

United States-Myanmar Relations: On the Threshold of Rapprochement? A Response

HARN YAWNGHWE

Priscilla Clapp's article very clearly describes the pragmatic new US policy approach to Myanmar adopted by the Obama administration, and the very deep-seated obstacles in both countries that stand in the way of genuine rapprochement. The paper accurately concludes that there is realistically no chance of this happening in the near future, even after the elections scheduled for 7 November 2010.

The deep-seated obstacles include the fact that, for the past twenty years, the focus of US policy has almost exclusively been on the personal leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi framed in terms of democracy and human rights. The objective of US policy was to remove the military dictatorship and replace it with the parliament elected in 1990 under the leadership of Suu Kyi. While this policy focus has shifted slightly under Obama, Suu Kyi is still central to US policy on Myanmar. As recently as 24 September 2010, the US government reiterated that the elections could not be seen as credible as long as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest.¹

For Myanmar's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), this validates their claim that Suu Kyi is being used by colonial forces (British) and neocolonial forces (US) to subjugate Myanmar: Suu Kyi was not allowed to compete in the 1990 elections; she was under house arrest; political prisoners were not released; the election campaign was not "free and fair" by any standards; and the media were as restricted then as now. Yet the US and the

HARN YAWNGHWE is the Executive Director of the Euro-Burma Office in Brussels.

international community hailed the 1990 elections as credible. From the military's point of view, what has changed to make the 2010 elections illegitimate? Was it because Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won in 1990 and has no chance of winning in 2010?

The regime will certainly not release Suu Kyi before the elections, let alone allow her to compete. This means that Washington will not be able to improve relations with Myanmar as long as she remains the focus of US policy. Suu Kyi remains a crucial figure, and she may be the only person able to hold Myanmar together in any future transition to a democracy; but if the US is serious about improving relations with Myanmar, it needs to take into account other factors that may be equally important.

As described in Ms Clapp's paper, the SPDC's primary goal is to maintain power. Improving ties with the United States, or any other country or organization including the United Nations, is secondary. Therefore, no matter what pressure Washington or other external actors bring to bear on Nyapyidaw, it will not release Suu Kyi because she is perceived as a threat to regime survival. Myanmar's military (the Tatmadaw) refuses to entertain the possibility of her assuming a leadership role. To the generals, it would be tantamount to surrendering the country's sovereignty to the colonialists and neocolonialists. The regime simply cannot, and will not, accept the premise that they are the villains and she is the saviour of Myanmar. Neither will the regime risk losing the elections by allowing them to be genuinely "free and fair". Nor will it release political prisoners and allow unfettered media coverage. All these factors impinge on the security of the regime and nothing will be allowed to challenge its supremacy.

The only hope the article holds out for a possible opening for better relations is if the new government is composed of different faces and the parliament produces a significant number of independent opposition figures including non-Burman ethnic leaders. And if the government adopts more open policies — such as the release of political prisoners and the introduction of economic reform — the process of rapprochement might inch forward. Yet as the author points out, this is extremely unlikely, given the SPDC's approach towards the elections.

Does this then mean that the Obama administration's new Myanmar policy is destined to fail? Unfortunately the answer is "yes" if the US government cannot re-focus and identify other strategic interests in Myanmar other than to install Suu Kyi as the

leader of the next government. The irony of this policy is that it is unclear whether Suu Kyi herself wants to assume the mantle of leadership; she appears to be more interested in promoting grassroots democracy and safeguarding human rights than in playing power politics. However, over the past two decades, some of her supporters have portrayed her as a demi-god who is above criticism. As stated above, her leadership is important, but if genuine democracy is to come to Myanmar, there is no role for a demi-god.

To move beyond this impasse, the US needs to re-examine where its strategic interests lie. The issue of Myanmar and support for Suu Kyi has been a “boutique” issue in the United States, and one that requires no real investment in time, energy or resources. Strong statements against unpopular and unlikeable generals at critical moments have, to date, served everybody’s interests well. But the unresolved crisis in Myanmar is now entering into another stage, and it behooves the United States to critically re-assess its Myanmar policy even beyond that which the Obama administration has already undertaken.

Myanmar lies at the crossroads of South, East and Southeast Asia. What the US decides to do will affect the entire region. While the prevailing assumption is that Myanmar is a client state of China, this is an oversimplification and, as described in the paper, the ruling generals are as anxious to keep the Chinese at bay, as they are to keep the West out. Contrary to popular belief, it is more in China’s interests to have a stable, economically vibrant and independent Myanmar on its doorstep than to have an unstable, unpredictable and economically stagnant client state. An economically developing Myanmar will help open up China’s south-west and enable China to have a more balanced growth *vis-à-vis* its eastern seaboard.² Stability in Myanmar is even more important as China tries to secure its energy supplies through oil and gas pipelines across the country. The Chinese are committed to Myanmar as a country, but not necessarily to the SPDC regime.³ Neither is China concerned whether there is a military or democratic government in Myanmar. What matters to Beijing is that the government is friendly and can promote and protect its national interests, particularly its economic interests.⁴ The question is: Is a stable, economically vibrant and independent Myanmar in the interests of the US? Can US and Chinese interests coincide? Is there a way to work together to bring change to Myanmar or are the interests of the US and China diametrically opposed? If so, the chances of improving relations with Myanmar will depend on how far the US is willing to go to support a military dictatorship.

New Delhi's policy towards Myanmar has, to date, been shaped by a desire to counter China's rising influence and to secure the Tatmadaw's cooperation to counter insurgents in India's northeast. Neither goal has been achieved. India is now concerned that the ill-conceived policies of the SPDC will inevitably turn Myanmar into a Chinese colony, which would be a disaster for India as it would threaten the country's security and open up the rebellious northeast to Chinese infiltration.⁵ Consequently a stable, economically vibrant and independent Myanmar would also be in India's interests. An added benefit would be that an economically developing Myanmar would open up India's northeast and enable India's growth to become more balanced. Is this in the interests of the US? Can US, Chinese and India interests coincide? Is there a way to work together to bring change to Myanmar?

ASEAN welcomed Myanmar in 1997 to counter rising Chinese influence. Chinese influence in Myanmar is perceived to be high because of the arms and economic aid it has furnished since 1989. But since 2001, Myanmar has also bought MIG-29 fighter aircraft and Mi-24 and Mi-2 helicopters from Russia, whose combined value could easily exceed \$1 billion.⁶ Yet no one is talking about rising Russian influence in Myanmar. Prior to this year, Chinese investment in Myanmar was only \$12 billion over a period of about twelve years, or about \$1 billion a year. Over the same period, Thailand invested close to \$10 billion.⁷ Again, no one talks about Thailand's influence in Myanmar. In comparison, China's investments in Indonesia in 2009 was \$14 billion,⁸ and \$3 billion in Vietnam.⁹ Therefore, China's so-called dominance in Myanmar may be over-rated. The US has been able to maintain its dominance in the region without antagonizing China. So, it may be possible for the US to do more in Myanmar without having to fear that it will affect US-China relations. ASEAN would positively welcome a more constructive US engagement with the SPDC instead of grand standing, as this would enhance US relations with the rest of ASEAN. The host of problems being exported from Myanmar — including refugees, migrant workers, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, drugs, etc. — could also be addressed. More importantly, Myanmar's easily exploitable natural resources have been depleted, and if ASEAN members are to continue to reap economic benefits from the country, they will have to substantially increase their investments in the country. An unstable, unpredictable regime and an uninviting economic environment do not facilitate this. Therefore, a stable, economically vibrant and independent Myanmar is also in ASEAN's interests.

A complicating factor mentioned in the article is the SPDC's alleged nuclear ambitions. While Myanmar's current nuclear capability is doubtful, it has been well-known for some time that the generals desire a nuclear capability and that they have upgraded ties with North Korea and Russia in pursuit of this goal. To the ruling generals, having a nuclear capability is a strategic necessity and they will not yield on this point. ASEAN is supposed to be a nuclear-free zone. It is not in the interests of either China or India to have a nuclear Myanmar. Therefore, is there a way for the US, China, India and ASEAN, to work together to bring change to Myanmar?

An additional factor raised in the article, and one of great concern to China, India and Thailand, is the ethnic issue. Myanmar's ethnic communities straddle the country's borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. Altogether they make up at least 35 per cent of Myanmar's population and their homelands 60 per cent of the territory. Most of the borders are undemarcated, which means that a return to open conflict between the military and ethnic ceasefire groups will definitely spill over into Myanmar's neighbours. While this issue may not seem an important factor in terms of US interests, it is actually central to the issue of democracy and human rights in Myanmar. The human rights abuses on political prisoners pale in comparison to those being inflicted on the ethnic nationalities, especially in the conflict zones. Some of the systematic and gross violations may entail categories of crimes against humanity or war crimes under the terms of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.¹⁰ Human rights abuses will increase if the ceasefires breakdown and conflict erupts. This likelihood is very high since Naypyidaw has failed to convince the ethnic armies to merge with the Tatmadaw as border guard forces. The SPDC delivered its final ultimatum at the end of August, stating that since the offer to transform into border guard forces had not been accepted, the ethnic armies would be deemed illegal organizations and must surrender their arms by 1 September 2010. It effectively means that as of this date, the ceasefires are void and that the Tatmadaw can launch an attack any time. To date, apart from a few minor skirmishes, no major fighting has taken place. It is likely that the SPDC will hold back until after the elections, but the risk of conflict remains high.

While the issue of human rights is important, the issue of democracy in Myanmar is even more intertwined with the ethnic issue. The Tatmadaw first seized power in 1962 because it did not

agree with the democratic government's proposed solution to the ethnic issue, namely to amend the Constitution and give the ethnic states a more equal say in the governance of the country — in short, a federal system. The Tatmadaw claimed that a federal government would lead to the breakup of the country. Therefore, as long as the ethnic issue is not resolved, the Tatmadaw will never return to barracks and democracy will not be established. Accordingly, if the US is serious about democracy and human rights in Myanmar, it cannot ignore how the ethnic issue is resolved.

In conclusion, the new US policy approach to Myanmar is likely to fail if the US continues to focus exclusively on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the 2010 elections. While acceptance of the fact that the military will be centrally involved in Myanmar's political transition is a practical first step, it is not sufficient to bring about a change in US policy. The SPDC and the 2010 elections will not meet US expectations. If the US makes good behaviour on the part of the generals a condition for engaging with Myanmar this will never take place. The generals especially, Senior-General Than Shwe, will not change or meet US expectations. Given that the SPDC has successfully consolidated power, why should he change? If the US wants to change its Myanmar policy it needs to take into account a broader range of factors and change its policy in light of US strategic interests. This policy change should be independent of how the generals behave before, during or after the elections.

The real question though is this: although the stated US policy is for a long-term, gradual and step-by-step engagement, is it sustainable? Even if the Obama administration is able to withstand criticisms of its policy and the behaviour of the generals, will this initiative carry over to the next administration? This is very unlikely unless it is in the strategic interests of the US to have a stable, economically vibrant, independent and neutral Myanmar sandwiched between China, India and Southeast Asia. If it is, the US will have to forge a strategy that will bring this about. This strategy may include engaging the Tatmadaw (no matter what the outcome of the 2010 elections) while at the same time implementing a coordinated long-term programme that Myanmar's neighbours actively help shape and participate in.

Increased humanitarian aid is definitely one option, but that alone will not be sufficient. Development aid in terms of health and education and empowering civil society will be needed. More controversial is the need to revive Myanmar's economy; to build the capacity of newly formed political parties so that they can

develop sound public policies and mobilize the populace; to teach elected representatives how to conduct legislative business in a democratic fashion, and civil servants how to perform their duties in a professional manner without caving in to political influences; and to show the military how they can perform their duties in a professional manner without oppressing the civilian population or the ethnic nationalities.

It may require a multinational effort to defuse tensions along Myanmar's borders and to help all stakeholders find a long-term political solution that is just and equitable. It may involve facilitating the involvement of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in a leadership position during the transitional process. But all this can only take place if the Tatmadaw does not launch a military offensive against the ethnic armies after the elections, and if neighbouring countries can be persuaded that they stand to gain by pursuing a common agenda. The key, of course, is if the American public can be persuaded that the US has to engage with the Myanmar government (of whatever complexion) in order to meet its strategic interests, which includes Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, democracy and human rights.

NOTES

- ¹ Daily Press Briefing, US Department of State, Mark C. Toner, Acting Deputy Department Spokesman, 24 September 2010.
- ² Private consultations with Chinese analysts between 2005 and September 2010.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Private consultation with Indian analyst, New Delhi, 29 July 2010.
- ⁶ "Russia-Burma Signs Arms Deal", *Mizzima*, 23 December 2009.
- ⁷ "Chinese Investments in Myanmar tops \$8 billion this year — data", *The Star Online*, 16 August 2010.
- ⁸ "Indonesia Seeks China's Help in Doubling Foreign Investment", Bloomberg, 18 April 2010.
- ⁹ "Vietnam Lures Chinese Investors", *China Daily*, 31 August 2010.
- ¹⁰ *Progress report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar*, Tomás Ojea Quintana, UN Human Rights Council, Geneva, 10 March 2010.