



# “Smart U.S. Policy” Toward Myanmar/Burma: Timing, Logic, and Impact

by Xiaolin Guo

*United States Senator Jim Webb had three missions during his visit to Myanmar/Burma in August 2009: a meeting with the Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (and representatives of her political party), and separately with General Than Shwe (the current head of the Union of Myanmar), in addition to securing the release of John Yettaw (an American citizen arrested by the Burmese authorities after having spent two nights without permission at Aung San Suu Kyi's guarded house). Despite mixed reactions from different camps, the trip was widely regarded as signaling the beginning of a policy shift in the U.S. away from isolation toward engagement. Early November saw another high profile visit to Myanmar/Burma by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State in charge of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kurt Campbell, who met with the Myanmar PM General Thein Sein and other ministers in Nay Pyi Taw, and separately in Yangon held talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and other stakeholders. His trip involved a more direct approach in terms of engagement, in tandem with a more articulated policy by the U.S. government. These events attracted media coverage, and prompted speculation about where the change in U.S. policy vis-à-vis Myanmar/Burma would lead. This policy brief seeks to explain the rationale of the policy review and the outcome to be expected.*

## Why the Sudden Change of Heart?

The current policy review vis-à-vis Myanmar/Burma is part of the ongoing U.S. foreign policy adjustment that ensued with the entrance into the White House of President Barack Obama, whose administration professed to abandon highly ideological approaches in favor of pragmatism in handling foreign relations. The move followed an announcement by the Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, in Jakarta, in February 2009, where she practically acknowledged in public the failure of economic sanctions in bringing about the desired results. Naturally, compared to the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the issue of peace in the Middle East, U.S. policy towards Myanmar/Burma hardly warrants urgency. More to the point, perhaps, a policy review in the case of Myanmar/Burma that finds itself under repressive military rule poses a bigger ideological challenge to politicians. It is essentially a moral issue, rather than a strategic one.

Prior to the present policy review, there had already been some talk assessing the merits and effects of a string of sanctions imposed by the U.S. and EU governments and others over the years. Increasingly, it had been acknowledged among scholars, think-tanks, as well as politicians—though far from unanimously—that the sanctions policy had not only failed to weaken the military's hold on power, but by prolonging the conditions of underdevelopment and poverty, it had worsened, rather than improved, the living conditions of ordinary citizens, in particular those of rural residents. Meanwhile, the general elections announced by

the military government are drawing near. By now, it has been widely acknowledged that the military is going to be part of the political transition in Myanmar/Burma. However, the result of the general elections is unlikely to be accepted by the U.S. and EU governments without the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi. To remove this snag, a speedy policy review seems to be imperative.

In parallel with these developments, there is a growing awareness of the role of China. Being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China has over the years repeatedly blocked moves to put the issue of Myanmar/Burma on the table of the UNSC for discussion. As a rising power in the region, China has been called upon to pressure the ruling generals into adopting political reform. The deal made by China National Petroleum Corporation with Myanmar's Ministry of Energy in 2009 to build crude oil and natural gas pipelines from Kyaukryu to Kunming provoked much media speculation centering on not just the role of China's relationship with Myanmar/Burma, but also the growing influence of China in the region. On the eve of President Obama's trip to Asia in November 2009, the White House made it known (as reported by AFP) that the U.S. government is “not going to let the Burmese tail wag the ASEAN dog.” The United States' deepening ties with ASEAN are, in part, prompted by a specific concern with China's deepening links with Southeast Asia. This China factor argument conveniently legitimizes politicians' calls for a policy review regarding Myanmar/Burma.



## Contents of the “Smart U.S. Policy”

The “smart U.S. policy” currently pursued by the Obama administration is a policy of *pragmatic engagement* with the government of Myanmar/Burma, the central part of which consists of high-level dialogue with government representatives. It started in late September 2009 on the occasion when the Myanmar PM General Thein Sein attended the 64th session of the UN General Assembly in New York. Another high-level meeting followed in Nay Pyi Taw during the trip of the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Kurt Campbell, a month later. At the APEC summit with the leaders of all ASEAN countries in Singapore (November 15, 2009), President Obama brought up the issue of releasing Aung San Suu Kyi directly to the Myanmar PM, who appeared in a group picture with other leaders.

By adopting a calculated engagement policy, the U.S. government has in effect abandoned its old rhetoric of regime change. Yet, engagement should not be understood as the goal of U.S. policy. It is rather the means, and to put it differently, the engagement policy serves to open an opportunity for the U.S. government to facilitate change in Myanmar/Burma by making the country function properly in the short term. The fundamental and long-term goal meanwhile remains unchanged, that is, “real progress on democracy and human rights.”

Lifting sanctions is not part of the deal, at least not for now, because such a move would, as Mr. Campbell testified before the subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “send the wrong signal to those who have been striving for so many years for democracy in Burma.” Similarly, there is no promise of improvement in bilateral relations, unless the Myanmar government takes meaningful action deemed to address the “core concerns” of the U.S. government. These “core concerns” range from, first and foremost, “the unconditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political prisoners; an end to conflicts with ethnic minority groups; accountability of those responsible for human rights violations; and the initiation of a genuine dialogue between the Burmese government, the democratic opposition, and the ethnic minorities on a shared vision for the way forward in Burma.”

The degree of satisfaction in addressing these “core concerns” may in the end determine the response from Washington to the outcome of the general elections. Right now the date for the general elections has not been made public; nor have the election laws been promulgated. Under the circumstances, the U.S. government expects, without being too specific, the broad participation by the population, including the people currently detained. Expectations of professionalism in the upcoming general elections are, on the other hand, being played down. While insisting

that the Americans “are not setting or dictating any conditions,” the U.S. Secretary of State urged the ASEAN nations, and Myanmar/Burma’s neighbors like China and India, to play a role in ensuring that the vote is “free, fair and credible.”

## Implications

The engagement policy adopted by the U.S. government may, in fact, be seen as a move away from a role as a force for change to a role as a facilitator of change. This approach aims at engaging the military generals in order to move things forward inside the country, while maintaining support for Aung San Suu Kyi and all alternative political forces, including the NLD and ethnic minorities. A priority in the U.S. engagement policy is to facilitate national reconciliation. Crucial to the task is to bring Aung San Suu Kyi back to the center stage. Her role is seen by the U.S. government as important not only for uniting the pro-democracy forces inside and outside the country, but also for building an alliance with the ethnic minorities that constitute over one third of the country’s population. Ethnicity has been a primary and persistent challenge to nation building in Myanmar/Burma, and without a solution satisfactory to all parties a meaningful democratic process remains unattainable.

The forthcoming involvement of external forces in the process is not going to be without repercussions. For one, the U.S. entering the scene is likely to have an impact, though not necessarily decisive, on the balance of power in the region. Geopolitics is the rule of game. With the shift of focus in U.S. foreign policy, a Myanmar/Burma bordering on China and India—at the same time being a member of ASEAN—becomes overnight a center of attention. The ASEAN countries and India have responded positively to the U.S. engagement policy, with anticipation of a change in power relations in the region. China has too, to a degree, but with reservations—while welcoming dialogue and change in Myanmar/Burma, China continues to focus its attention on regional stability. How the world power is going to cooperate with regional powers in the business of engaging Myanmar/Burma remains to be seen.

Dynamics of international politics constantly reflect and interact with concerns revolving around values and/or interests, or concerns for achieving a balance between values and interests, especially in the case of the United States, a nation keen on projecting an image of itself as a value-based society. By adopting the “smart policy” to engage Myanmar/Burma, the U.S. government appears to be shifting the balance from a predominantly value-based approach to foreign relations to one that is relatively more interest-based. On a macro-level, this shift has more to do



with U.S. standing in the world, rather than with anything strategically vital to U.S. national interests. This should, by no means, detract from the U.S. interest in areas such as counter-narcotics, health, and environmental protection, as well as the recovery of the remains of those servicemen missing in action during World War II.

All in all, the engagement policy marks not a change in the goal of the U.S. government, but it changes the way in which that goal is pursued. Whether it is for rational or moral reasons, the China factor matters in the current policy shift. The changing dynamics are bound to ease some of the pressure on the government of Myanmar/Burma, and inevitably put a smirk on the faces of neighboring countries such as India, who sees China as its biggest rival in the region and with whom it has lingering territorial disputes. China is yet to adjust its position in response to what is happening along its southwestern border, and any adjustment on its part may ultimately reflect, or indeed reflect upon, U.S.-China relations. As Myanmar/Burma is about to change, the region is adapting, and adaptation to change by different players will continue to interact with the dynamics of international politics.

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