change in Burma can only come from within the country itself.

For some years, pressure had been mounting for a fundamental review of US–Burma relations. The Bush administration's hardline policies had clearly failed to achieve their key objectives. Burma's ruling SPDC was still firmly entrenched in power and was taking steps to perpetuate military rule. Not only had the generals refused to release all political prisoners

1 Glen Kessler, 'Shift Possible on Burma Policy', *The Washington Post*, 19 February 2009, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/02/17/ST2009021700968.html.

(including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi), but also the number of prisoners had increased. And, as demonstrated by the regime's harsh reaction to the 2007 'Saffron Revolution', Burma's human rights record had not improved.

Indeed, it has been argued that the Bush administration's policies were quite counterproductive.² In the face of continued diplomatic pressure, the SPDC had become even more obdurate and resistant to calls for political and economic reform. Some US sanctions were specifically targeted against the generals and their cronies, but other economic measures hurt the Burmese people more than the regime. The forces for change in Burmese society were weakened, not strengthened.

In addition, the undisguised hostility shown towards the SPDC by the US—which labelled Burma an 'outpost of tyranny'—has sown a deep distrust of the West among Burma's generals, who even now worry about an invasion of the country by the US and its allies.³ This fear lay behind Naypyidaw's refusal to let the US, UK and France unload aid supplies from their warships after Cyclone Nargis hit Burma in May 2008. It has also encouraged Burma to develop closer ties with China, Russia and North Korea. Some activists claim that it has even prompted a secret nuclear weapons program.

Hillary Clinton has acknowledged that sanctions have failed to influence Burma's military leaders, while noting that ASEAN's softer policy of 'constructive engagement' has also been unsuccessful. She has said that the US is prepared to consider new options. The Bush administration's policies cannot suddenly be abandoned, but Barack Obama's election has given the US space in which to consider fresh approaches towards pariah states like Burma—approaches that do not sacrifice US core principles and enduring strategic interests, but are less confrontational, more flexible and have more realistic goals.

Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg has revealed that the US is looking for 'collaborative and constructive' solutions to the Burma problem. It plans to discuss a common approach with ASEAN, China, India and

2 Morten Pedersen, 'Limitations of the Global Human Rights Paradigm', *Mizzima News*, [Yangon], 12 March 2009, www.mizzima.com/edop/commentary/1832-limitations-of-the-global-human-rights-paradigm-.html [page discontinued].

3 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.17 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2008), www.griffith.edu.au/business/griffith-asia-institute/pdf/Andrew-Selth-Regional-Outlook-17.pdf [page discontinued].

Japan, 'to find a policy that will improve the lives of the people of Burma and promote stability in the region'.⁴ This may be code for humanitarian aid, 'intelligent sanctions' and greater incentives for reforms. The US has also reopened direct links to the regime. In April, the Director of the State Department's Office for Mainland Southeast Asia held discussions with senior SPDC officials in Naypyidaw—the first such visit in seven years.

In a separate move, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee has announced its own review of Burma policy.⁵ This seems designed mainly to ensure that the Obama administration takes account of Congress's concerns. These were expressed last year in the *Tom Lantos Block Burmese Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts (JADE) Act*, which strongly condemned the regime and increased economic sanctions. It also included provisions for a special envoy to advance US interests (such as the coordination of sanctions and release of political prisoners) and called for increased support to nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) conducting humanitarian projects in Burma.

The Obama administration's more openminded approach has been widely welcomed. However, it will face strong opposition from human rights campaigners and Burmese expatriate groups, who remain convinced that diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions are still the only ways to make the SPDC surrender power. They also claim that this is the only morally defensible position to hold. Already, 17 members of the US Congress have written to Hillary Clinton urging her not to lift sanctions against Burma, and activists around the world are preparing to oppose any apparent 'weakening' of the US position.

These groups have long claimed that any concessions offered by the international community will simply be pocketed by the regime, without substantive movement towards political and economic reforms. They are also concerned that a perceived retreat from the US's current tough stance will encourage other states—notably, members of the EU, but also countries like Australia and Japan—to soften their own policies. To the activist community, this would simply reward the regime for its bad behaviour and encourage even greater repression.

4 'US Wants Common Myanmar Strategy with Asia', *Agence France-Presse*, 1 April 2009, news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20090401/pl_afp/usmyanmardiplomacy/print [page discontinued].

5 'Senate to Review Burma Policy', *Radio Free Asia*, [Washington, DC], 8 April 2009, www.rfa.org/english/news/burma/burmapolicy-04072009123741.html.

It may turn out that the opposition movement is worrying for no reason. For, without a significant gesture on the part of the SPDC, such as the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, any new US policy or international initiative is not likely to get very far. And even if such a gesture was forthcoming, the bilateral relationship would always be hostage to the regime's behaviour. In this regard, the historical record does not promote confidence.

Ever since the abortive prodemocracy uprising in 1988, which saw more than 3,000 people killed, the generals have demonstrated their intolerance of dissent and readiness to crush any civil unrest. As economic conditions in Burma deteriorate—as they are expected to do over the next year—and as the elections for a new military-dominated parliament get closer, more demonstrations seem inevitable. Some observers have even predicted instability within the armed forces. Protests of any kind are likely to trigger a strong reaction, as seen in 2007.

Further instances of human rights violations in Burma would severely undercut attempts by the US to adopt a more nuanced approach towards the regime and strengthen the hand of those (including in Congress) calling for a continuation of the old hardline policies.

Even if Naypyidaw can be persuaded to conduct a genuine dialogue with Washington, there remains the problem that the generals are fiercely nationalistic and intensely protective of Burma's independence and national sovereignty. Attempts by foreign countries or multilateral organisations to involve themselves in Burma's internal affairs will continue to be resisted. Meetings to discuss such issues (along the lines of the six-party talks involving North Korea, for example) are unlikely to be seen as useful, or even legitimate.

The Obama administration's willingness to explore new and more constructive approaches towards Burma is a very positive step, but it has some powerful opponents. Also, no one is under any illusions as to the nature of the military regime and its resistance to change. As always, the key to Burma's future lies in the country itself. The international community can do more to improve the lot of the Burmese people but, barring an unforeseen change of government in Burma, its ability to promote much needed reforms will remain limited.

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