

Kurt Campbell on US–Burma relations

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Testimony to the US Congress by Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, offered a fascinating glimpse into the Obama administration's thinking about developments in Myanmar and its relations with the US.

On 25 April, the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs examined US policy towards Burma.¹ The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held similar hearings the following day. Both heard testimony from officials and influential Burma-watchers.²

Kurt Campbell, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and, in the minds of many, the chief architect of the Obama administration's current approach to Burma, made a number of key points in his comments to the House Committee. These include the following:

1 'Oversight of US Policy Toward Burma', Hearings, Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 25 April 2012, foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearings?ID=4B811069-3F87-41BE-A2DB-E08B1EA4E128.

2 'US Policy on Burma', Subcommittee Hearing, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, Washington, DC, 26 April 2012, www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/us-policy-on-burma.

1. With regard to the reforms made since March 2011 by President Thein Sein, the US believes this ‘nascent opening’ is real and significant. In contrast to much of the commentary published to date, however, the US believes this process is ‘fragile and reversible’. As Hillary Clinton said on 4 April: ‘[T]he future of Burma is neither clear nor certain.’³
2. The US welcomes the progress made in negotiations between Naypyidaw and Burma’s various ethnic communities, but Washington remains concerned that ‘the impact of Burma’s reform efforts has not extended far beyond the capital and major cities’. The continued fighting in Kachin State and human rights violations against the Rohingya minority, for example, remain major concerns.
3. According to Campbell, much work remains to be done in Burma. ‘The legacy of five decades of military rule—repressive laws, a pervasive security apparatus, a corrupt judiciary and media censorship—is still all too present.’ This has prompted the Obama administration to adopt a ‘step-by-step process’ towards the easing of economic sanctions. This approach is more measured than that which some other governments appear to be adopting.
4. The by-elections on 1 April, in which Aung San Suu Kyi and 42 other members of the NLD were elected, were considered ‘a significant step forward’. Despite some irregularities, the elections ‘demonstrated a smooth and peaceful voting process’. Washington is hoping that current differences over the oath can be resolved soon so that the elected NLD members can take their seats and make a contribution to the parliamentary process.⁴
5. The Burmese Government is proceeding with a strong program of economic reforms, including overdue changes to the exchange rate mechanism, but in Washington’s view, allocations for the armed forces remained ‘grossly disproportionate’, at 16.5 per cent of the (formal) budget. At 3.25 per cent and 6.26 per cent, respectively, the allocations for health and education were still very low, but the US acknowledged that they were more than double previous levels.

3 Paul Eckert and Arshad Mohammed, ‘US Moves to Ease Myanmar Sanctions After Reforms’, *Reuters*, 5 April 2012, www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-usa-idUSBRE83315U20120405.

4 ‘In Myanmar, What a Difference an Oath Makes’, *CNN*, 26 April 2012, edition.cnn.com/2012/04/26/world/asia/myanmar-politics/index.html.

6. Although Thein Sein has given assurances that Burma will observe the relevant UNSC resolutions, the US remains ‘troubled’ by Burma’s military trade with North Korea. This has the potential to ‘impede progress in improving our bilateral ties’. Indeed, despite two rather noncommittal US reports on the subject recently, Campbell described this as ‘a top national security priority’.⁵
7. In recent months, the US has appeared less concerned about Burma’s ‘nascent’ nuclear research program.⁶ Campbell told the committee that the US welcomed assurances from senior officials that Burma had no intention of pursuing nuclear weapons. However, Washington continues to urge Naypyidaw to display greater transparency on nonproliferation issues and to accede to a range of additional IAEA instruments.

5 Andrew Selth, ‘Burma and WMD: Nothing to Report?’, *The Interpreter*, 29 March 2012, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/03/29/Burma-and-WMD-Nothing-to-report.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-wmd-nothing-report].

6 Andrew Selth, ‘Does Burma Have a WMD Program?’, *The Interpreter*, 7 June 2010, archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/does-burma-have-wmd-program [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/does-burma-have-wmd-program].

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