

The Burma Road Ahead by David I. Steinberg

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The welcome visit by Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and ASEAN Ambassador Scot Marciel to Burma last month inched forward the Obama administration's efforts to improve relations between the United States and Burma/Myanmar. Following on the visit by Sen. Jim Webb in August, and the announcement of the administration's new policy the end of September, these initiatives began what is likely to be a long, arduous road, leading – perhaps – to better relations.

The Obama administration's reconsideration of policy, however, has had to be grounded in U.S. political realities: the goals of the new policy remain the same – better governance and economic development for the people within the context of more democratic administration and human rights – but sanctions could not be removed although higher-level dialogue could begin. It would have been politically impossible for the administration to unilaterally eliminate sanctions, given congressional constraints, as Burma is still (as one official called it) a “boutique issue.”

A great deal of political ammunition cannot be expended on Burma in the light of more pressing international and local problems. There was no public mention of Burma in statements by President Obama to either the Chinese or Indian leadership, and it seems unlikely that it came up as an important private issue in spite of the intense interests in Burma by both neighboring states.

We may not know so early the full effects of the visit, but we may be able to infer certain results from both edges of the still-wide chasm that divides the countries. From a U.S. vantage point, the process toward improved relations that Assistant Secretary Campbell had earlier indicated would be long and somewhat tortuous was born out. That the team had significant time with Aung San Suu Kyi was a helpful indicator, and her present views on sanctions, which are a critical criteria of reconciliation, have not yet been made public and are important in the relationship, as they have more than materially shaped U.S. policy. The meeting with the prime minister was helpful, but one with Gen. Than Shwe, might also have been useful, but was never requested.

The message that seems to have been conveyed by the administration, and one that had been long apparent, was that if the Burmese wish to see a major shift in U.S. policy, then they must take some significant ameliorating action that would demonstrate their intent to reform. The trip also reassured our allies and ASEAN that the U.S. wanted to play a positive role

in the region. Contrary to what some observers have commented, the Chinese likely welcomed the trip and the new policy that indicates the U.S. sought stability both in the region and in Burma. Stability is also clearly part of the Chinese national strategy, given their present and potential influence, investments, and energy interests in that country and their concern for their southern frontier.

From a Burmese regime perspective, the results of the visit and policy also may have been positive. The junta may have picked up a little additional internal legitimacy through their public information campaign on the visit, but that in any case did not spill over to the international community. They have neither made any derogatory statements about the U.S., nor taken any actions that might exacerbate problems with the U.S. The military is centered on the forthcoming 2010 elections.

It is the road ahead, however, on which attention should be focused. For the U.S., the action is now with the Burmese junta, which must take some major step, such as the release of political prisoners, and initiate real internal dialogue on the nature of the political and constitutional processes. Foreign observers have called for free and fair elections, but their attributes have not been defined. For the U.S., do they include not only fairly counting votes, but liberalized campaigning regulations (involving relaxation of the rigid censorship law), allowing the National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate, releasing Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, allowing her to run for office? The last point would involve changing the approved constitution, called for by the NLD but which is highly unlikely. High-level U.S. visits to Burma once again need some important and demonstrable progress from the Burmese side.

The junta may instead claim that their roadmap to “discipline-flourishing democracy” is en route with its culmination in the planned (but as yet unscheduled) 2010 election and the inauguration of the new 2008 constitution by the newly elected Parliament, in which opposition parties will participate but whether their voices will be allowed to be heard is uncertain. This, they might argue, fulfills their promises, and the new government then can deal with the U.S.

From the junta's perspective, they have eminently succeeded (even if they have ignored the welfare of their people). They will have re-established a form of limited representative government, assured continuing and ultimate military control, built a new capital, negotiated cease-fire agreements with a wide swath of minority groups, widely constructed infrastructure, and established a comfortable cushion of foreign exchange earnings (over \$5 billion) after a previous bankrupt regime, and these resources are bound to increase rapidly through gas sales to China. They have, according to their calculations, assured the unity of their state,

their primary articulated objective, and maintained national sovereignty. How much of this resonates internally is unknown, although it falls flat in an international context, and ignores the multiple abuses committed by the regime on its own peoples.

Reaching the joint destination along this divided Burma road of U.S.-Burmese relations is uncertain and likely to be distant, but as Mao Zedong said, it starts with a single step, which at least has been taken and is potentially important even as the destination is distant and obscured.