

## Burma in Strategic Perspective: Renewing Discussion of Options

by Lewis M. Stern, George Thomas, and Julia A. Thompson

### Key Points

**U.S. policy has sought to nudge the junta in Burma toward a more reasonable approach to its dilemma, either in the form of managing Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest in a semitransparent fashion, allowing the release of imprisoned prodemocracy activists and the National League for Democracy cadre, agreeing to visits from United Nations special representatives, or accepting regional advice and guidance at critical moments. But Burma is a minuet dramatizing the "one step forward, two steps backward" description of progress. Even as the administration of President Barack Obama commits itself in principle to reaching out to Burma, events conspire against another effort to coax the junta toward a reasonable, regionally acceptable solution to its hard edge.**

**Exigencies occasioned by Cyclone Nargis compelled a limited "opening" in the aftermath of the humanitarian crisis, but these were no watershed events signaling a more reasonable posture by the junta toward its neighbors, toward the West, or toward the United States. Nevertheless, they did represent instances of change, and they did provide the foundation for regrouping to determine whether there was a basis for altering some U.S. tactical approaches to Burma. The question is, to what extent do these slight changes represent a real basis for confidence in forward movement?**

U.S. policy toward Burma has kept attention riveted on democracy, on nudging the Burmese military junta toward a commitment to elections, on holding the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to high standards regarding human rights and religious freedom, and on galvanizing regional and global support for a policy trajectory that edges the country closer to a moment when free speech, assembly, and freedom from fear dislodge the stranglehold of the military dictatorship that has dominated Burma since the early 1990s.

U.S. policy has worked to keep Aung San Suu Kyi situated in the forefront of the effort to leverage the junta into compliance with a roadmap-like way of moving out from under the long and costly impasse, and it has featured the role of the long suffering United Nations (UN) special representative position that seeks to keep the region and other players interested in resolving the Burma conundrum.

Indeed, U.S. policy has been successful in getting the Burmese leadership to accept a manageable bundle of graduated steps toward counternarcotics cooperation, and has consistently focused on urging the junta toward permitting steps aimed at suppressing opium production. U.S. policy has urged the junta to allow Red Cross observers into the country, and has focused on convincing the Burmese leadership to stick to a commitment to writing a new constitution, enabling free and unfettered electoral competition on a "level

playing field," and gradually transitioning to a system premised on civilian rule.

U.S. policy has looked for ways of leveraging the influence of players (especially Suu Kyi), and sought to deploy economic sanctions as a blunt-edged instrument against junta dominance; some of the targeted sanctions against the assets belonging to the top leaders and cronies and state-owned enterprises have had a much more measurable effect than the broader sanctions. The United States has also focused on utilizing rules governing visas and U.S. legislation to constrain and confine the junta leadership. Additionally, Washington has sought to rely on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and "frontline states" such as Thailand to wield influence and deploy effective moral suasion as a means of pushing the junta to an inclusive constitutional drafting process, responsiveness to Western and regional concerns regarding Suu Kyi's health and well-being, and ever more liberal possibilities regarding the participation in the process of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

It seems that the missing ingredient is a policy that focuses on the people of Burma, and one that is prepared to take advantage of the circumstances of late 2007, when the citizenry reacted against an unannounced decision of the SPDC to remove fuel subsidies, which caused the price of diesel and petrol to suddenly rise as much as 66 percent

and the price of compressed natural gas for buses to increase fivefold in less than a week. Students and opposition political activists led antiregime demonstrations that the junta reacted to quickly and harshly with a range of arrests and detentions. Beginning in mid-September 2008, Buddhist monks led the conflict until a renewed government crackdown on September 26, 2008.

At various times, elements of all of these aspects of U.S. policy and regional involvement have been deployed in an attempt to nudge the junta toward a more reasonable approach to its dilemma, either in the form of managing Suu Kyi's house arrest in a semitransparent fashion, allowing the release of imprisoned prodemocracy activists and NLD cadre, agreeing to visits from UN special representatives, or accepting regional advice and guidance at critical moments (such as in the midst of attempts to define a role for regional and U.S. aid mechanisms in the context of global response to the devastation of Cyclone Nargis).

The extremely frustrating pendulum swing between positive moments of optimism and reversals that seem to wreak havoc on the possibility of progress on Burma continues to describe the events involving this challenge. Alongside of efforts by the administration of Barack Obama to review Burma policy and devise ways of signaling the potential for forward motion, events conspire against efforts to persuade the junta to alter its preferred course of action. Suu Kyi and two companions were sentenced by a government-run court on August 11, 2009, to 18 months under house arrest for allowing an American supporter who entered her heavily guarded villa uninvited to stay for several days. John W. Yettaw, the 54-year-old American who swam across a lake to get to Suu Kyi's home, was sentenced to 7 years in prison, including 4 years of hard labor.<sup>1</sup> Senator James Webb's visit to Burma, talks with the leadership, and ability to secure the release of Yettaw have breathed life into the possibility of devising

a more positive level of engagement between Burma and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

## After Care

In the aftermath of Joint Task Force (JTF) Caring Response, the U.S. response to the impact of Nargis on the Irrawaddy Delta, and in the face of bolder regime moves against Suu Kyi en route to the 2010 election, we need to explore the dividends that might spring from continued efforts to prod the junta toward a more reasonable posture.

U.S. policy has stipulated the need for progress in national reconciliation, particularly in the form of a dialogue between the SPDC and Suu Kyi. The situation was changing in slow and modest ways. The SPDC entered into talks with Suu Kyi in October 2000, who was released from 20 months of house arrest in May 2002 and was allowed to undertake limited political activities. The Burmese responded favorably during initial discussions on POW/MIA recovery missions, and in 2002 it was thought that they would agree to restarting operations in 2003. Periodic reassessments of U.S. Burma policy have taken into account advances in counterterrorism cooperation, the junta's helpfulness on POW/MIA issues, and some slight indications that the regime was prepared to be reasonable about moving toward democracy, attitudes toward the opposition, and relations with the United States.

In April 2002, in the context of a systematic interagency review of policy options in response to the dialogue between the SPDC and Suu Kyi, the U.S. Department of State/U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was tasked with developing and implementing a humanitarian assistance package, as well as a roadmap articulating benchmarks that should be met by Rangoon to be certified on counternarcotics cooperation. The physical attack of Suu Kyi by supporters of the junta in May 2003, and the

subsequent renewal of Suu Kyi's arrest by the SPDC, was followed by a brief effort to define a "roadmap toward democracy" by Khin Nyunt, chief of Burma's defense intelligence organization in August that year who, by October 2004, had been placed under arrest along with his supporters, and supplanted by a less flexible leadership group headed by Senior General Than Shwe and Vice Senior General Maung Aye, the army's commander in chief. In 2005–2006, however, Burma was fully cooperating in the war on terror, assisting in a positive fashion in the case of a Burmese forger who was captured carrying false travel documents in August 2002 (and who assisted Pakistani security and police officials by identifying the apartment block where suspected al Qaeda members had been living in Karachi), and also taking an uncharacteristically cooperative posture regarding overflight for Operation *Enduring Freedom* aircraft in 2002. Of course, since then the junta has reestablished a much harsher position on Suu Kyi and, in 2008, extended her house arrest.

## Junta in 2008–2009

Burma did not embrace the possibility of rapprochement on the basis of U.S. and Western efforts to describe a trajectory toward democracy, and subsequently defined its own path toward democracy, rearticulated in 2008, in a way that repeated the byzantine trajectory this arc would take through the year 2010 while simultaneously continuing to arrest and harass opposition members, stick to the formula for democracy in a junta-written constitution that essentially preserved military preeminence, and minimize the likelihood that Suu Kyi and the NLD would be able to develop into a credible, functioning democratic opposition.

In May 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit Burma. Nearly 85,000 people died in its aftermath. According to the *New York Times*, a year later, an additional 54,000 people were still listed as missing. The storm's winds reached as high as 121 miles per hour at landfall. A tidal surge drove inland from the sea, blowing away 700,000 homes in the delta, killing three-fourths of the livestock, sinking half

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the fishing fleet, and salting a million acres of rice paddies.<sup>5</sup> Exigencies occasioned by Nargis compelled a limited “opening” in the aftermath of the humanitarian crisis:

- The Burmese junta agreed to receive the commander of U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) in the midst of efforts to find a way to make use of U.S. military resources for relief efforts in the aftermath of Nargis.

- The SPDC leadership agreed to C-130 flights under the condition that the junta would take control of the loads on U.S. military aircraft initially.

- The junta found a midway point in discussions with ASEAN and the UN that allowed some nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers into the country without granting blanket clearance to all NGOs seeking to be helpful with the relief effort.

While there was no junta support for utilizing U.S. military helicopters in the relief effort, allowing the involvement of assets from the USS *Essex* group, or agreeing to a USAID-led assessment team, elements of the Burmese junta were responsive to U.S. efforts to continue C-130 flights. Burmese military officials responsible for the airport in Rangoon were cooperative with U.S. military officials seeking to facilitate operations during Caring Response.

These were not watershed events signaling a more reasonable posture by the junta toward its neighbors, the West, and the United States. In fact, the rhetoric displayed in the regime’s daily newspaper during the regional/global response to Nargis suggested a consistent antipathy toward the United States. Moreover, the isolation and secrecy of the Burmese military junta remains palpable, and the leadership of the junta has not become more amenable to change. The May 2008 realignment of the military’s officer corps represented an effort by the senior military leadership to remove older officers resisting Than Shwe’s “Roadmap to Discipline—Flourishing Democracy” and an attempt to neutralize ranking officers frustrated by slow promotions. Nevertheless, they did represent instances of change, and they did provide the foundation for regroup-

ing to determine whether there was a basis for altering some of our tactical approaches to Burma, if not U.S. strategic thinking. The question that confronted the Obama administration beginning in January 2009 was the extent to which these slight changes represented a real basis for confidence in the possibility of forward movement.

There is probably little basis for agreement on the efficacy of rewarding the regime for the more moderate and reasonable attitudes taken on the issue of international aid flows following Nargis, especially since the pendulum was flung in the opposite direction with the mid-May arrest and subsequent August 2009 resentencing of Suu Kyi. A course of action predicated on much more positive inducements is unlikely to make sense largely because the compromises the junta made in order to receive, for example, the USPACOM commander did not represent benchmark moments in junta history; essentially, the Burmese military leadership accommodated changes in procedure to reap the dividends that access to international largesse offered.

There is similarly no basis for the argument that it would be possible to expand the “cracks” in the leadership that, from some perspectives, emerged during the Nargis crisis into large-scale fissures. There is little traction to the argument that these slight shifts could be construed as the first objective signal that regime change is possible and that elements of the junta could indeed work with the United States and other countries on a wide range of civilizing initiatives.

## Emerging Constituency

What seems to have emerged as the result of the international relief effort is some slight indication that the behavior of the regime can be altered by ASEAN-led regional cooperation. Channels of communication can be developed, especially on the basis of practical requirements for coordination on operational equities (such as overflight, landing clearance, and consignments). New contacts can emerge. Slightly greater understanding regarding the operational code of the middle level military leadership could be derived from these interactions. Moreover, there

appears to be a renewed willingness of some in the region, such as Thailand and perhaps Singapore, to take an effective leading role in managing relations with Burma.

Finally, there seems more of a basis now for supporting slight changes in the way the United States conducts relations with Burma. There is more of a consensus among analysts and U.S. policymakers on the extent to which sustaining the lines of communication that emerged operationally during Caring Response represents a useful, potentially positive alternative. There was at least momentary consideration in May 2008 of the utility of sustaining senior level contacts made during Caring Response in a fashion that would enable the United States to gauge the willingness of junta counterparts to share an occasional contact, although the recent conservative swing of the pendulum has once again marred the possibilities for change.

There might be support for Burmese involvement in Title 10-funded activities with a humanitarian assistance theme, or for some effort a year after the initial surge to look at the situation in the delta, population requirements, and ways to address lingering issues there. None of this need be configured in a way that suggests these modest outreach efforts are intended to represent a positive inducement timed in proximity to the election. Strong support for the conduct of an election, and at least symbolic transition to a civilian regime, would indeed put the United States and ASEAN and many of the other players on the same sheet of music, but an election alone will not necessarily trigger the transition observers and long-time supporters of democratization in Burma have called for largely because:

- The military may represent the most coherent, organized interest group in Burma, and perhaps the entity most capable of basic rule, delivery of services, and provision of security.

- The political opposition is severely fragmented, limited in vision, underresourced, and dependent on the kindness of overseas supporters.

- Local groups of monks showed themselves as the most coherent Burmese organizations capable of touching the people where they live, organizing rapidly to solve local problems,

and addressing the issues related to putting in the plumbing for disaster relief work.

■ Civil groups that stepped up during Caring Response provided aid and services where the government failed to do so in a way that showed that these groups, properly resourced and empowered, could represent a key component to real democratic change.

The situation in Burma may be changing in modest ways that probably should not be the basis for a strategic overhaul of current policy starting points, but should prompt exploring methods of consolidating lines of communication that opened in modest ways as a result of the limited cooperation allowed during the aftermath of Nargis. We should focus on these changes and the opportunities that they may present without losing sight of the overall repugnant character of the junta's leadership and the basic motivation for current policy.

## Reactions from Critics

Critics of U.S. policy argue that there are basically four tasks that must be confronted in reviewing Burma policy. America's core strategic objectives regarding Burma need to be articulated with greater clarity, and American policy toward Burma must begin to speak to the issue of how to reconcile the democracy-promotion agenda with a more realistic assessment of what President Obama will be able to accomplish in the next few years.

One criticism leveled at U.S. Burma policy is that the entire approach is bereft of strategic thinking, that little effort and energy have been invested in identifying what America's core strategic objectives are with Burma, and that no attempt has been made to reconcile the democracy-promotion agenda with a more realistic assessment of what can be accomplished in a way that serves U.S. strategic interests. More often than not, such criticisms end by arguing that the American commitment to the creation of a democratic government revolving around the NLD does not represent a realistic goal and does nothing to advance larger U.S. policy agendas in the region.

The United States must clarify for itself key players in the region and outside of

Southeast Asia capable of and willing to exert influence and strategic leadership. Several countries have stood up and attempted to assert some leadership on Burma, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore. None of them, critics argue, holds the key to "resolving" the status quo either because of their own domestic disorder (Thailand), economic interdependence (Thailand, China), or weak ties to the junta that have not translated into effective influence (Singapore). The key argument in this context is that the United States has not paid sufficient attention to other states such as Indonesia, whose strategic interests and growing ability to exert influence position Jakarta in a credible way, with a level of capability that outstrips that of the other presumptive frontline states. Additionally, China may have secured the latest natural gas contract in Burma, but Delhi continues to play an important role there. Beyond the issue of energy, India's strong historical links have animated Indo-China competition in Burma.

The United States must take the lead in sculpting a more robust multilateral agenda for handling the Burma problem. Resolution of the Burmese challenge will require cooperation from a variety of actors. Aside from India, China, and key Southeast Asian nations, some have argued that Norway, a neutral agent familiar with the key players in Burma, is a critical interlocutor and that leveraging Norway's assistance could help create an institutionalized diplomatic architecture to deal with Burma (similar to the Six Party process).

The United States should galvanize an effort to synthesize the key perspectives from China, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia in a fashion that clarifies the relationship between the goals of those interested parties and our own equities regarding the Burma issue and, more broadly, Southeast Asia's well-being as a region.

These are clever interpretations of what is wrong with the current U.S. approach, but they all miss the key point. These interpretations argue on behalf of formulating a much more muscular multilateral approach with a distinctively strategic depth aimed at integrating an understanding of the bigger picture and coming up with an appropriate plan befitting the situation, establishing a goal, and anticipating possible challenges.

However, the U.S. policy toward Burma has foundered not because of lack of strategic foresight and not because of the failure to think in terms of bringing appropriate and capable allies and friends into the mix with unique resources and specific ways of altering the playing field.

U.S. policy toward Burma has failed because it is *not foreign policy*. Since the late 1980s, U.S. Burma policy has revolved around a series of internal arguments aimed at practicing what it preaches. That policy has been preoccupied with defining the *moral* basis for a relationship with a country that is not important enough so that it would matter whether the argument goes well, or takes decades to sort out, or occurs in a vacuum separated from the political and military realities of Southeast Asia. Burma was the one place where, from 1988, we could afford to act on the basis of the courage of our convictions without undermining a lucrative trade relationship, sacrificing key and concrete foreign policy objectives in the area, or compromising the interests of friends and treaty allies in measurable ways.

## Strategic Objectives

Suu Kyi, who has dedicated her life to Burma's future at considerable personal expense, has exercised judgment and made political choices that have had grave political consequences. Her 2003 decision to go to Sagaing Division, for example, in an effort to incite her supporters against the advice of some wiser NLD figures and some of her strategic choices and views regarding the role of the League have alienated some in the NLD and broken the organization into quarreling factions.

The NLD, though perhaps not a spent force, is one that has seen a lot of miles, and it has racked up a checkered record in pursuing its goal. Fealty to the NLD may indeed fetter the cause of achieving peace, stability, economic prosperity, and democracy in Burma if only because the NLD's survival has required it to act politically, and in so doing it has come to resemble other political structures elsewhere that have sought to preserve influence in combative circumstances by committing tactical acts requiring compromises with

principles in order to sustain its energy and organization against mounting odds.

What Burma needs most right now is peace, and an end to the sectarian-based, ethnically focused insurgencies. Burma requires a government that generates room for economic activity and civil society. Some of the regional SPDC authorities appear to recognize the need to allow the people the space necessary to exercise economic initiative, and to organize and assemble to articulate their interests. One can see a certain amount of this in the Mandalay, Irrawaddy, and Pegu Divisions, and in the Karen and Kachin States.

Local decisions by military leaders appear to be allowing for the possibility that provincial-level SPDC leadership has recognized that prosperity will trigger the building of Burma. Perhaps this local leadership is getting the sense that allowing more room for independent economic decisions will pay off by enabling local investment and growth in a fashion that will fuel a thriving economy, with minimal intervention from military leaders and a much greater role for managers, technicians, and economic planners. The fact is that in the remote localities, the Burmese army can play a constructive economic role. It has established itself, for example, as the primary means of farm-to-market transportation. Even in Rangoon, the army seems to have come to exercise restraint on price-gouging. In many ways, in adopting populist gestures, the army has come to operate in the same way the Thai army did in the 1970s and 1980s—as a force prepared to speak out for the interests of the common, and largely poor, citizenry.

## Key Players

The problem with the argument that Thailand is the wrong player, wrong ally, at the wrong time, insofar as it speaks to the question of Thailand's foreign policy capabilities in the midst of domestic ferment, is that the Thai still regard themselves as a capable, influential regional power with the credibility necessary to take a leadership role and have sought to remain involved and relevant, although with a lessened impact as the result of preoccupation with their own domestic state.

Thailand's distinctive lack of domestic tranquility since 2006 has undermined U.S. confidence in Bangkok's ability to govern effectively and to sustain a commitment to democratic growth. In the eyes of Thailand's neighbors in the region, however, power has been used effectively by its military and civilian leadership, whose efforts to manage issues have demonstrated both resolve and the right instincts. Moreover, Thailand's assertive foreign policy positions on Burma have given friends in the region the basis for confidence in and support for Bangkok's positions on key regional issues, such as Thailand's response to the Burmese junta's May 2009 incarceration of Suu Kyi.

The Thai were one of the first responders to Nargis that crippled Burma in 2008, while Thailand held the ASEAN chair. They moved a C-130 into Rangoon early in the aftermath of the cyclone's deadly foray through the Irrawaddy Delta. Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej lent his voice to the international effort to nudge the Burmese military leadership to begin issuing visas to international aid experts and to allow aircraft into Burma with specialists who could facilitate the distribution of relief commodities. The Burmese rebuffed the international community, insisted that they could handle the consequences of the cyclone, and continued to allow only select relief flights by the United Nations and, beginning on May 9, the United States.

Prime Minister Samak, initially snubbed by the junta, visited Burma on May 14. He was instrumental in getting an agreement in principle from the Burmese to receive an ASEAN disaster assessment team. Thailand worked closely with Singapore in organizing the ASEAN effort to press the Burmese toward flexibility on relief flights and access for regional assessment teams and disaster response experts. Thailand provided a staging area at Utapao for the USPACOM joint task force and accommodated the presence of a USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team. Moreover, in late May, with many of the U.S. assets already in theater to support Caring Response, the Thai hosted the 27<sup>th</sup> annual Cobra Gold exercise, with a significant humanitarian disaster response component to its command post dimension.

The Thai have long felt that they had something to offer the United States in terms of perspectives regarding, and access to, the leadership of Burma. Bangkok has urged flexibility, understanding, a certain amount of accommodation, and real recognition that the equation of power in Burma suggests that the military will be in a leadership role for a long time. From the days of General Suchinda Kraprayoon's close and friendly relations with the SPDC's predecessor, the State Law and Order Restoration Council leadership, the United States has rebuffed those views, which struck a succession of U.S. administrations as deriving from individual relations between the Thai military and their Burmese counterparts.

That Thai perspective, to Washington's way of thinking, placed primacy on using those channels of communication between the Thai military and their Burmese counterparts to establish peace and quiet rather than determining ways to press the Burmese toward the vision of a democratic state capable of conducting free and fair elections, willing to achieve peace with the ethnic groups seeking independence, and prepared to allow the population to engage in trade and commerce.

Washington policymakers have prioritized achieving the junta's eventual replacement by a coalition of some sort that integrates a wide range of players into the formula for a national government in Burma. The Thai appear confident in the perspective, increasingly shared by ASEAN, of sustaining lines of communication with the junta because it is the only source of power in the country, while ceasing efforts to justify Burma's domestic policies internationally.

Any attempt to "multilateralize" the issue in a fashion that brings new players into the mix, and in a way that clearly suggests an external effort to supplant Thailand's role in this fray, will quickly come to be seen by the region as a potentially painful shift for Thailand, and will lose the support of ASEAN members who would not do anything that would compromise Thailand's standing in the region or damage Bangkok's status and leadership.

It is not clear that Bangkok is in a position to add more to the mix. It is clear, however, that the Thai have grown closer to the Singaporean view of how Burma should

be managed in the ASEAN context than to Washington's perspective over the last 15 years.

The problem with the argument that Singapore does not have real strategic influence over Burma is that Singapore has in fact exercised its best diplomatic capabilities and pursued a clever, effective, and practical course of action aimed at dealing with the Burma situation. The Singaporean position on Burma is straightforward and unencumbered by the complexities presumed to derive from entangling commercial relationships with Burmese businesses that do their banking in Singapore: domestic developments in Burma, the Foreign Ministry states unequivocally, have adversely affected the reputation and credibility of ASEAN. Singapore has supported ASEAN's repeated calls for the release of Suu Kyi. It has stalwartly held the position that, since Burma has ratified the ASEAN charter, Burma has certain obligations to human rights under it. Singapore has also argued that the question of expulsion or suspension of Burma from ASEAN's ranks is not as straightforward as it seems, especially since Western sanctions have little effect on Burma so long as China and India keep their borders with Burma open. ASEAN, Singapore insists, is likely to have more influence over Burma, however limited, through efforts to engage the SPDC rather than attempts to isolate it. Singapore takes solace in the fact that despite frequent criticisms by ASEAN, Burma has remained committed to ASEAN and attended all meetings.

The Singaporean argument—that Burma has been a serious member, attending meetings and fulfilling organizational obligations, that ASEAN would have already isolated Burma if that would have solved the problem, and that patient engagement is the answer—suggests to some that Singapore is counseling understanding and sympathy in its call for patience. In fact, Singapore has deployed its most effective diplomats, unstintingly dedicated itself to working the issue, and invested energy and resources in trying to shape the regional response in an active, effective way. In the context of the Burmese military junta's irrational reaction to Western offers of post-cyclone assistance, Singapore supported an approach that placed a primacy on putting local resources on the ground

since Burma was more likely to respond positively to ASEAN efforts to construct an in-country aid hub and mechanisms for delivering assistance.

All the while, even when counseling a specifically ASEAN response to the Burma situation, Singapore has supported efforts by the international community, in particular by the UN, to bring about change in Burma. Moreover, Singapore has not taken the position that keeping Burma as an ASEAN member undermines the credibility of the regional association. Singapore has calculated that ASEAN's credibility does not just hinge on Burma, and so Singapore rejected the notion that the regional association could not be any stronger than its weakest link. ASEAN's credibility, the Migrant Forum in Asia has stated, was built over years. Moreover, Singapore has not shrunk from supporting global organizations, specifically the United Nations, in its unremitting effort to pressure the Burmese military junta to take a more realistic position on internal matters. Importantly, when Burma accused Thailand of meddling in its internal affairs in mid-2009, Singapore insisted that Thailand had the right as the ASEAN chair to make the kind of statement that it did, a statement that Singapore's Foreign Ministry defended as well within the bounds of Thailand's responsibilities at the time.

## **Sculpting an Agenda**

Thinking about Burma in exclusively bilateral terms is an ineffective approach to the problem. Though resolution of the Burmese challenge will require cooperation from a variety of actors, it is not clear that the right players have been fingered for involvement in a coalition of the willing. Norway is not part of the European Union (EU)—hence it is a lesser party to EU sanction regimes, and that is the basis for the assumption that Norway could play a careful role in prodding the EU agenda forward. At the same time, ASEAN, China, India, and South Korea have business interests in Rangoon and elsewhere in Burma that might be leveraged. Japan is a key player that generally manages to stay in SPDC good graces despite Tokyo's periodic joining of harsh criticism barrages. The eco-

nomics—and therefore political—levers on Burma are going to be Asian.

Apart from these levers, the reality of India's nexus with Burma requires consideration. These two countries have serious common strategic interests beginning with reigning in separatist/terrorist groups that cross borders and cause trouble. India and Burma remain focused on dealing with the consequences of a common colonial past, and have done so in ways that are supportive of each other—tactically, strategically, and diplomatically. The SPDC benefits from its India ties, but the Indians have tremendous influence and (probably) leverage that has not yet been harnessed productively. The Indian navy was the first to actually receive diplomatic clearance to enter Burmese ports to offload supplies in the immediate aftermath of Nargis.

An economic consortium that includes some of the above mentioned players might be able to persuade Burma that its national interest lies in freeing up the economy, making business law transparent, developing tourism as the cash cow, and entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century with some grace. Those noted above are in the best shape to do this, as they are ignoring the sanctions. Nothing will happen until the Burmese army can shed its street reputation as a human rights violator. However, it is important to reiterate that targeted sanctions against state-owned enterprises and individuals are having a marked effect, unlike the broader, toothless, difficult-to-enforce sanctions. Targeted sanctions will clearly have to be factored into the equation as the West continues looking for ways to exert influence over the junta.

There might be a widely shared multinational consensus that Than Shwe and his inner circle have to go before anything positive can happen in Burma, and there might even be a sense that the 2010 elections could emerge as the basis for a graceful exit. Could Khin Nyunt and Suu Kyi work in the manner in which F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela approached the future of South Africa? Would Nyunt attract a Thai-style "Democratic Soldier" following in the Burmese army—similar to the views of the Thai Young Turks of the early 1980s who were committed to democratic representation, social justice, and

legal rights—that would shield the defense establishment from the argument that the entire army above the rank of major should be placed before a war crimes tribunal? Even if there was a remote possibility of any of this, the extension of Suu Kyi's arrest virtually guarantees that she will be unable to mount any kind of serious challenge.

## A Nuclear Burma

In early August 2009, international media reports told the story of two Burmese defectors, unknown to each other—one a Russian-trained officer in a Burmese “secret nuclear battalion,” and the other a former executive who handled nuclear contracts with Russia and North Korea—who shed light on a secret complex, allegedly located in tunnels at Naung Laing, a mountain in northern Burma adjacent to a Russian-built civilian reactor, which was the center of Burma's attempt to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. The defectors claimed that, with North Korean assistance, Rangoon was building a hidden nuclear reactor and plutonium extraction facilities.<sup>4</sup>

In June, the United States used UN Security Council Resolution 1874, the new sanction against North Korea, as the basis for a decision to order the U.S. Navy to track the North Korean government-owned freighter *Kang Nam*, suspected of attempting to deliver illicit cargo to Burma in support of weapons programs. While the North Koreans insisted that they would consider any international inspection of the ship as an “act of war,” the ship returned abruptly to North Korea after a week without delivering its cargo. Chinese pressure in particular helped persuade Rangoon to turn away the freighter. In August, Indian authorities detained and searched a North Korean ship for radioactive materials when that ship, with a declared destination of the Middle East, ventured close to Burma. Reflecting significant regional discomfort over the possibility that Rangoon was angling to acquire nuclear weapons capability, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan declared that, if Burma were in fact pursuing such a program in violation of ASEAN agreements, such actions could result in expulsion from the group.

Burmese pursuit of a nuclear weapons program has been interpreted as a signal that the junta wishes to close itself off from any possibility of rapprochement with the United States, a view that fails to explain Rangoon's decision to release the American whose swimming escapade at the site of Suu Kyi's house arrest was at least the proximate cause of the SPDC's most recent actions against her. The Burmese tilt in the direction of North Korea has been viewed speculatively as part of a decision to acquire a nuclear deterrent in the face of mounting threats (of an unspecified sort) against the military junta. Finally, Burma's effort to become a nuclear “power” has been viewed as an attempt to accrue international respect and prestige, or a strategy for securing a bargaining chip for future negotiations with the United States.

Explanations of Rangoon's intentions notwithstanding, Burma is a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has concluded a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with a small-quantities protocol designed for states that have little or no nuclear material, all of which obligate Burma to inform the IAEA no later than 6 months prior to operating a nuclear facility. Burmese cooperation with North Korea to achieve its presumed goals suggests that Rangoon has no intention of abiding by the safeguards agreement, meaning that the UN Security Council would have to confront this challenge, and that China, driven by its close economic relationship with Burma, could be prompted to deploy its veto authority on the council to block any effort to make Burma's noncompliance consequential for the military junta.

However, China, in spite of its longstanding willingness to press against international efforts to isolate Burma, has not necessarily had an easy time in its relationship with this unpredictable, demanding partner, and Beijing cannot possibly have a comfort level with the prospect of its neighbors having their own hair trigger. China could find convincing reasons to nudge Burma to express peaceful nuclear intentions. Beijing might be convinced of the sensibility of supporting aspects of U.S. efforts to press Rangoon to invite observers in for a full tour, endorse the Proliferation Security Initiative, and sign

an Additional Protocol with the IAEA, which would enhance inspections.

The prospect of Burma, conceivably the world's most isolated leadership, taking hints from North Korea, a practiced prevaricator, is alarming in the extreme, and could take Herculean efforts by the international community and the region to reverse, an effort that will severely test the resolve and staying power of ASEAN, increasingly wearied by the potentially destructive antics of the SPDC, and as stymied as the rest of the world by the challenge of holding the junta to standards of civilized behavior.

## What Is to Be Done?

There are several opening gambits that could build on lines of communication to the isolated, repugnant SPDC and embroider on existing elements in the bilateral relationship without signaling a sea change in attitudes toward the military junta.

For example, counterterrorist cooperation could afford a real chance of a successful opening for contact with elements of the national defense establishment focused on rational courses of action in a way that resonates positively with regional priorities and ASEAN equities. Efforts to enlist the SPDC in counterterrorist cooperation could be managed in small steps, beginning with U.S.-hosted multilateral seminars such as those conducted by the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, and USPACOM-hosted, Title 10-funded multilateral conferences, and Department of Defense (DOD) sponsorship of working level visits for Burmese officials responsible for regional counterterrorist cooperation. Burma might be more amenable to a focus on transnational threats than counterterrorism given Rangoon's vested interest in protecting its borders from illicit movement of drugs, people, and weapons, and its desire to acquire the technology necessary to counter those threats. Additionally, expanded counternarcotics cooperation including an invitation to Burma to attend the Military Law Enforcement Academy in Bangkok would be a possible, positive step.

Tying Burma into regional approaches to disaster relief is another value-neutral channel that could accommodate first efforts to

develop points of contact in the SPDC that DOD would be prepared to work. Training or briefings on lifesaving methods and search and rescue technologies and processes, the addition of Burma to the list of stops for a future Pacific Partnership or Pacific Angel program, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief could build on the interests of NGOs in Burma that demonstrated some capacity during the aftermath of the cyclone, enable the United States to develop synergies with these humanitarian-focused NGOs, and create some space for the development of civil society.

Providing jobs for Burmese would greatly improve living standards and reduce migration. Burma has huge oil and gas reserves. A number of Western firms have had profitable relations with the Burmese. Tearing down the barriers to U.S. firms getting in on the deal would help replicate the thriving mini-economies that have developed in the Karen and Kachin States because of active, profitable trading with Thailand. It is important that the United States consider encouraging a revival of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin's idea of a railway line and roadway from northeastern India to the South China Sea, or supporting ASEAN and Indian efforts to develop this infrastructure. A focused, multilateral effort to engender an interest in real national development of critical transportation systems would create good jobs for the Burmese people, and, with effective involvement by ASEAN, the manipulative possibilities that enable "slave labor" arrangements to develop as the key resource for accomplishing these big ticket developmental projects could be quashed.

These modest starting points could be framed in ways that remind the junta of the limited, humanitarian-focused concentration of activities aimed at serving the interests of the Burmese people without legitimating the SPDC. However, they do not obviate the need to begin looking for elements of the Burmese military establishment with which the United States could engage if only to establish the most fundamental channels of contact with military leaders intent on fulfilling the more rational responsibilities of a national defense mechanism, such as securing borders, providing for the common defense, performing rudimentary developmental responsibilities, and building national infrastructure.

Selective, discriminating, and mindful attempts to identify Burmese army field grade officers who could conceivably benefit from observing the multilateral humanitarian assistance and disaster relief component of Cobra Gold should be taken. A good starting point would be low-key efforts to identify common starting points with working level defense ministry officials responsible for external relations through "orientation trips" to USPACOM aimed at explaining theater engagement, demonstrating regional command responsibilities for multilateral outreach in disaster response, and USPACOM involvement in developing regional capacities in areas such as search and rescue and consequence management.

The Obama administration's consideration to allow U.S. investments (now prohibited under economic sanctions) in exchange for Suu Kyi's release and to allow opposition groups, including her NLD, to participate in elections scheduled for next year demonstrates a seriousness about nudging things beyond the standoff achieved by sanctions and sanctimoniousness. Senator Webb's recommendation to focus first on what is possible places a primacy on engagement, in spite of the flawed constitution approved last year, and the junta's "seven steps toward democracy" that are bound and determined to enable the military to retain its domination of the government.<sup>5</sup>

The lessons from the history of democratic transitions over the past 25 years in Southeast Asia suggest that economic growth fostering a middle class, U.S. policies that emphasized security and export-oriented economics, and recognition of the role of business interests, civil society, and NGOs were critical

parts of the equation, as was U.S. involvement in defining education opportunities, cultural exchanges, and scientific and technological cooperation. In the Burmese context, all this plus the importance of humanitarian engagement and infrastructure projects and patient attempts to identify areas of commonality—disaster relief, humanitarian aid, adaption to climate change—are important steps.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Obama administration signaled the possibility of a less confrontational approach to the Burmese military government: "Imposing sanctions has not influenced the junta," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated in February. See Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Liz Robbins, "U.S. Senator in Myanmar to Meet Leader," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2009, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2009/08/15/world/asia/15myanmar.html?nl=pol&emc=polal](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/15/world/asia/15myanmar.html?nl=pol&emc=polal)>.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Webb, "We Can't Afford to Ignore Myanmar," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2009, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2009/08/26/opinion/26webb.html?emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/26/opinion/26webb.html?emc=eta1)>.

<sup>3</sup> "Cyclone Nargis," *The New York Times*, updated April 30, 2009, available at <[http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/news/international/countriesandterritories/myanmar/cyclone\\_nargis/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/news/international/countriesandterritories/myanmar/cyclone_nargis/index.html)>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, <[www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/defectors-tell-of-burmas-secret-nuclear-reactor-1766566.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/defectors-tell-of-burmas-secret-nuclear-reactor-1766566.html)>; and <[www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw\\_20090810\\_9726.php](http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20090810_9726.php)>.

<sup>5</sup> Webb.

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