

Griffith Asia Institute

Regional Outlook

UNITED STATES RELATIONS WITH BURMA:
FROM HOSTILITY TO HOPE

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Executive Summary

For more than 20 years, the United States pursued a hard line policy toward Burma that was bound to fail. Indeed, in many ways it was counter-productive. It also flew in the face of strategic developments in the Asia–Pacific region.

Despite constant pressure from the US and its allies, between 1988 and 2010 Burma's armed forces consolidated their grip on the country. Ostracised by the West, Burma turned to China and other countries for arms, trade and diplomatic support. In terms of both internal controls and external relations, the military government became stronger than it had ever been.

No foreign government or international organisation can take credit for the reform program introduced by President Thein Sein in 2011. However, the Obama Administration's more measured approach to Burma since 2009 placed the US in a position where it could respond promptly and positively to this unexpected turn of events. Since Hillary Clinton's successful visit to Burma in 2011, several steps have been taken by Washington to encourage the reform process and develop closer bilateral ties.

This shift in US policy has been widely welcomed, but there is no agreement on what actually prompted the Secretary of State's visit. It has been variously described as a calculated move to leave behind the discredited policies of the Bush era, an effort to boost Thein Sein's standing and encourage the domestic reform process, an attempt by the Obama Administration to re-engage with the Asia–Pacific region, and a ploy by the US to score points in its strategic competition with China. Burma's shadowy defence relationship with North Korea may have also been a consideration.

It is likely that, to a greater or lesser degree, all these factors contributed to the decision to make the visit, and to pursue closer relations between Washington and Naypyidaw.

Nothing to do with the relationship between the US and Burma, however, can be taken for granted. It is still fragile, and the process of rapprochement could easily be derailed, either by developments inside Burma or by the actions of anti-regime elements outside it. The signs for improvement in the relationship over the longer term are encouraging, but all involved need to be patient. They will have to accept that, while the US and other members of the international community can help Burma in many ways, only the Burmese themselves can decide their future.

Author's Note

After the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by most countries, the United Nations (UN) and other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990. In this paper the better-known names, for example 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar', 'Rangoon' instead of 'Yangon', and 'Irrawaddy' instead of 'Ayeyarwady', have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Army' and 'Myanmar Police Force'.

The armed forces have ruled Burma since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by elections in 2010. The resulting national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011. Power was formally transferred from the SPDC to a new government in March that year.

After the UK sent military forces into the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma in 1885, Rangoon became the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built town of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 320 kilometres north of Rangoon, as the seat of Burma's government. When they appear in this paper, the terms 'Rangoon regime', or in some cases simply 'Rangoon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Burma's armed forces. In recent years this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Burma.

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1. Introduction

When it rains, collect water

(Old Burmese proverb, quoted by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking in Naypyidaw at the conclusion of her visit to Burma, 1 December 2011)

For 20 years, the United States (US) pursued a policy toward Burma that was never going to achieve its stated aims. Indeed, Washington's unremitting hostility to the military government in Rangoon (and, after 2005, the new capital of Naypyidaw) was in many respects quite counter-productive. It also flew in the face of strategic developments in the wider Asia-Pacific region. No foreign government or international organisation can take credit for the wide-ranging reform program introduced by President Thein Sein after his inauguration in March 2011. As demonstrated by Hillary Clinton's successful visit to Naypyidaw that December, however, the Obama Administration's more considered approach to Burma's 'fiendishly complex' problems placed Washington in a much better position to take advantage of this unexpected paradigm shift.¹ So far, the signs of a rapprochement are encouraging, and hopes are high, but both sides will need to put behind them two decades of threats, insults and mutual recriminations.

2. US–Burma Relations after the 1988 Uprising

In 1988, after the Burmese armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising and took back direct political power, Ronald Reagan suspended the US's small aid program in Burma, imposed an arms embargo and introduced a range of economic sanctions. Under the next three US presidents these measures were progressively strengthened, through five laws and four presidential directives.² To ease implementation of the latter, Burma was formally declared 'an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States'.³ By the time Barak Obama moved into the White House in January 2009, US policy toward Burma was tougher than that against North Korea, despite the fact that Pyongyang was clearly guilty of far worse human rights abuses than Naypyidaw and posed a much greater strategic threat.⁴

During President George W. Bush's eight years in office, Burma was the focus of harsh criticism by senior US officials. In 2003, for example, Secretary of State Colin Powell referred publicly to 'the thugs who now rule Burma'.⁵ The same year, one influential Senator told Congress that Burma was 'a clear and present danger to itself and to its neighbours'.⁶ In 2005, Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice labelled Burma 'an outpost of tyranny' to which the US must help bring freedom.⁷ In President Bush's 2006 State of the Union speech, immediately after references to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Burma was ranked alongside Syria, Iran and North Korea as places where 'the demands of justice, and the peace of the world, require their freedom'.⁸ In 2008, the president re-stated his firm commitment to help the Burmese people 'in their struggle to free themselves from the regime's tyranny'.⁹

In stark contrast, official US commentary about Burma's diverse and scattered opposition movement was invariably positive and supportive. Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in particular was lauded by the Bush Administration — including the First Lady — and by high profile members of Congress from both parties. Indeed, during the Bush era, the US's Burma policy was heavily indebted to her known and perceived views.¹⁰ According to eminent Burma-watcher David Steinberg, 'No living foreigner has shaped contemporary United States policy toward a single country more than Aung San Suu Kyi'.¹¹ At the same time, US officials openly praised Burmese groups dedicated to the overthrow of the military government. Support was provided to exiled activists through organisations like the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy. One Congressman even hinted publicly at US military aid to anti-regime insurgents.¹²

There is no doubt that the widespread and persistent human rights abuses perpetrated by Burma's military government during and after 1988 aroused genuine outrage in the White House, in Congress and among the American public. These sentiments, encouraged by non-government organisations, activist groups and lobbyists, were shared by many other governments and communities around the world. Even so, it is hard to escape the conclusion that another reason why Burma was singled out for exemplary punishment by the US was because policy makers in Washington felt that there were few critical national interests at stake. After the uprising, Burma was seen as isolated, weak and of little commercial or strategic importance. Due in large part to its decades-old neutrality in foreign affairs and its autarkic socialist economic policies Burma had no major friends or allies. It was thus deemed a relatively cost-free target.

It is probably also relevant that, during his two terms in office, President Bush faced major problems of his own, which not only demanded good relations with Congress but

also periodic repairs to the US's public image. Some prominent Aung San Suu Kyi supporters held important positions on Capitol Hill. Alienating them would have caused problems for the president in other areas of foreign and defence policy, not least in his prosecution of the long-running wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, after revelations of abuses like the mistreatment of prisoners by US personnel at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility in Cuba, Bush needed publicly to demonstrate the US's continuing concern for human rights.¹³ Burma's undisguised and almost universally despised military dictatorship gave him ample opportunity to do so.

Whatever the motives behind its approach, the Bush Administration was soon reminded that economic sanctions are at best a clumsy diplomatic tool and at worst a counterproductive one. They are easy to invoke but difficult to remove. Unless applied very carefully they can miss their intended targets and harm the innocent. It is also difficult accurately and objectively to measure their impact. Under pressure to justify its support for economic sanctions, Burma's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) has claimed that such measures have not greatly hurt the Burmese people, but this argument is difficult to sustain in the light of the available evidence.¹⁴ For example, the State Department calculated that in 2003 up to 60,000 garment workers — mainly women — lost their jobs after US sanctions against Burma were tightened that year.¹⁵ The Tatmadaw's senior officers, by contrast, lived privileged lives and were insulated from the kinds of hardship suffered by the general population.

In any case, unless sanctions have wide international backing, targeted governments can turn elsewhere for arms, trade and diplomatic support. One of the Burmese government's first responses to US and European Union sanctions was to develop strong bilateral ties with China. It improved relations with a wide range of other countries, including members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the former Eastern bloc. They were more than willing to fill the gaps created by the West's sanctions regime. Also, due in part to their piecemeal implementation, some of the US measures contained loopholes. All these factors severely undercut their effectiveness. When the Obama Administration reviewed US policy toward Burma in 2009, it concluded that sanctions were at best 'modest inconveniences' to the military regime.¹⁶ The French Foreign Minister went even further, stating that, with regard to Burma, 'sanctions are useless'.¹⁷

Washington continued to pursue its hard line policy even after the importance of Burma's geostrategic position and role became more apparent. Naypyidaw's burgeoning relationship with Beijing, for example, significantly altered the region's strategic environment, in part by exacerbating Indian fears of 'encirclement' by China and its 'allies'. Courted by both major powers, Naypyidaw was able to play China and India off against each other, to Burma's considerable advantage. By joining ASEAN in 1997, Burma became a greater factor in regional diplomacy, much to the discomfort of the US. From around 2003, Burma's military ties to North Korea raised the spectre of nuclear and missile proliferation.¹⁸ Due to its vast energy resources, Burma was a major factor in its neighbours' economic development. It was also a player in international efforts to combat transnational crime, such as narcotics and people trafficking.

Largely because of its uncompromising attitude toward Burma, the US found it difficult to play a constructive role on these kinds of issues. The primary aim of the hard line policy was to isolate and punish Naypyidaw but its practical outcome was that, in some respects, Washington effectively isolated itself.

The US's tough approach toward Burma illustrates the danger of formulating foreign policies without first objectively assessing their likely impact.¹⁹ While it was prompted by several factors, the Bush Administration's highly principled stand against the military government was applauded by many in the US and further afield. It sent the generals a strong diplomatic message. However, it was pursued in the face of growing evidence that such a hostile attitude would not achieve the US's stated objectives in Burma. For many years this was nothing less than regime change, achieved if possible through

acceptance of the 1990 election result, which was a landslide for the opposition parties. Later, US aims were listed as national reconciliation, progress toward a genuine democracy, the release of political prisoners — including Aung San Suu Kyi — and an end to human rights abuses. As the record shows, none of these goals were achieved before Barak Obama's election.

Indeed, despite constant pressure from the US and its allies, Burma's military government not only consolidated its grip on the country but became stronger than it had ever been. The punitive measures and harsh rhetoric aimed at the regime aroused the generals' strong nationalist sentiments and isolationist tendencies, and strengthened their resolve to resist what they saw as unjustified interference in the country's internal affairs. Foreign pressures helped justify their bunker mentality, and made them even more fearful of political, economic and social change. Potential moderates — admittedly, a relative term — within the regime were denied political space. Fearful of US and United Nations (UN) military intervention, the regime also expanded and modernised its armed forces.²⁰ Hard evidence is lacking, but it probably also decided to try and acquire ballistic missiles and may have even considered development of a nuclear weapon.²¹

Granted, those countries that favoured a policy of 'constructive engagement' with the military government did not enjoy much diplomatic success either. China was closest to Burma after 1988, but even Beijing struggled to influence the attitudes of Senior General Than Shwe and other officers in the ruling military council. ASEAN too was unable to make much of an impact on the regime's thinking although, after Cyclone Nargis struck Burma in 2008, ASEAN and the UN were entrusted to manage the delivery of foreign aid — including US aid — to the disaster victims. Throughout this period, the government, armed forces and country were conflated in the minds of the ruling military hierarchy. Thus a threat to one was seen as a threat to all. Preservation of Burma's stability, unity and independence — as they were defined by the generals — was placed above all other considerations.

3. Bilateral Relations Since 2009

Shortly after President Obama's inauguration in January 2009, the administration undertook a comprehensive review of US policy towards Burma. More than its predecessor, it seemed to understand that there were few practical ways for the international community to influence an authoritarian government that was deeply committed to its self-appointed role in national affairs, did not appear to care for the welfare of its own people, did not observe international norms and was protected by powerful friends. In that sense, Burma was like North Korea or Cuba. President Obama's new policy of 'pragmatic engagement', announced in September that year, acknowledged this harsh reality. It took full account of the situation in Burma and the US's experience to that date, and posited what seemed to be more achievable goals.

In explaining the new policy line, senior officials were at pains to stress that the US's fundamental aims had not changed. Washington still wanted a unified, peaceful, prosperous and democratic Burma. It still called for the release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who by that time had spent about 12 years under house arrest. The best way of pursuing all these goals, however, was seen to be through quiet diplomacy, in particular a direct, senior-level dialogue. Recognising the political realities — in Washington as much as in Naypyidaw — the full range of economic sanctions was kept in place, as were travel bans on senior Burmese officials and their business 'cronies', pending concrete steps by the military government to address the US's concerns. Nor was public condemnation of the regime ruled out, should the circumstances warrant it.

This approach was founded on a hard-headed appreciation of the military regime's intensely nationalistic mindset and deep sense of insecurity. The Obama Administration acknowledged the challenges in formulating an effective engagement policy that remained focused on democratic reforms, but was also sustainable and convincing to a regime that had long perceived such concerns as a means to remove it from power. Public expectations were deliberately kept low. Senior US officials repeatedly warned that engagement with Burma was going to be a long, slow and step-by-step process.²² They were under no illusions about the nature of the military government and the difficulty of shifting it from its firmly-held positions on issues such as Burma's 2008 constitution, which guaranteed the Tatmadaw's control of the country, even after the managed election of a hybrid civilian-military parliament in 2010.

The new policy did not lose sight of the US's principles and national interests, but it lacked the hubris which had characterised the Bush Administration. Rather than seeking to impose change on Burma from the outside, the Obama policy placed much greater emphasis on the Burmese people themselves deciding their political future, and attempted to encourage positive movement in that direction. Also, the US openly embraced ASEAN as a partner in its attempts to bring about reforms in Burma. In July 2009, the US signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a step the Bush Administration had refused to take, largely because of Burma's ASEAN membership. The Obama Administration hoped that, by coordinating their policies, the US and regional countries — including non-ASEAN states like China — could have a greater impact on the thinking in Naypyidaw.

Thanks to this more nuanced approach, Burma became much less of an obstacle to the development of US relations with other Asia-Pacific countries. However, as far as a constructive dialogue with Naypyidaw was concerned, the Obama Administration's hopes were sadly misplaced. In 2010, after several unsuccessful US attempts to engage with the military regime, the State Department quietly acknowledged that this aspect of the new policy had failed. Activist groups and anti-regime campaigners in Congress were quick to remind the president that they had predicted such a result. They

demanded an immediate return to the hard line policies of the Bush era. Yet, the administration held its nerve. Behind the scenes, US officials quietly continued their efforts to engage the Burmese government. In 2011, this approach was vindicated.²³

That year, a number of statements by Burma's new president seemed to herald a more open-minded and conciliatory approach to government. Aung San Suu Kyi expressed her belief that Thein Sein was genuine in his wish for national reconciliation and incremental reform, and agreed to work with him to achieve these goals. A range of measures was introduced, including one that permitted Aung San Suu Kyi and other members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to contest by-elections in April 2012 for 45 parliamentary seats.²⁴ Hundreds of political prisoners have been released, restrictions on the news media and internet use have been eased, labour laws have been amended and curbs on the development of civil society have been reduced. The government has also made efforts to negotiate ceasefires with those armed ethnic groups still in the field. To date, Karen and Shan guerrillas have agreed to discussions, but Tatmadaw operations against the Kachin are continuing.²⁵

Despite the claims of some politicians and activists, these and other reforms appear to have been prompted largely by internal factors.²⁶ Around 2003, the military leadership seemed to come to the conclusion that it needed to adapt to changing circumstances. Not to do so would see the regime face increasing internal problems while Burma fell even further behind its regional neighbours. The Tatmadaw's continued dominance and the country's future could both be assured, it was felt, by following a seven-point plan to a 'disciplined democracy'.²⁷ This process was given added impetus by the 'saffron revolution' in 2007. Than Shwe's retirement, Thein Sein's elevation to the presidency and Aung San Suu Kyi's willingness to participate in a reform program were also important. They doubtless figured in the regime's calculations, but there is no evidence that the momentous changes seen in Burma since March 2011 were in direct response to the policies of any foreign government or international organisation.²⁸

After decades of broken promises and failed initiatives, most Burma-watchers are being cautious in their assessments of President Thein Sein's reform program. A hard core of activists and their supporters have dismissed recent developments as part of a massive confidence trick by an entrenched military regime.²⁹ They distrust Thein Sein's motives and question Aung San Suu Kyi's judgement in joining — and thus helping to legitimise — a deeply flawed political process. A few have even called for harsher sanctions against Naypyidaw.³⁰ Most analysts share the concerns expressed about foreign governments and organisations acting with indecent haste, but the sceptics are clearly in the minority. A consensus is steadily building around the world, in both official and unofficial circles, that, within self-imposed limits, the reform process is real and gaining momentum. Most observers believe that, even if it should falter, it would be difficult for the Burmese government or armed forces to turn the clock back to 2010.

President's Thein Sein's objective — at least in the short term — seems to be something along Vietnamese or even Chinese lines, namely a prosperous and independent country with a measure of individual freedom, exercised within the framework of a constitution that enshrines the central role of — in Burma's case — the armed forces. Indonesia's recent history also offers some useful lessons. For her part, Aung San Suu Kyi is facing the challenge posed to all popular national leaders, of making the transition from political icon to effective politician. For the time being, she seems prepared to work with Thein Sein within the current political framework. This is a pragmatic strategy but it carries risks. It has already upset some of her supporters. It will also be difficult to sustain. Pressure is already building for Burma's 'disciplined democracy' to be replaced by a genuinely representative system of government.

4. The US Response to Thein Sein's Reforms

Had the Obama Administration reverted to the policies of the Bush era, as many urged it to do, it would not have been in a position to respond as promptly and positively as it did to the diplomatic openings that emerged in 2011. Hillary Clinton's visit to Burma that December — the first by a Secretary of State for more than half a century — was a major turning point in the bilateral relationship.³¹

During her visit, it was announced that the US would loosen its restrictions on United Nations Development Program, Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Bank activities in Burma. Washington would also investigate options for bilateral cooperation. Possible areas for assistance included narcotics control, education, health, legal reform, and broader capacity building measures.³² In January 2012, the US announced that it planned to upgrade its diplomatic representation in Burma to ambassador level.³³ A few members of Congress are of the view that the aid and concessions being offered to Burma are 'grossly premature', but the proposals outlined by the Secretary of State have received broad bi-partisan support.³⁴ Most members of Congress seem to agree with her that 'history teaches us to be cautious' but there are 'some grounds for encouragement'.³⁵

Aung San Suu Kyi's role in this process has been crucial. Before Hillary Clinton's visit to Burma, Barack Obama spoke to the opposition leader by phone. While such a call might be considered provocative, in diplomatic terms, it was later made public by the US side, probably for domestic political reasons. Had Aung San Suu Kyi opposed the visit, however, or refused to meet with the Secretary of State, there is little chance that it would have gone ahead. In the event, the meeting between Hillary Clinton and Aung San Suu Kyi opened the way for a stream of official US visitors to Burma, including some of the former regime's strongest critics. All made well publicised calls on 'The Lady'. Doubtless with her blessing, they have since expressed their readiness to consider a relaxation of the US's hard line, including the possible removal of sanctions. This will take time, however, as the various measures imposed against Burma since 1988 are complex and often inter-locked. Some will require formal Congressional action.

In any case, the US has emphasised that it will wait for evidence of substantive reform in Burma before taking this important step, as part of a graduated process under which Washington will 'match action for action'.³⁶ The first major test for both sides was the April 2012 by-elections. While there were a number of irregularities, they were later pronounced by key opposition groups to be generally free and fair.³⁷ In a landslide for the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi and 42 other party candidates were elected to national and regional assemblies.³⁸ Hillary Clinton has since announced several additional steps in the development of the relationship.³⁹ Further progress is likely, but not assured. Washington is watching closely to see if Thein Sein keeps other promises he made during the Secretary of State's visit, relating to such issues as the release of political prisoners and the cessation of defence links with North Korea.

The dramatic shift in US policy has been widely welcomed, but even experienced Burma-watchers have been unable to agree on what actually prompted Hillary Clinton's visit. It was variously described as a calculated move to leave behind the discredited policies of the Bush era, an effort to boost Thein Sein's standing and encourage the domestic reform process, a gesture of support to Aung San Suu Kyi, part of a broader attempt by the Obama Administration to re-engage with the Asia-Pacific region — as outlined in the president's address to the Australian parliament that November⁴⁰ — and a ploy by the US to score points in its strategic competition with China. Burma's

shadowy defence relationship with North Korea has also been of concern. It is likely that, to a greater or lesser degree, all these factors contributed to the decision to make the visit, but the China and North Korean angles warrant closest examination.

Some commentators have claimed that the US wishes to re-establish relations with Burma in order to counter Beijing's influence, even to help 'contain' China. It is true, the US is now much more sensitive to China's important role in Burma, but as noted above Washington's interests there are wide ranging and go well beyond Cold War notions of great power balances and communist containment. Similarly, Beijing may not be entirely comfortable with the idea of the US developing a closer relationship with its prickly southern neighbour, but it knows that Naypyidaw values Burma's independence very highly and would not allow itself to become the puppet of any major power. Indeed, China and the US — and other regional powers like India — share an interest in a stable, prosperous and independent Burma. There is even some evidence to suggest that China has long been encouraging Naypyidaw to reduce tensions with Washington.⁴¹

During the Clinton visit, Burma's relationship with North Korea and Naypyidaw's reported ambition to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) received little media coverage, but both subjects were high on the US agenda. Washington appears to have accepted 'strong assurances' from President Thein Sein that Burma will observe the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and sever all military ties with North Korea.⁴² If this promise is kept, it would have a direct impact on any Burmese plans to buy or build ballistic missiles — the WMD program identified by the US as being of greatest immediate concern.⁴³ Naypyidaw has also undertaken to work with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on accession to the Additional Protocol. Signing this instrument, which allows for IAEA inspections of suspect facilities, should help settle US and international fears about the possibility of a Burmese nuclear program.

5. Troubled Past, Uncertain Future

The US has many reasons to establish a good working relationship with Burma. Current indications are that this is beginning to develop but nothing can be taken for granted. Both sides remain wary of each other and will embrace new initiatives cautiously. The process could be derailed by any number of issues. The Obama Administration seems to have decided that the best way of encouraging reform is for Thein Sein and his supporters to succeed in their efforts to reshape Burma, and is taking steps to assist in this process. However, US policy over the past 23 years has left a bitter legacy in Burma. The US is still regarded with suspicion — even hostility — by some members of the government, the parliament and the armed forces. If Washington identifies too closely with a particular reform program, or gets too close to any individual in Burma, then it could harm their prospects. This applies as much to Thein Sein as it does to Aung San Suu Kyi.

In other ways too, there are difficult times ahead. After decades of hardship and disappointment, the Burmese people are now hopeful of genuine reforms and an improvement in their standard of living. Popular expectations are rising. However, Thein Sein has to balance competing political pressures, including from conservatives opposed to his current approach. At the same time, he has to take account of Burma's limited ability to implement and absorb change.⁴⁴ The reform process is unlikely to go as far and as fast as many — both inside Burma and outside it — would like. Demands for a revision of the 2008 constitution are bound to increase, including from Aung San Suu Kyi, testing the government's resilience and resolve.⁴⁵ Problems with the ethnic minorities will continue to pose serious challenges. In the event of perceived instability or disunity, the Tatmadaw has the legal and physical means to take back direct political control.

In these circumstances, it will not be difficult for Naypyidaw's foreign critics — both in the US and elsewhere — to point to issues of continuing concern. They have already raised doubts about the sincerity of Thein Sein's reform program and questioned the US's wisdom in engaging with a government that has yet to deliver substantive reforms, or make sweeping structural changes. Continuing military operations against ethnic armed groups like the Kachin will inevitably bring renewed reports of human rights abuses and are likely to spark protests.⁴⁶ Military officers and civilian officials used to wielding unbridled authority over a cowed population will not change their behaviour overnight. Corruption, discrimination and the abuse of power are now deeply embedded in Burmese society. Even if Thein Sein had a firmer support base and far greater resources at his disposal, he would not be able to satisfy everyone.

There is much to be concerned about in Burma but, unsurprisingly, Naypyidaw feels it is being held to a standard higher than that applied to other regional countries. The undemocratic constitution, the rigged 2010 elections and other abuses in Burma have been highlighted while similar developments elsewhere have been paid little attention. Also, as Naypyidaw has satisfied some US demands, it has been presented with other conditions which must be met before bilateral relations can be fully restored. One key Congressman has stated that US sanctions will not be lifted until Naypyidaw has resolved its conflicts with the ethnic communities.⁴⁷ Yet this is perhaps the most intractable problem facing Naypyidaw — and one that has bedevilled Burmese politics since the country's independence in 1948. If also made a precondition, revision of the 2008 constitution would be a major obstacle to the restoration of bilateral ties.

There is a risk that, if the goalposts keep moving, or Washington fails to deliver on any of its promises, Thein Sein's government will question the US's bona fides. It could also

become more vulnerable to those in Burma opposed to rapprochement with Washington, and to aspects of the reconciliation and reform program.

It may not be a very satisfying conclusion to all those who have waited decades for the promise of a brighter future in Burma, and worked hard to achieve it, but the US and other states with a close interest in that alluring but deeply troubled country will need to be patient. Assuming that he remains in office long enough to make a sustained effort, the task facing Thein Sein is daunting. After more than 50 years of brutal, inept and ideologically distorted military rule, there is hardly a single sector of Burma's government, economy and civil society that is not begging for reform and desperate for financial, technical and other kinds of assistance. Some steps can be taken quickly and relatively painlessly, but the depth and complexity of the challenges faced by Burma are such that fundamental reform will take considerable time, effort and resources.

General Ne Win, the architect of the 1962 coup which first brought the armed forces to power, once remarked that 'no foreigner can ever be a friend of Burma'.⁴⁸ Yet the US, other countries and international organisations can assist in the reform process. For the time being, the aims of the Burmese government, the opposition movement and the international community appear to be broadly aligned. As Aung San Suu Kyi told the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2012, this offers 'a rare and extremely precious opportunity'.⁴⁹ Even so, any foreign aid will need to be carefully calibrated and coordinated, lest it overwhelm levels of political tolerance in various circles in Naypyidaw, and the country's capacity — bureaucratic, technical and physical — to manage the assistance provided. For, if the record of the past 23 years teaches anything, it is that only the Burmese can decide their future, and they are determined to do so in their own way and in their own time.

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