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Why go to Myanmar? By Ernest Bower

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Why should Hillary Clinton go to Myanmar? The short answer is to encourage the best chance at real political change in a country that effectively cloistered itself under harsh military rule for nearly five decades. Myanmar, or Burma, has been the virtual political ball and chain of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which it joined in 1997. Secretary Clinton plans to visit Dec. 1–2, becoming the first US secretary of state to do so since John Foster Dulles 50 years ago.

The plan is essentially to "take them up on it" and proactively encourage what could be a historic opportunity for reform. Thein Sein, Myanmar's president, has signaled that the government is opening the door to political reform and he says he won't go back. History advises caution, however, as the generals have cynically initiated numerous false starts in the past, only to slam the door shut with determined violence. It is likely that the junta's former leader, Than Shwe, has allowed what he sees as a calculated gamble on reform. Whether and at what point he could pull it back remains to be seen.

While analysts will quibble over intent, there is no argument that this time feels different. The Obama administration is seizing the opportunity to encourage change. The approach makes sense for several reasons.

One is that the motivation for change is credible. There are three parts to the answer of why Myanmar is changing now. The first is nationalism and an existential sense of needing options to balance perceived Chinese dominance of the economy, military acquisition, and infrastructure. Myanmar's leaders privately describe tacit Chinese control of their economy as suffocating and encroaching on sovereignty. Local business leaders complain of Chinese companies' ability to virtually flood their market at will with inexpensive goods. Unsurprisingly, Myanmar wants options and space.

Second, Than Shwe is reported to have realized that the system he used to rule with an iron fist was bound to be inherited by the next-strongest and most ruthless general. He knew from experience that this might not augur well for him and his family, much less burnish his legacy. By allowing power to be diffused via political reform, he may be relieved of the potentially damaging ramifications of a military succession. He is willing to take his chances with the legacy of a leader who stepped aside to open the doors to reform.

Finally, there is a quiet but indisputable trend toward empowerment of the people in Southeast Asia. This has been the year of the voter in the region. The "ASEAN Spring" has been a quieter and more peaceful version of what has been happening in the Middle East, but in many ways is no less significant. Governments around the region are scrambling to retain power by pursuing reform—from Malaysia where Prime Minister Najib Razak is unfolding historic reforms to save his ruling coalition, to Vietnam where the Communist Party works incessantly to distribute authority in an effort to survive, to Singapore where the incumbent People's Action Party was shocked in May elections, and to the Philippines where an unexpected reformer was essentially conscripted to run for president based on his mother's legacy.

Indonesia moved earlier and is now coping with the chaotic traits of being a new democracy. Thailand's voters are in the midst of deciding how their country will be governed. In fact, this trend may be compelling. It is more than possible that in the next 10 years political reform in Southeast Asia will affect China more than Chinese economic dominance will change ASEAN.

The decision to send Secretary Clinton to Myanmar to support reform is also consistent with the outlines of a developing US strategy generally and for Southeast Asia specifically. The goal is to strengthen ASEAN as a foundation for new regional security and trade architecture, and thereby create frameworks capable of allowing China to grow and be secure but not use its new economic might to force neighbors' hands on issues related to sovereignty. To be successful, this plan must also allow China to save face in the process.

To achieve this goal, the administration has decided to invest in a significantly more granular engagement and understanding of each of the ASEAN member countries—to fortify the whole by solidifying ties with its parts. This is a labor- and time-intensive approach, and not without risks, but it is the only way to go.

The keystone of America's new Burma policy is that the administration has the support of Aung San Suu Kyi, a woman who personifies her country's struggle for political reform. Through US special envoy Derek Mitchell and others, the United States now has daily communications and access to Suu Kyi. She has announced she will run for Parliament in the coming by-elections (believed to be slated for December, but not officially announced yet). She has also signaled that she trusts President Thein Sein and believes there is no choice but to test how far he can go with reforms.

Actions have backed up words thus far. Thein Sein has followed through on commitments to open up the media, changed the electoral laws to allow Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in elections, passed a new labor law that allows for the formation of unions and collective bargaining, and started to release political prisoners. More needs to be done, and urgently, but these steps demonstrate credible commitment to change. Harder steps will be resolving disputes with the ethnic minorities and implementing much-needed economic reforms.

The US response to these steps forward is likely to be measured. Don't look for US sanctions to be unwound anytime soon. In fact, even if the Obama administration wanted to, it couldn't move too quickly to unwind and revoke the multiple layers of legal sanctions preventing US companies and the US government from engaging Myanmar. The process will be to verify and consolidate gains on reform and respond with appropriate steps toward reengagement. The process will look similar to normalizing relations with Vietnam, if Myanmar is serious about following through. Steps are incremental and take years, as trust is built and progress confirmed.

Secretary Clinton's trip is a strong statement of intent by the United States. Additional near-term measures by the United States could include naming an ambassador, recognizing the country's name as "Myanmar" rather than calling it "Burma," and working to revise the Tier 3 rating for Myanmar on the State Department's Trafficking in Persons report, which automatically prevents the United States from supporting assessment visits by multilateral development institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank.

Clinton's trip is well timed and well advised. It is true that Than Shwe and retrograde forces could try to turn back the political clock in Myanmar. Yet even in this worst-case scenario, the US effort would not have been in vain.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.