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Burma: The Man has met The Lady

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President Obama's historic visit to Myanmar in November 2012 symbolised not only the dramatic evolution of US–Myanmar relations, but also the changes that were taking place in Myanmar under president Thein Sein. Most of the coverage by journalists and commentators of the visit was balanced and sensible, but there were a number of issues that were not paid the attention they deserved.

To long-time Burma-watchers, and countless others, it was an astonishing sight, enthusiastically conveyed by the international news media: two of the world's most iconographic (not to mention photogenic) figures, both winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, embracing in Rangoon.¹ It was the ultimate hero shot.

To use Nich Farrelly's apt phrase,² the international community was for a moment at least transfixed by the image of Barack Obama and Aung San Suu Kyi standing together on the steps of the house where the Burmese opposition leader had spent most of the past 24 years under arrest. More than anything else, perhaps, it demonstrated just how far Burma—and US–Burma relations—had come over the past two and a half years.

1 Lindsay Murdoch, 'Obama Courts Burma as US Pivots to Asia', *The Age*, [Melbourne], 19 November 2012, www.theage.com.au/world/obama-courts-burma-as-us-pivots-to-asia-20121119-29m37.html.

2 Nicholas Farrelly, 'Mr Obama Goes to Myanmar', *New Mandala*, 19 November 2012, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2012/11/19/mr-obama-goes-to-myanmar/.

While it only lasted six hours, the Obama visit was highly symbolic. After more than two decades of direct military rule, Burma effectively shed its pariah status. As the US President reminded everyone in his keynote speech at Rangoon University (for generations, the home of political protest in Burma), a host of difficult issues is still to be resolved.³ However, President Thein Sein's ambitious program of political, economic and social reforms has been endorsed at the highest level.

Before, during and after the Obama visit, there was an avalanche of reporting and commentary from a wide range of academics, journalists and others, covering everything from US global security interests to the colour of Hillary Clinton's pant suits. Most coverage of the visit was balanced and sensible.⁴ However, a few of the matters raised—and not raised—in the press are worth a brief comment.

First, there were a few stories that stated that Burma's reform program and readiness to develop its relationship with the US were the result of the Bush administration's earlier hard line.⁵ This claim simply cannot be sustained. Not only is there no evidence that external pressures prompted the paradigm shift that occurred in Burma in 2011, but also there is a wide consensus that US sanctions were in fact counterproductive. Without the Obama administration's new policy of 'pragmatic engagement', Washington would not have been in a position to respond to Thein Sein's initiatives in the way it has.

Second, a great deal has been written about how Burma fits into the US 'pivot' towards Asia and now constitutes an important element in the US's strategic competition with China.⁶ It would be naive to ignore the implications of closer US–Burma ties for Washington's relations with Beijing, but a fixation on China ignores other imperatives behind the

3 'Remarks by President Obama at the University of Yangon', Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Washington, DC, 19 November 2012, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/19/remarks-president-obama-university-yangon.

4 Evan Osnos, 'Obama to Burma: A "Remarkable Journey"', *The New Yorker*, 19 November 2012, www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/11/obamas-trip-to-burma-a-remarkable-journey.html.

5 Mary Kissel, 'Bush's Burma Policy, Obama's Victory Lap', *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 November 2012, online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324439804578115312833763472.html?mod=asia_opinion.

6 Jurgen Haacke, *Myanmar: Now a Site for Myanmar–US Geopolitical Competition?*, in IDEAS Reports: Special Reports, Nicholas Kitchen (ed.), SR015. LSE IDEAS (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, November 2012), www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR015/SR015-SEAsia-Haacke-.pdf [page discontinued].

Obama visit, not least the US's wish for closer relations with ASEAN. It is also worth remembering that Burma is not a pawn in this game and has already taken steps to balance its growing links with the US with renewed strategic ties to China.

Third, it was noteworthy that the Obama visit produced little comment about Burma's reported nuclear and ballistic missile ambitions or its relationship with North Korea, which was characterised by the US in April as 'a top national security priority'.⁷ Yet, during the visit, Thein Sein announced that Burma would sign the additional protocol to the IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and would observe UNSC Resolution 1874 imposing sanctions against North Korea. For his part, Obama hinted at renewed military ties between the US and Burma.

Something else not examined closely was the fact that Obama spent as much time with an opposition member of Burma's parliament as he did with the president of the country hosting his state visit. Given Aung San Suu Kyi's global status as a champion of democracy and a political rock star, this is hardly surprising, but the domestic implications of this meeting attracted little comment. As was the case during her overseas visits earlier this year, few seem to have considered the potential damage that such high-level attention (verging at times on adulation) could do to Aung San Suu Kyi's relationship with Thein Sein, the maintenance of which is essential for continuing stability and progress in Burma.

Finally, it was again apparent that many observers, not just activists and human rights campaigners, but also governments and international organisations, are holding Burma to standards of behaviour and levels of achievement that are rarely applied to other regional countries—even North Korea.⁸ There is of course nothing wrong with having high ideals and one always looks in vain for consistency in international relations. However, Burma will struggle to meet all the goals set for it by outsiders, many of which have proven beyond the ability and acceptability of many richer and more developed countries.

7 Andrew Selth, 'Kurt Campbell on US–Burma Relations', *The Interpreter*, 27 April 2012, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/04/27/Kurt-Campbell-on-US-Burma-relations.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kurt-campbell-us-burma-relations].

8 Andrew Selth, 'Burma and Libya: The Politics of Inconsistency', *The Interpreter*, 17 June 2011, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/06/17/Burma-and-Libya-The-politics-of-inconsistency.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-libya-politics-inconsistency].

It remains to be seen where US–Burma relations go from here, but the signs are encouraging. Washington warmly welcomed the announcement, made by Thein Sein during the Obama visit, that his government would pursue a range of measures in areas such as human rights, prisoner releases, forced labour, conflict mitigation and reconciliation (including with the country's ethnic minorities), nuclear proliferation and people trafficking.⁹ All are issues on which the US has expressed concern over the years, most recently by Obama during his visit.

Despite all the diplomatic handshakes and photo opportunities, however, no one should underestimate the difficulties involved in tackling these issues. There are no easy solutions to Burma's fiendishly complex problems, which will challenge governments in Naypyidaw for many years to come. Some reforms may be easy to introduce into law, but their implementation will prove very difficult. Notwithstanding all the signals given by Obama to the Burmese Government, Washington clearly recognises this fact and seems prepared to cut Naypyidaw considerable slack to maintain the momentum of the reform process.

Given that Burma is only just emerging from the world's most durable military dictatorship, Obama's visit was politically risky. Geostrategic factors aside, however, the President seems to be gambling that the reform process will continue and the country's problems can be managed in a way that will not make his stopover look premature or ill-advised. It is a hope that is widely shared.

9 Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Information Team, Press release No.2/2012, 19 November 2012, www.president-office.gov.mm/en/briefing-room/news/2012/11/19/id-1049 [page discontinued].

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