

Burma: Time for a New Approach by Ralph A. Cossa

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Burma and Aung Sang Suu Kyi are once again in the headlines, for all the wrong reasons. We may never really know why some foolish American, identified as John Yettaw from Missouri, put himself and Daw Suu Kyi in jeopardy by intruding uninvited into the compound where she has been kept under house arrest for years. It already seems clear that the ruling junta will use this incident to justify keeping her under house arrest or worse – her period of detention was supposed to officially end soon, but few doubted that the junta would come up with some reason to keep her imprisoned. The international response has been predictable. But, demanding Aung San Suu Kyi's release is not a strategy and focusing exclusively on her, as important and symbolic as she is, will not lead to a solution.

As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently observed, U.S. policy toward Burma, as followed by her husband's administration and by the Bush administrations that came before and afterwards, is not working: "Clearly, the path we have taken in imposing sanctions hasn't influenced the Burmese junta," she noted during her mid-February visit to Indonesia. She is, of course, absolutely right.

Before those in Southeast Asia and elsewhere start a chorus of "I told you so," however, Secretary Clinton also observed, equally correctly, that the policy followed by Burma's Southeast Asian neighbors had likewise failed to bring about much needed and promised reform in one of the world's few remaining totally despotic nations – in Asia, only North Korea rivals Burma for top position.

The U.S. position toward Burma has long been one of total isolation and strict sanctions until such time as the ruling junta recognizes the results of the 1990 election which should have brought Nobel Laureate Aung Sung Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to power. This is simply not going to happen. Meanwhile, the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose image is burdened by having Myanmar – the name preferred by Burma and its neighbors – as a member has argued that "constructive engagement" is the best path to reform. The ruling junta has thus far successfully resisted both approaches and seems oblivious to the embarrassment it is heaping upon its neighbors and itself.

That a new policy is needed is beyond dispute. What that policy should or will be is far from clear, however. Some have argued that the Six-Party Talks process being used in Northeast Asia to try to bring about Korean Peninsula denuclearization is a possible format to follow. Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State Jim Steinberg has said that the

United States wants a "collaborative and constructive" approach on Burma, that avoids a "zero-sum game" approach. However, finding a lowest common denominator among Burma, the rest of ASEAN, China, India, Japan, and the United States (the most frequently referenced six parties) will almost guarantee failure. It also puts Burma too much in the driver's seat; like Pyongyang does at the Six-Party Talks, Rangoon could set the terms of the debate and disrupt the process simply by walking out whenever things are not going completely its way. Besides, China has long demonstrated that when it comes to Burma, Beijing is part of the problem, and not eager to be part of the solution, out of concern for "interfering in [Myanmar's] internal affairs."

Others have argued for business as usual. In a letter to Secretary Clinton, seventeen members of the U.S. Congress, urging her to "join us in standing firmly alongside Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's democracy movement," reminded her that the lifting of current sanctions against Burma required that the ruling junta – the State Peace and Development Council or SPDC, headed by General Than Shwe – first release all political prisoners (Aung Sang Suu Kyi being first among some 2100 suspected to remain in captivity) and also engage in genuine dialogue with the NLD and with the nation's troubled ethnic nationalities as well. It completely rejects Burma's new constitution and the sham referendum that "endorsed" it as the fraud that they both are. This approach clearly takes the moral high road. But it remains a road to nowhere, proposing a policy that feels good rather than does good.

Finding a middle ground approach toward Burma does not require Washington to abandon its principles. No one expects that the U.S. is going to embrace the junta any time soon. Nor will it (or should it) endorse a referendum whose opponents were not allowed to express opposing views or a constitution that in effect blocks Daw Suu Kyi from ever assuming power (it excludes from national office those with a foreign spouse – her late husband was a British citizen).

But U.S. sanctions need to be more targeted against the government and its leaders and not against the people themselves. As the International Crisis Group argued last October, "It is a mistake in the Myanmar context to use aid as a bargaining chip, to be given only in return for political change. . . . Twenty years of aid restrictions – which see Myanmar receiving twenty times less assistance per capita than other least-developed countries – have weakened, not strengthened, the forces for change." The bans on Burmese garments, agriculture and fishery products, and restrictions on tourism should be lifted.

The U.S. provision of humanitarian assistance during Hurricane Nargis last year was a step in the right direction, despite the restrictions imposed by the junta on its delivery.

The aid offer, and the junta's initial reluctance to accept it, resulted in the rest of ASEAN arguing for rather than against the U.S. position; this is the circumstance we need to continue to create. This does not equate to "abandoning" Aung Sang Suu Kyi, as critics claim, but involves accepting that the near term goal is not her immediate assumption of power but the restoration of some form of democratic process which can hopefully lead to that near-term goal.

To this end, the U.S. and ASEAN should agree upon a strategy for compelling the junta to live up to its own promises and then judging it by its own standards, not ours. The junta claims it is on the fifth of seven steps in pursuing its "roadmap to democracy" – the official term is actually "roadmap to discipline-flourishing democracy" but most prefer the shorter version. It now promises to hold "free and fair elections" and to then turn over the reins to a civilian government by 2010. Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein reportedly even promised his ASEAN colleagues at their annual summit earlier this year in Thailand that Burma would allow the United Nations to monitor the 2010 election. Without endorsing the vehicles that got them to this point – the constitution and referendum – we can still join hands with ASEAN in insisting that the junta live up to these promises. This will at least put the U.S. and the rest of ASEAN on the same side and put the spotlight and pressure where it really belongs.

This approach will not work, however, if the NLD decides to boycott the elections as it is currently threatening to do if all political prisoners are not released and the junta agrees to a review of the new constitution. This would be a mistake! Such a decision would ensure that the ruling junta will be able to handpick its successor while the rest of ASEAN pretends that the roadmap is being followed. The new trumped up charges against Daw Suu Kyi stemming from the intrusion no doubt have the dual aim of keeping her imprisoned and pushing the NLD toward its threatened boycott. It would be much wiser for the NLD to once again have faith in the same people who voted overwhelmingly for them in the last election and enter the political fray while calling on the junta to keep its "free and fair elections" promise and calling on the rest of ASEAN to ensure that it does. In this way, Aung Sang Suu Kyi's incarceration can be used as a further catalyst to get the people to the polls and once again, as in 1990, embarrass the regime, this time with ASEAN and the rest of the world holding it to its promise.

I had the great pleasure and honor of meeting Daw Suu Kyi (legally) in 2002 when I gave the first lecture ever given by a foreigner at NLD headquarters in Rangoon, during a brief period when she had been released "without restrictions" from house arrest. She was and is a truly inspirational figure totally adored by the masses. I also found her to be totally inflexible and unyielding in her beliefs, characteristics that have no doubt held her in good stead during years of isolation and house arrest. But the time has come for the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi to become more flexible and try to beat the junta at its own game, not by trying to get it to change its rules (since it won't) but by joining together with ASEAN, Washington, and others to make sure that this time they live up to their own rules. If that happens, the roadmap toward

democracy might actually (finally) begin to live up to its own name.