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Responses, Articles

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US Policy towards Myanmar: The Big Shift and Regional Impact

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Myanmar’s reform steps and the US diplomatic opening towards that country have signalled a period of great consequence in international relations. An isolated country, hitherto compared to the likes of North Korea, is now the centrepiece of prospective international investments and a fundamental component of what is being called the ‘Great Game East’.

Then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to Myanmar in late 2011 heralded a new beginning in US policy towards Myanmar, hitherto hamstrung by sanctions. That the visit came more than half a century after then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles visited in 1955, made it all the more monumental, in terms of the shift in US-Myanmar relations. But, even as the Hillary visit was largely welcomed internationally and in the United States, there was and still remains a cautious optimism as to how fast the US should move in relaxing the restrictions, it has imposed in engaging with Naypyidaw.

The decision to send the Secretary of State came after many discussions among the White House, the State Department and members of Congress, following a series of exploratory visits to Myanmar by the administration’s special envoy, Derek Mitchell, who is currently serving as the US ambassador there.

Almost a year later in November 2012, President Obama made history becoming the first sitting US president to ever visit this Southeast Asian country. Speaking at the University of Yangon, Obama turned a new leaf in the relationship, saying, “…We don’t need to be defined by the prisons of the past. We need to look forward to the future.”
The question is: Why this move from Washington? While the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of policymaking process cannot be ascertained quickly and authoritatively, some logical reasons could be arrived at. First, as Myanmar’s leadership continued to open up and seemed intent to allow Aung San Suu Kyi relative political freedom, paving a nascent path to democratisation, Washington needed to sit up and acknowledge. Since, Myanmar had been isolated and continuously sanctioned primarily because of political repression and lack of freedom, the winds of change had to be encouraged, albeit with conditions, which was and remains the prevalent mood in Washington. Moreover, if US-Myanmar’s new found relationship does manage to bring in political and economic dividends for Myanmar, the pro-reform and pro-democracy elements in the country would have a score card to show that democracy and engagement does pay.\(^4\)

In fact, the Obama administration in September 2009 had initiated a policy change after seven months of review, discussion, and consultation. This reassessment of the US policy towards Myanmar led to a new pragmatic policy of engaging Naypyidaw, while continuing the sanctions regime. For the first time, a dialogue was initiated with the military rulers, regarding Myanmar’s path to democratisation and greater respect for human rights. Besides talks on comprehensive reform and national reconciliation, the new policy also entailed coordinating efforts with other countries regarding Myanmar, and engaging Myanmar’s leaders to sever its ties with North Korea and abandon its alleged nuclear weapons ambitions.\(^5\) But, the policy shift and careful steps towards a rapprochement began to see results only when former Prime Minister and military leader U Thein Sein became Myanmar’s President and the new civilian government began taking steps towards political reforms and national reconciliation.

There are strategic factors as well, influencing policymakers in the United States. Just as the Indian government reinvigorates its ‘Look East policy’, the Obama administration has made the rebalancing strategy towards the Asia-Pacific its signature foreign policy effort. President Obama announced the significant shift in American relations with Myanmar during his Asia-Pacific trip in November 2011, citing “flickers of progress” that merited giving an extended hand of friendship, if not an embrace. Acknowledging the progress and the challenges ahead for Myanmar’s path to reform, he said, “…we want to seize what could be an historic opportunity for progress, and make it clear that if Burma continues to travel down the road of democratic reform, it can forge a new relationship with the United States of America.”\(^6\) In both the policy
outlooks, the unmistakable impact of China’s rise and its economic footprints in the region is quite discernible, even though official commentary might present more benign perceptions.

As Hillary Clinton commenting on US approach to Myanmar, said, “…we welcome positive, constructive relations between China and her neighbors… from our perspective; we are not viewing this in light of any competition with China. We’re viewing this on its merits as an opportunity for us to reengage here.”7 US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, addressing the Shangri-La Dialogue this year also emphasised the rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific as “…primarily a diplomatic, economic and cultural strategy.”8 Giving a sneak peek on how Washington’s moves towards Myanmar is being seen in China, Sun Yun, an expert on China's foreign relations at the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C. said, “Beijing understands Myanmar's aspiration to diversify its international engagement and improve relations with the United States. However, Beijing doesn't wish to see those goals achieved at the expense of China.”9

Till recently, western countries have largely stayed away from Myanmar, imposing a host of stringent sanctions. Therefore, neighbouring China has had a windfall in terms of investment opportunities in mineral-rich Myanmar, and Myanmar’s military leaders, in absence of an alternative, put their eggs in the Chinese basket. Being a bordering country and given long years of engagements between Beijing and the erstwhile military junta, the economics in Myanmar, at present, is highly tilted in favour of China.10 President Sein earlier suspended the $3.6 billion Chinese-financed Myitsone hydro-electric power project in response to strong public opposition. Many saw it as a defiant act against Beijing, a way to reach out to other international partners. But, others saw the decision as specifically based on domestic opposition concerning environmental damage, and hence not harming overall bilateral ties.11 Indeed, Myanmar’s geographical proximity to the two Asian powers, India and China, inevitably makes it a major part of their strategic calculations and now with, America’s new overture towards it, the Asian power game might see new dynamics. By opening up to the United States, and increasing its ties with countries like India in the neighbourhood, Myanmar wants to increase its zone of legitimacy and credibility in the international community. With the relative opening
of the country, Naypyidaw has shown a balancing act, and a desire to restrict complete
dependence on the Chinese.
The rise of China has spawned continuing debates among policymakers and analysts around the
globe, and US rebalance policy is largely seen as a means to prevent the rise of a hegemonic
China, both in the economic and the political front. Despite the subdued tone in Washington
when it comes to the ‘China rationale’ in its rebalancing strategy, Beijing is clearly
uncomfortable with increasing US engagements with countries in the region, that detest the
aggressive attitude of China regarding its boundary dispute with India, or sovereignty claims in
the South China Sea and the East China Sea.
And during his monumental visit to Myanmar last year, President Obama could not steer very far
away from the strategic calculations, involved in America’s rebalancing policy, and the
significance of Myanmar therein, as he said, “I came here because of the importance of your
country. You live at the crossroads of East and South Asia.” “.... The United States of America
is a Pacific nation….And as our economy recovers, this is where we believe we will find
enormous growth. As we have ended the wars that have dominated our foreign policy for a
decade, this region will be a focus for our efforts to build a prosperous peace.... And as President,
I have embraced ASEAN,” he continued.12 According to Ernest Bower, senior adviser for
Southeast Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, improving relations with
Myanmar fits into the wider US policy of revitalising its Asia-Pacific relationships. “Myanmar is
the keystone state that links China, Southeast Asia and India, and if we didn't get it right, we
wouldn't be able to play the chess game that is required in order to deal with China,” he said.13
The US, pursuant to official statements, has begun a “targeted, carefully calibrated military-to-
military engagement” with Myanmar that included the recent participation of representatives of
Myanmar’s armed forces as observers in the US-led “Cobra Gold” military exercise in Thailand,
the largest multinational annual exercise held in Asia. These initiatives take place, amidst
selective sanctions, such as the one imposed on Lieutenant General Thein Htay, the head of
Myanmar’s Directorate of Defense Industries for ignoring international requirements that he stop
buying military equipment from North Korea.14 Human Rights groups and some lawmakers in
the US want the Obama administration to tread cautiously when engaging Myanmar’s Armed
Forces, officially known as Tatmadaw given the military’s record of human rights abuses and
their heavy handed role in the country’s economy. “The Burmese military is the historic perpetrator of human rights abuses, and, one may presume, also the current perpetrator, so sanctions against them should be the last to go,” said US Congressman Rush Holt.\(^1\)

Hence, even as countries increasingly make a beeline to engage resource-rich and strategically located Myanmar,\(^2\) several challenges remain, both internal and external in nature. Visible reform efforts like releasing Suu Kyi from house arrest and freeing political prisoners, abolishing censorships, legalising trade unions and protests, have elicited policy changes and ease of sanctions from the US and Europe. But, impediments remain on the path to democracy, including the issue of national reconciliation amidst ethnic violence, and the role of the military in the country’s future. And, as Washington restructures Myanmar’s role in its foreign policy calculations, or more specifically in its new rebalancing strategy, Naypyidaw’s own moves, and what moves other stakeholders make in this ‘strategic chessboard’ will be of great consequence.

END NOTES:


12. The White House (Office of the Press Secretary), “Remarks by President Obama at the University of Yangon.”


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