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## **Obama in Myanmar—A Visit with Limited Significance**

*By Robert H. Taylor*

The visit of President Barack Obama to Naypyitaw and Yangon in November is obviously a major event in Myanmar-United States relations. Despite the fact that the United States Congress has yet to repeal various pieces of sanction legislation on Myanmar, and the Myanmar constitution which the United States condemned as fatally flawed two years ago remains unchanged, the visit is like a seal of approval on the government of President Thein Sein, at least for those who believe “the West is the Best”.

Unlike his predecessor as President, George W. Bush, President Obama has had the good fortune to be in office at the time the army government fulfilled its promise made in 1988 to establish a multi-party political system with a market-oriented economic system. The Obama administration, like many in the United States Congress, continues mistakenly to believe that the political reforms introduced by President Thein Sein's government are the result of American and other Western sanctions. The domestic logic of the reforms escapes their understanding.

The visit by the United States President probably would not have occurred at this time except for the fact that he is also visiting the top US Southeast Asian military ally, Thailand, and also attending the ASEAN summit in Cambodia. Coming just two weeks after his re-election, the visit to Myanmar will strengthen his ability to convince the Congress to follow the call of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to remove the sanctions on Myanmar, which he has already suspended by executive order, and restore normal and positive relations with a country seen by the United States as overly dependent upon China for too long. Such a move is in keeping with the logic of American foreign policy vis-a-vis China conducted during the Cold War, before human rights became the official driver of American policy, at least towards Myanmar.

## AMERICAN PRESIDENTS AND MYANMAR

Though President Obama has attended formal meetings with President Thein Sein in third countries before, this is the first meeting between the heads of state and government of the two countries on their own soil since 1966. That was the year that the Myanmar Socialist Programme Party Chairman, General Ne Win, made a State Visit to Washington DC, and was received at the White House by then President Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson was then embroiled in the war in Vietnam and keeping Myanmar neutral and outside of the sphere of the Soviet Union and/or China was a top American priority. Myanmar as a socialist but anti-Communist state was from the point of view of the United States, a positive asset in the Cold War. It was anti-Communist and did not cost the United States any serious money. President Johnson's remarks on that occasion were designed to prove to a sceptical Third World that the United States defended the rights of small states to remain independent. Little came from the visit, but President Johnson subsequently described his private and off-the-record conversations with Chairman Ne Win as one of his most stimulating meetings with a foreign head of state during his time in the White House.

After the visit, the American press was impressed, almost to the point of disbelief that Chairman Ne Win did not ask for American aid. He asked for nothing but to be left alone. Informally, however, the United States proved to be cooperative with Myanmar, particularly in the provision of military training and equipment. When Myanmar's relations with China subsequently deteriorated during the Cultural Revolution, the United States had the good sense to stay out of the conflict in order not to make a bad situation worse. China and Myanmar eventually restored cordial state-to-state relations while China continued to back the Burmese Communist Party and the Myanmar national army continued to thwart its efforts to take state power.

Presidents Obama, Bush and Johnson are not the only US leaders to give a thought to Myanmar from time to time, though rarely for long. Vice President Richard M. Nixon, who would later succeed Johnson as President, visited Myanmar in 1953, at a time when America was looking for allies in the Cold War. Subsequently, he took an interest in Myanmar affairs, and attended Myanmar National Day receptions in Washington regularly. In retirement, after being forced from office over the cover up of the Watergate burglary of his political opponents' offices, ex-President Nixon came to Yangon in 1985 in order to visit the Shwe Dagon Pagoda one more time.

In 1949, President Harry Truman secretly authorised, without even telling his Secretary of State, the Central Intelligence Agency to arm and support, with Thailand and Taiwan, Chinese Nationalist (KMT) troops who had fled across the border from Yunnan following the victory of the Chinese Communist army and the rise to power of the Chinese Communist Party. His idea was that they would provide a diversion to Chinese forces engaged in the Korean War, at the other end of China. The KMT did little to provide that, but they posed problems for Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and gave rise to the drug trade, which is one of the continuing legacies of US-Myanmar relations. Combating the KMT within Myanmar also deepened the army's grip on administrative power in the

northern, eastern and western borderlands of the country. The United States did provide Myanmar from the time of the Nixon administration until 1988 with some assistance in the latter's efforts to curtail illicit drug production and halt smuggling out of the northern reaches.

Even before Myanmar gained its independence, United States Presidents gave thought to that country from time to time. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared to British Prime Minister Churchill during World War Two that he did not like the Burmese. His sweeping aspersion on a population at that time approaching 20 million was based on a single encounter with then Myanmar Premier U Saw. U Saw had flown to London and Washington on the cusp of the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia in order to convince Prime Minister Churchill to promise dominion status to Myanmar in exchange for Burmese support for the British war effort. When Churchill said no deal, U Saw flew on to Washington D.C. and tried to bargain with Roosevelt.

His offer was essentially, "You, Mr. President, get Churchill to change his mind and promise me dominion status or independence after the war, and I will stop taxing the American military equipment you are shipping up the Burma Road via Yangon to your allies in China, the KMT government of Chiang Kai-shek." President Roosevelt rejected the offer and U Saw flew off in time to get bombed on at Pearl Harbour before flying back to Yangon via Europe. There, he contacted the Japanese in Lisbon, and thanks to American Naval Intelligence intercepting Japanese cipher traffic and passing on his message to the British government, consequently spent the remainder of the war in a British prison in Uganda.

American Presidents before President Franklin D. Roosevelt thought little of Myanmar, if at all. Then part of the British Indian empire, if they thought about Myanmar, it was as part of the problem of British Imperialism, not Myanmar as such. An exception, however, was President Herbert Hoover. As the President best known for having had the bad luck to be in office at the time of the 1929 Wall Street crash and the commencement of the 1930s world-wide recession, which included the Saya San Rebellion in Myanmar as a sideshow, Herbert Hoover was a mining engineer before entering politics during World War I. He made millions of dollars over a ten-year period in London, from amongst other things, developing the Namtu-Bawdwin Mines in the Shan States in northern Myanmar.

Americans have long seen Myanmar as a fabled place of mineral resources and it is doubtful that has changed. However, it would be churlish not to think that President Obama is visiting for loftier motives.

## MYANMAR AND THE US IN 2012

In 2012, with President Obama entering his second and last four years in office, the reorientation of United States foreign policy away from the Middle East and back to East and Southeast Asia is bound to be further advanced. In contrast to when the United States appeared to ignore South and East Asia during the Bush years, in order to concentrate on

Iraq, Afghanistan and the larger Middle East, the Obama administration has tried to redevelop links with Asia. This is for good economic and strategic reasons.

Economically, India, China and the countries of South East Asia are the most economically dynamic of any in the world today. With Europe economically moribund and the Middle East an area of increasing political instability, the best regions for the development of trade and investment are in Asia. Besides, much of America's debt is held by Asian economies, especially China, and the future of that debt may spell the future of the United States.

Strategically, the United States government has seen the Pacific Ocean as an American lake since the end of World War II. With the nominal demilitarisation of Japan, the United States faced no challenger from the Indian Ocean to San Francisco Bay. Now China is beginning to develop its sea power and strategic interests beyond its border. China has also been astute in utilising its financial and cultural power to win friends and gain influence in Southeast Asia while reminding Japan that it is not the only country with interests in Northeast Asia.

States have long memories and long planning horizons and the will to power does not lapse with time. Though China today is largely militarily incapable of projecting power far from its shores, in time that can change, and the United States wants to forestall that possibility. Whether there is any reason to be so concerned is a question that is not often asked in Washington or Beijing.

President Obama's visit to Myanmar comes at a time of uncertainty in the process of political reform inside the country. Much remains unclear and in flux. The new constitutional order has yet to settle into place and the role of the legislature seems to be uncertain. The constitutional impasse that occurred earlier this year, when the nine-member Constitutional Tribunal issued a decision that legislative committees were not government institutions but merely committees of the legislation, resulting in threats to impeach the court (and the President) in the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house of the legislature), demonstrated the untried nature of the new order. The checks and balances built into the constitution were interpreted by the majority in the legislative branch as the right to dictate to the executive and the judiciary, a situation which brought into doubt stable government.

Beyond Naypyitaw politics, old social problems have resurrected in the more open political atmosphere ushered in by the ending of press censorship and the opening of the internet to all. The most obvious instance is the conflict in the western Myanmar state of Rakhine where communal violence has occurred between Buddhists and Muslims over the status of those persons of Bengali descent often described as 'Rohingya', a neologism of relatively recent origin. This conflict has resulted in scores of deaths and the dislocation of over 100,000 persons into refugee camps. The issue, which the previous authoritarian governments of Myanmar could keep in check through police power, has become a festering sore which threatens to cause communal conflict across the country.

Conflict persists also in the north of the country between the government and the Kachin Independence Army, one of a number of ethnically designated armed groups still extant. Most have entered into ceasefire agreements with the government and some have

allowed their troops to be brought under the control of the central army as border guard units. However, peace in the border areas remains tenuous and the absence so far of significant amounts of aid and trade has not seen economic growth in ethnic minority areas which is significant enough to undermine the arguments of ethnic politicians that the government does nothing for their regions.

However, these and other issues are domestic concerns of the Myanmar government, and not part of the larger strategic picture of the United States government. As the United States re-engages with Asia, it wishes to see Myanmar become a “normal state”. That includes pursuing defence and foreign policies which are better aligned with United States interests in the region. The weaning away, or the apparent weaning away, of Myanmar from North Korea, and the abandonment of the perhaps purely fictional nuclear ambitions of the previous Myanmar government, is welcomed by the United States. Even if Myanmar had no nuclear ambitions, pretending to have had them proved sufficient to encourage the United States to normalise relations with the country. Who leads who remains in doubt, at least to sceptics of the American view of world politics.

President Obama’s fleeting visit to Myanmar will not change either Myanmar or the interests of the United States in Myanmar. These are works in progress and given the history of Myanmar-US relations, the way ahead is neither certain nor likely to be smooth. Myanmar’s geography dictates that it cannot get too close to the United States without raising concerns from its giant neighbour to the north. Proximity trumps prospects.

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