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Burma: A Strategic Perspective

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Conclusions

During the past decade, the United States has condemned the actions of the Burmese government, halted all bilateral economic and military assistance, suspended most-favored nation trading status, and generally tried to isolate the oppressive regime in Rangoon.

Despite these policies of isolation and sanction, the regime continues to be as dismissive of human rights as ever. Meanwhile, a growing economic, political and military embrace of Burma by China has not gone unnoticed by the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN has argued that Burma should be integrated into the region and that policies that quarantine it only backfire, since a country that has welcomed isolation cannot be punished by it. Thus, not only might the United States fail to change the behavior of the Burmese regime, it might also let China develop a quasi-protectorate role over it and allow the human rights issue to divide the United States from its ASEAN friends.

Idealism versus Realism: Meeting the Interests of the United States

Since the earliest days of the Republic, U.S. foreign policy has exhibited two, often conflicting, tendencies. The first is a normative, "idealist" impulse to use foreign policy to further deeply held American political values-notably democracy and human rights. The second is a geopolitical "realist" approach that stresses the pursuit of national interests defined largely in terms of power and economic advantage. Recently, the tension between these two orientations has been clearly evidenced in policy toward China and most specifically in the recurring debate over granting most favored nation (MFN) status to Chinese trade. Both within the Executive and the Legislative-and between the two branches-proponents of conditioning MFN on Chinese adherence to basic human rights standards have clashed with those who see MFN as a matter of economic self-interest.

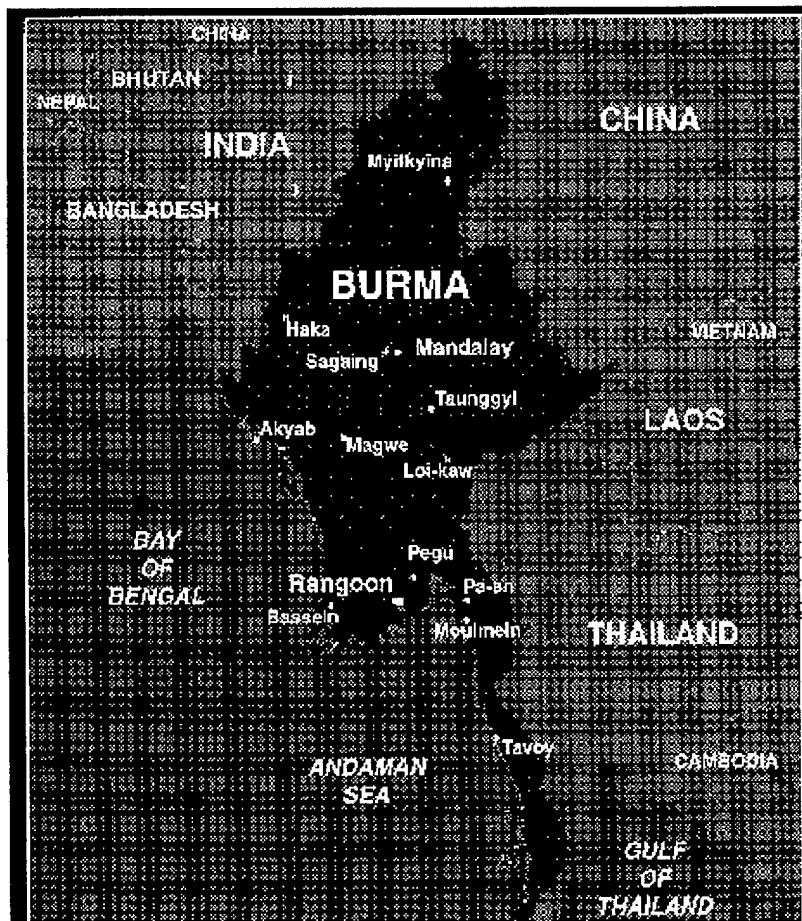
In the case of China, the "realists" seem to have carried the day-largely because the costs of trying to impose a normative agenda on China were seen as being too high.

Burmese Brutality Drives U.S. Policy

In the case of Burma the normative approach has governed policy for most of the last decade. (Burma was the nation's official name in English until it was changed by the current regime to Myanmar. The U.S. Government, however, continues to use "Burma" in its official documents.) Policy has been driven

by a deep repugnance for the crude, brutally authoritarian character of the Rangoon junta, the self-described State Law and Order Council (SLORC). The SLORC government has massacred pro-democracy demonstrators (including students and Buddhist monks) in 1988, suppressed political dissent before and since, engaged in large-scale forced labor, probably collaborated in opium/ heroin trafficking, and annulled the results of a democratic election in 1990 while imprisoning the leader of the democratic movement, Nobel Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi. A recent Washington Post editorial that referred to the SLORC as "thuggish," the "bullies of Burma," and "worthy of contempt" is typical of recent newspaper commentary concerning Burma.

Not surprisingly, U.S. policy toward Burma has reflected this sense of moral outrage. Since 1988 the United States has regularly condemned the actions of the regime, halted bilateral economic and military assistance, suspended MFN privileges, opposed lending by international financial institutions to Burma and tried to rally support for such policies among other countries-including a proposed international embargo on arms shipments to Burma. The other side of the coin has been outspoken support for Aung San Suu Kyi and other champions of democracy in Burma. Even prior to the outrages of 1988, Washington had kept its dealings with the authoritarian leadership in Rangoon to a minimum. Congressional interest in Burma has been episodic at best, but has usually taken the form of urging harsher, more punitive policies toward Rangoon. Most recently, Senator Mitch McConnell has introduced legislation that expands existing sanctions to include termination of all American trade and investment with Burma, including tourism. In its original form the McConnell bill would have imposed these restrictions on non-U.S. companies dealing with Burma that also have a commercial presence in the United States.



Underlying Realities Reflected in Policy

This highly normative policy agenda has reflected three underlying realities: (1) During most of the Cold War period Burma was, from a U.S. perspective, geopolitically irrelevant. Its geographic remoteness and self-imposed isolation reinforced this assessment. (2) The events of 1988 (demonstrations and repression) and 1990 (abrogated elections) coupled with the inspirational defiance of Aung San Suu Kyi have thrown the normative issues into high relief. (3) There have been no significant national interest costs to the United States of a policy of principle regarding Burma. For officials in Washington, Burma is something of a foreign policy free good comparable to Cuba and in contrast with China or North Korea.

China's Emergence a Growing Factor

In recent years, the strategic landscape in Southeast Asia has begun to change in ways that demand a rethinking of U.S. policy toward Burma. The major new reality is the emergence of the People's Republic of China as a regional great power. China's economic and military capabilities have grown dramatically at a time when China's traditional security concern, Russia, has faded. Japan remains a long-term, but not an immediate security problem for China. This has left China free, in geopolitical terms, to shift its attention to the south. The most striking manifestation of this development has been a very assertive policy toward the South China Sea; i.e., the entire sea and all the land outcroppings within it are claimed as Chinese sovereign territory. This has been accompanied by a number of statements from senior Chinese civilian and military officials that seem to presage a kind of Chinese Monroe Doctrine for South-east Asia—a modern reprise of the historic preponderance of the Middle Kingdom. This, plus China's recent resort to bareknuckled military intimidation aimed at Taiwan, has reinforced a growing perception in Southeast Asia of China as a major security factor—and perhaps a threat. The discovery of Chinese facilities on a reef near to, and claimed by, the Philippines did nothing to dispel these concerns.

Southeast Asian uneasiness concerning Beijing's capabilities and intentions also has been fed by China's growing presence in Burma. For the first three decades of Burmese post-colonial independence, China's influence in Rangoon was sharply limited by its provocative and futile support for a Burmese Communist Party (BCP) insurgency against the government. But with Beijing's renunciation of its BCP policy and Rangoon's international isolation after the bloodbath of 1988, the picture changed dramatically. On August 6, 1988, even as pro-democracy demonstrators clashed with police in Rangoon, China and Burma signed a border-trade agreement. Two months later a high level Burmese delegation went to China and the first shipment of Chinese arms arrived in Burma the following August. Thus began an increasingly intense relationship that has seen Burma drawn deep into China's embrace. The public record is striking. In four years Burma has purchased an estimated \$1.4 billion in Chinese arms including F-6 and F-7 fighter aircraft, tanks, APCs, radars, three frigates with missile capability, patrol boats, rocket launchers, and small arms. Veteran Southeast Asia correspondent, Bertil Lintner, recounts a conversation with a Chinese resident on the Burmese border who described one nighttime convoy of over 500 military trucks crossing the border from China headed south.

China Economically Engulfs Burma

Economically, China's presence, particularly in northern Burma, has exploded. In 10 years crossborder trade went from \$15 million to over \$800 million. A flood of inexpensive Chinese goods now dominate

the Burmese consumer market. Large numbers of Chinese traders and undocumented immigrants have changed the demographic profile of northern Burma. Today, Mandalay is described by Burmese visitors as a predominantly Chinese city dominated by Chinese money. Chinese construction crews are building and upgrading highways, bridges, and railroads through northern Burma to the sea, while Chinese officials describe Burma as a potentially lucrative outlet to the Indian Ocean for Chinese trade. There has been occasional speculation, and some official concern, in Southeast Asia that China seeks more than trade along Burma's coast. Lintner reports:

"Most alarming, from the perspective of ASEAN, was the fact that some of the equipment for the Burmese navy had to be installed and at least partially maintained by Chinese technicians. To ASEAN strategists, this meant that the Chinese had gained a toehold in the maritime region between India and Southeast Asia for the first time."

Press reports speculate about listening posts and possible Chinese naval bases on Burmese islands near the mouth of the Malacca Straits, although little hard evidence has surfaced so far. But in 1994 the Indian Navy reportedly detained a Chinese survey ship in Indian waters with electronic monitoring equipment. At the same time, three boats, variously described as fishing or cargo vessels, flying the Burmese flag but crewed by Chinese were detained by Indian patrol craft. No fish or cargo were on board.

The roster of bilateral VIP visits is impressive. The highlights include a week-long visit to China by General Khin Nyunt (the military intelligence chief generally regarded as the most powerful single member of the junta) accompanied by four ministers, the commander of the Northern Military Region, four deputy ministers, and a large number of senior officials. It was Khin Nyunt's fourth official visit to China. Sixteen months later he was back accompanying the SLORC chairman, Senior General Than Swe, for another week-long visit. It was Swe's third trip to China. A month earlier he had hosted a senior Chinese leader and had described China as "the Myanmar people's most trusted friend."

Best Friend or Greatest Threat?

From a geopolitical perspective, Burma's approach to its huge northern neighbor is anomalous. The obvious point is that Burma has developed increasingly close ties with the only country in the world that is in a position to seriously threaten its vital security interests. The issue is whether Burma's leaders have fully thought through the implications of their policy. When this question was posed to Burmese military intelligence officers, it was evident that the whole issue was the subject of great interest and no little controversy among them.

The Burma-China connection has captured the attention of ASEAN. The basic ASEAN approach to Burma has been "constructive engagement," i.e., normal relations with an effort to build economic and political ties to Rangoon. As such it is diametrically opposed to U.S. policy and has been the subject of recurring debate between ASEAN and Washington. In June two special envoys toured the ASEAN capitals to press Washington's case to little apparent effect. ASEAN believes that a policy of isolation and pressure toward Burma only heightens the regime's insecurity, causing it to resort to greater repression at home and to turn to its only perceived friend abroad-China. It is the latter that concerns ASEAN the fear that China is using Burma to extend its military and political reach in the region.

ASEAN's expansion of contacts with Rangoon offers an alternative to Beijing. Senior ministerial officials from Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam have led delegations to Burma. Both Khin Nyunt and Than Swe have visited ASEAN capitals. In 1994 Burma attended its first ASEAN

Ministerial meeting as an invited guest of the host government, Thailand. In December 1995 Burmese representatives also attended the ASEAN Summit as guests. Burma has formally acceded to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and acquired formal ASEAN observer status this year with actual membership on or before 2000. Burma has also joined the region's multilateral security dialogue, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF provides a vehicle for a sustained military and intelligence interchange with Rangoon. All of this demonstrates Rangoon's receptivity. A fair assessment is that Burmese leaders have a new found desire to offset a heavy dependence on China with ties to Burma's Southeast Asian neighbors.

Among all the countries that gained independence from colonial rule in the decade following World War II, Burma had the brightest economic prospects. Richly-endowed with natural resources, Burma also inherited a trained bureaucracy, an English-speaking intelligentsia, and a literate work force. But three decades of the "Burmese Road to Socialism," autocratic rule, and self-imposed isolation have turned Burma into one of the world's poorest countries. This in turn has made Burma vulnerable in security terms. Recent market-oriented reforms have produced a short term economic stimulus with annual growth rates averaging above 7% over three years. But Professor David Dapice, who has analyzed the economy in depth, argues persuasively that this "modest rebound is not likely to presage a period of Korea style growth unless many other changes are made-changes that are not yet in evidence. Without [them] . . . the outlook is poor to grim."

Dapice argues that an economic relapse will have the pernicious effect of reinforcing the junta's seige mentality, exacerbating its tendency toward police state methods. Such an economically hardpressed regime will be likely to increase its collaboration in the narcotics trade and to turn to China. The result will be more crossborder migration and increasing control of the economy by well-capitalized Chinese traders, at least in the northern parts of the country. More far-fetched, but not impossible, is an absorption of some of the country along the lines of Tibet. For many ethnic groups, their historical experience with the Chinese has been better than that with the Burmans, and the de facto territorial integrity of a poor, weak, and divided nation cannot be taken for granted.

Recommendations

Current U.S. policy toward Burma authentically reflects American political values and is morally validated by the long record of human rights outrages by the Burmese regime. But Washington must ask itself whether current policy meets two other tests: 1) Does it have any realistic prospect of success in altering the character of the Burmese regime? 2) Does it jeopardize U.S. strategic and foreign policy interests in Southeast Asia, particularly as they relate to China and ASEAN?

A policy of unaffectionate engagement would bring U.S. policy into closer alignment with ASEAN, open channels of strategic dialogue with Rangoon, and perhaps improve the prospect of political change in Burma by exposing both leaders and populace to increased external contact and influence.

This paper is an outgrowth of an NDU conference where the author was asked to analyze U.S. foreign policy from a geopolitical/strategic standpoint. Dr. Marvin C. Ott is a professor of National Security Policy at the National War College. For more information Dr. Ott can be reached by telephone at (202) 685-3692, by fax at (202) 685-4239, or on the Internet: ottm@ndu.edu.

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