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Burma: Obama's 'pragmatic engagement'

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US President Obama's cautious policy of 'pragmatic engagement' with Myanmar inevitably attracted criticism, particularly from diehard activists, but many observers felt that it was more likely to break the deadlock in bilateral relations and improve conditions for people in the country than a continuation of George W. Bush's discredited hardline approach.

I recently returned from Washington, DC, where I was able to hear Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and Scot Marciel, US Ambassador to ASEAN, speak about the Obama administration's review of US policy towards Burma.¹ Earlier this month, these two officials made a short 'exploratory' visit to Burma, where they explained the context of the review to members of the military government, Aung San Suu Kyi and other political figures.

Most observers have welcomed the end of the Bush administration's hardline Burma policy, but there is still widespread scepticism that President Obama's more nuanced approach involving closer engagement

¹ 'SAIS Hosted Conference on Political and Economic Development in Myanmar/Burma on October 30', *News and Events* (Washington, DC: Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University), www.sais-jhu.edu/news-and-events/index.htm [page discontinued].

and dialogue with Naypyidaw will be any more successful. One seasoned Burma-watcher has described it as ‘naive’.² A Republican congressman labelled the new policy ‘alarming’ and even ‘immoral’.³

Given such reactions, it might be helpful to look at the thinking behind the Obama administration’s approach, what it is actually trying to do and how its policies differ from those of the previous administration.

The Naypyidaw government is notoriously opaque. Even when official statements are issued, the reasons behind certain policies are difficult to discern. To many observers, some positions adopted by the military regime have been not only illogical, but also self-defeating. Popular pundits have put this down to the ruling hierarchy’s superstitions, but on important issues, it is unlikely that such factors outweigh careful consideration of the country’s—and the regime’s—perceived interests.⁴

Understanding those perceptions, and the way decisions are made in Burma, is made even harder by the regime’s isolation. Almost all foreign diplomats in Burma are based in Rangoon, yet the seat of government is in Naypyidaw, hundreds of kilometres away. Foreigners find it hard to meet Burmese officials outside a strictly controlled environment, and the country’s pervasive security apparatus makes it difficult to gain accurate insights into the regime’s inner workings.

Paradoxically, attempts since the abortive 1988 prodemocracy uprising to isolate Burma diplomatically have resulted in an expansion of the regime’s foreign relations. It has established closer ties with its regional neighbours and countries like China, Russia and North Korea. Indeed, by imposing economic sanctions, travel bans and other punitive measures on Burma, the US and members of the EU effectively isolated themselves. This complicated communications with the regime, added to its mistrust of foreign powers and reduced the ability of countries like the US to affect thinking in Naypyidaw.

2 Bertil Lintner, ‘Reaching Out to Burma’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 November 2009, online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703740004574512231868995674.html.

3 Lalit K. Jha, ‘Key Republicans Oppose Engagement with Burma’, *The Irrawaddy*, 22 October 2009, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17041 [page discontinued] [now at www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=17041].

4 Andrew Selth, ‘Burma’s “Superstitious” Leaders’, *The Interpreter*, 22 October 2009, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/10/22/Burmas-superstitious-leaders.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-superstitious-leaders].

Misreading the nature of the regime, the Bush administration tried to force the generals to abandon policies they considered essential for regime survival and for Burma's unity, stability and independence. Not only was this approach demonstrably unsuccessful, it was also counterproductive. According to Kurt Campbell, sanctions have been no more than 'modest inconveniences' to the military leadership.⁵ Yet such measures hardened the generals' resolve to resist external pressures and made them even more determined to remain the arbiters of Burma's future.

The Obama administration seems to understand that there are few practical ways for the international community to influence a government that is deeply committed to its self-appointed role in national affairs, does not care for the welfare of its own people, does not observe international norms and is protected by powerful friends and allies. President Obama's new approach acknowledges these harsh realities. It also takes full account of the regime's intensely nationalistic mindset and posits more achievable short-term goals.

Kurt Campbell and other officials have stressed that the fundamental US aims have not changed. It still wants a unified, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Burma. Washington is still calling for the release of all political prisoners.⁶ The best way of pursuing these aims, however, is now seen to be through a direct senior-level dialogue. Recognising the political realities—in Washington as well as in Naypyidaw—sanctions will remain in place, pending concrete steps by the regime towards addressing core US concerns.

Administration officials recognise the challenges in formulating an effective engagement policy that remains focused on democratic reforms but is also sustainable and convincing to a regime that has long perceived such concerns as a means to remove it from power. Clearly, much work lies ahead in crafting inducements that will lead to real change in Burma. The regime has expressed an interest in developing closer ties with the US, however, and presumably recognises it will have to give up something in return—possibly even the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

5 Dan Robinson, 'US Diplomat Outlines Obama Approach on Burma', *Voice of America*, 1 October 2009, www.voanews.com/english/2009-10-01-voa32.cfm [page discontinued] [now at newsvideo.su/video/3437016].

6 Scot Marciel, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 'Burma: Policy Review', Remarks, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, 5 November 2009, www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2009/11/131536.htm [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2009/11/131536.htm].

Listening to senior US officials speak on this subject recently, and surveying their public statements, three other aspects of the new US policy struck me as noteworthy.

First, it is apparent that the new approach is founded on a very hardheaded and realistic appreciation of the current situation in Burma. The US administration expects engagement with Burma to be a long, slow and step-by-step process. It is under no illusions about the nature of the military government and the difficulty of shifting it from its firmly held positions on issues such as Burma's constitution, the proposed elections and political freedoms. As Kurt Campbell said last month: '[A]chieving meaningful change in Burma will take time.'⁷

Second, the new approach lacks the hubris that characterised the Bush administration. For eight years, the US seemed to feel that it could resolve Burma's complex problems by actively intervening in the country's affairs through a range of direct and indirect measures. By contrast, the Obama policy, while not losing sight of US principles and national interests, places much greater emphasis on the Burmese people themselves deciding their political future and attempts to encourage positive steps in that direction.⁸

Third, the Obama administration has openly embraced ASEAN as a partner in its attempts to bring about reforms in Burma. In July, the US signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation—a step the Bush administration refused to take, partly because of Burma's ASEAN membership. ASEAN's own policy of 'constructive engagement' has made few substantive gains. The US hopes, however, that by coordinating their Burma policies, it and regional countries can make greater progress towards their shared objectives.⁹

Not surprisingly, the US's new Burma policy is unpopular in some quarters, and critics of both governments will seize on inevitable setbacks to denounce it further. Given the continuing terrible problems in Burma,

7 Kurt M. Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 'US Policy Towards Burma', Testimony Statement Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, 21 October 2009, www.internationalrelations.house.gov/111/cam102109.pdf [page discontinued] [now at 2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2009/10/130769.htm].

8 'Playing "Wait and See" in Myanmar', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 2–8 November 2009, www.mm-times.com/no495/n012.htm [page discontinued].

9 'Myanmar Will No Longer Dictate ASEAN Ties: White House', *Agence France-Presse*, November 2009, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gxpnh413mGqW7eZ_5LzyUVI7aZw [page discontinued].

their frustration is understandable. Yet the Obama administration's critics seem only to be offering a continuation of the discredited policies of the Bush era and a perpetuation of the diplomatic impasse that has characterised the past 20 years.

As Hillary Clinton stated in Singapore earlier this month, there are no quick or easy solutions to Burma's many problems.¹⁰ However, President Obama's fresh approach seems to hold out some hope for breaking the current deadlock and achieving gradual progress on a number of pressing issues.

10 'Clinton Says No New Conditions for Myanmar', *CBS News*, 11 November 2009, widgets-cbsn.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-says-no-new-conditions-for-myanmar/.

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