

## **How the US could leverage Myanmar ties** by Nay Yan Oo

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For those who hailed Washington's Myanmar policy a success, the fate of US relations with the former pariah state became a pressing question with the advent of the Trump administration. Some now wonder if the positive aspects of US engagement with Myanmar – including the lifting of long-standing economic sanctions in 2015 and 2016, and active support for reforms – will be replaced by a more unpredictable approach. Judging from remarks by Myanmar's leaders, from State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi down, Naypyitaw clearly hopes for further US support for its democratic reforms and closer engagement with its military.

Donald Trump's election as US president has triggered an array of reactions in the Southeast Asian country, which recently emerged from 50 years of military rule. "[Donald Trump is the American Ma Ba Tha](#)," said U Hla Swe, a former prominent parliamentarian from Myanmar's military-backed, former ruling party, the USDP, and an admirer of Trump's nationalistic stance. Ma Ba Tha is a Buddhist nationalist organization that calls for protection of nationality and religion and has led the anti-Muslim movement. Ashin Wirathu, the controversial monk who has whipped up anti-Muslim feeling in the country and was prominent in Ma Ba Tha, also publicly stated: "We stand with Donald Trump."

The Trump phenomenon appeals to the military-backed former ruling party and Ma Ba Tha supporters because Trump's nationalist rhetoric – "America First" – seems to reflect their own ideology. In making policy, they believe, nationalism should take priority over democracy and human rights.

Trump's call to "build a wall" along the US-Mexico border also has strong appeal for some senior Myanmar military officials who envision [their own wall](#) along the border with China and Thailand to block cross-border movements of the ethnic armed groups that operate there. Several key politicians from western Rakhine State, scene of deadly communal tensions between Muslim and Buddhist populations from 2012, also dream of building a wall along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Such a barrier, they assert, will stop border crossings and illegal immigration. For them, Trump is a champion who protects race and religion and promotes a unified nation.

In contrast, the business community, democracy activists, and some government officials in Myanmar are skeptical about Trump's populism. His isolationist pronouncements

have caused alarm in such circles, fuelling worries that US aid and development assistance could decline drastically, while investment from US companies could shrink. They are also concerned that the US might ignore Myanmar's efforts at democratic transition, in contrast to the support of the Obama administration.

## **Popular cause**

There are several reasons why the Trump administration should accord Myanmar a prominent place in its Asia policy. Engagement with Myanmar is a rare area of bipartisan consensus in Washington. Politicians from parties have backed political reforms in Myanmar. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former President Barack Obama, who developed a close friendship with Suu Kyi, now Myanmar's de facto leader, are gone. But influential Republican senators Mitch McConnell and John McCain have been strong supporters of Myanmar's transition.

The country is important geopolitically, given its strategic location between China and India, and as a link between south Asia and members of ASEAN. Myanmar can also feel the Chinese behemoth breathing down its neck. Naypyitaw's political reforms and the reorientation of foreign policy toward the West have helped the US maintain a power balance with China. The new US administration should not miss this opportunity to reinforce a counterweight to China's regional influence, especially one that is reasonably US-friendly. In addition, Myanmar has the potential to emerge as a key regional player. Democracy has been badly fraying in Southeast Asia, as seen in the rise of a populist administration in the Philippines, political scandal in Malaysia, and military rule in Thailand. Myanmar's peaceful transition could become a powerful example in the region. As its fledgling democracy matures and economy grows, Myanmar could play a more influential role in regional issues. It would be wise for the US to maintain its close friendship with a rising power in ASEAN.

Myanmar also offers promise for US businesses and investors. With cheap labor and abundant natural resources, its untapped market of some 53 million people is a great attraction. It shares a border with two of the world's largest markets, China and India, reinforcing its attractiveness to US companies.

To continue its remarkable journey toward liberal democracy, Myanmar needs help from the US to strengthen democratic institutions, promote the rule of law, and nurture a functional market economy. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Yangon [was re-established in 2012](#) after a 23-year hiatus, and a number of US non-governmental organizations have been supporting the country's reforms.

The US government should continue to encourage investment in Myanmar that would create job opportunities for locals, namely in the garment industry, infrastructure, and tourism.

### **Bilateral trade**

Trump says his administration is more interested in bilateral trade deals than multilateral ones. Myanmar should propose a bilateral trade agreement to institutionalize economic relations between the two countries. Inviting US corporations and financial institutions to set up business would be much easier under bilateral trade negotiations, and US business would have more confidence to invest.

In addition, the new secretary of defense should re-examine relations with the Myanmar military. Congress still bars the US military from fully engaging with its Myanmar counterpart. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) still occupies an influential role in politics with an automatic allocation of 25 percent of the seats in Parliament and controlling three ministries related to security. The soldier class has no plans to return to barracks in the near future either. Still, the generals are clearly keen to establish closer ties with the US military because they want to reduce their reliance on Beijing and have a deep desire to reconnect with the international community. The military waits to be modernized, and the generals look forward to assistance from the US

Some diplomats and congressional leaders in Washington believe that limited engagement with the Tatmadaw gives the US the ability to influence the military's behavior. But a recent report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies insisted that "advancing military-to-military engagement is a better way to enhance, promote, and deepen the professionalism and democratic outlook of Myanmar's officer corps and accelerate their withdrawal from politics."

The new US administration should also give Myanmar's armed forces an opportunity to get involved in international peacekeeping operations and security affairs. Washington could invite Myanmar military officers to join the US-run International Military Education and Training program. It can offer training in civil-military relations and counter-terrorism, as well as disaster response management and human rights. The US should encourage track 1.5 and track 2 diplomacy with nongovernmental and civil society organizations.

Such moves could convince the generals to exit the political stage and put Myanmar on the road to a truly civilian government. In return, the Tatmadaw's leaders need to ease US concerns by ensuring involvement of the elected civilian government in security matters, improving its human rights record in troubled areas such as northeast Myanmar and in Rakhine State, working closely with ethnic leaders in the peace process to end the civil war, and terminating relations with North Korea.

The US shares credit for helping end Myanmar's half-century of international isolation. The seeds of democracy have been planted. To keep the plant alive and help it blossom, sustenance from the international community is needed.

Fostering the emergence of democracy and modernization of the military are critical to the success of Myanmar's democratic transition, and it is to be hoped that the Trump administration will continue its full support for this astonishing journey.

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