

32

Burma and Libya: The politics of inconsistency

(11:06 AEDT, 17 June 2011)

The Libyan crisis in early 2011 prompted an uncharacteristically swift and concerted response from the international community. Activists immediately asked why Myanmar did not qualify for such attention, given that the language used to describe Libya and its problems could also apply to Myanmar. However, there were factors that made Myanmar's case different. In any case, one always looked in vain for consistency in international affairs.

Lord Palmerston said nearly 200 years ago that countries have no eternal allies or perpetual enemies, only eternal and perpetual interests. Whether or not this is true, one always looks in vain for consistency in the conduct of international relations. Burma-watchers have recently been reminded of this fact by the world's dramatic response to developments in Libya.

In February, the UN Security Council effectively invoked the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) doctrine to justify military intervention in Libya. The UNSC referred the Libyan case to the International Criminal Court and the UN Human Rights Council endorsed an International Commission of Inquiry. President Obama later stated that 'left unchecked, we have every reason to believe that [Libyan President Muammar] Gaddafi would commit atrocities against his own people. Many thousands could die.'¹

¹ 'Obama Endorses Military Action to Stop Gaddafi', *Yahoo News*, 18 March 2011, news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110318/ap_on_re_us/us_us_libya [page discontinued].

Burma activists were quick to ask why similar actions could not be taken against that country. After all, almost every criticism made of the Libyan regime could be levelled equally strongly at the military-dominated government in Naypyidaw. Indeed, as one observer pointed out: ‘[M]uch of the language used in the [Libya] resolution has for many years featured almost word for word in UN General Assembly resolutions on Burma, and reports from the UN Special Rapporteur on Burma.’²

According to opposition websites, people inside Burma watched in disbelief at how quickly UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the Security Council acted after Gaddafi’s attacks on Libyan civilians. They contrasted this response with the consistent lack of international action to prevent military operations against unarmed demonstrators and ethnic minorities in Burma, which, since the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, have probably resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and forced hundreds of thousands of refugees into neighbouring countries.³

Several commentators have since pointed out that the rare consensus in the UNSC supporting international action against Libya was most unlikely to be repeated in the event of a similar proposal to intervene in Burma. The political and strategic circumstances—China’s national interests, in particular—are quite different. Nor would ASEAN endorse an armed attack against a fellow member. There are also questions over the feasibility of an extended multinational military operation against a country like Burma, particularly if it were opposed by regional countries.

Another critical difference between Libya and Burma—one that has been noted by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi—is that the Libyan armed forces are divided in their loyalties.⁴ Despite regime fears that the Middle Eastern ‘contagion’ might spread to Burma—prompting censorship of the protests in the local news media—there have been no signs that significant

2 Mark Farmaner, ‘UN Resolution on Libya Exposes German Hypocrisy on Burma’, *The Irrawaddy*, 4 March 2011, www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=20874&page=1 [page discontinued].

3 Nant Bwa Bwa Phan, ‘UN’s Libya Action Must Be Reproduced’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 1 March 2011, www.dvb.no/analysis/un%E2%80%99s-libya-action-must-be-reproduced/14506 [page discontinued] [now at english.dvb.no/analysis/un%E2%80%99s-libya-action-must-be-reproduced/14506].

4 Luke Hunt, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi Notes Parallels Between Middle East and Burma’, *Voice of America*, 24 February 2011, www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/Aung-Suu-Kyi-Notes-Parallels-Between-Middle-East-and-Burma-116860863.html [page discontinued] [now at www.voanews.com/east-asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-notes-parallels-between-middle-east-and-burma].

elements in the Burmese armed forces are ready to back the opposition movement and bring down the hybrid military/civilian government that was installed earlier this year.

Some Burma activist groups have condemned the uneven application of the R2P doctrine as blatant hypocrisy by Western countries devoted to their own narrow interests. Yet, there have always been inconsistencies in the Burma policies of both national governments and international organisations. For example, Burma is currently the target of wideranging sanctions that are aimed at few other countries, despite the fact that many—including a number in Asia—also have authoritarian regimes and long records of human rights abuses.

Such anomalies have rarely been questioned—at least not openly. In a recent Nelson Report, however, Georgetown University's David Steinberg asked why US sanctions against Burma are far harsher and more extensive than those levelled against North Korea.⁵ Pyongyang poses a much greater strategic threat to the US, and the wider world, than Naypyidaw. And the situation inside North Korea—in terms of undemocratic governance, human rights abuses, political prisoners, restrictions on civil society and economic mismanagement—is far worse than in Burma.

There are good reasons for the US to be concerned about Burma, but singling it out for exemplary punishment seems to disprove Palmerston's dictum. For, as US Senator Jim Webb in particular has argued, Burma still engages the US's national interests.⁶ It occupies a sensitive geostrategic position between the nuclear-armed giants of India and China. It is a member of ASEAN and plays an important role in the management of several transnational problems. Burma has also developed a defence relationship with North Korea that probably includes ballistic missile sales and possibly even illicit transfers of nuclear technology.

Senior US officials have privately conceded that the main reason for the inconsistency in approach is Aung San Suu Kyi, whose influence on US policymakers has been profound.⁷ As Steinberg has also observed, had Suu

5 David Steinberg, 'Disparate Sanctions', *The Nelson Report*, 15 June 2011.

6 'Senator Webb Holds a Hearing on Burma Policy', *YouTube*, 6 October 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGPbhJzJDBQ.

7 David Steinberg, 'Aung San Suu Kyi and US Policy Toward Burma/Myanmar', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.29, No.3, 2010, pp.35–59, doi.org/10.1177/186810341002900302.

Kyi not risen to global prominence and captured the popular imagination, it is likely that the US and other Western countries would have felt less constrained in considering a wider range of policy options towards Burma. As things currently stand, Washington is unlikely to make any significant changes to its Burma policy without first considering The Lady's views.

All other considerations aside, this fact alone—that one, albeit remarkable, person can have such an effect on the foreign policy of the world's most powerful country—underlines the futility of looking for consistency in the conduct of international relations.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.