



***WESTERN POLICY AND THE AUNG
SAN SUU KYI DILEMMA***

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Aung San Suu Kyi for some two decades made Western policy toward Myanmar. Her supposed views, even those attributed to her when she was under house arrest and could not communicate, have more than influenced policy—they have determined it. She rejected the military-imposed name of the country, “Myanmar,” and even today the United States officially, and virtually alone, avoids the military designation, preferring “Burma.” In influential opposition policy circles, and in the media and popular opinion—strongly supported by her winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991—she was pictured as the brave, stalwart icon of truth and justice opposed to a murderous, corrupt military.

Ironically, this image was shattered at the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 2019 by her defense of the brutal military criminal and ethnic cleansing actions against the Rohingya Muslim minority. But even as it reverberated against her internationally, it increased her support amongst the Bamah (Burman) Buddhist ethnic majority—as she no doubt intended—who are deeply prejudiced against the Muslim minority. There seemed little doubt about the high level of support for her, despite the failings of the regime she, even unconstitutionally, “headed.”

The Myanmar situation, always complicated however, has become even more complex since the Feb. 1 coup of 2021. Previously, multiple splits among ethnic minorities and with the central, ethnic Burman

controlled government, together with conflicts between the National League for Democracy (NLD)—reformed since the coup into the National Unity Government (NUG)—and the military has metastasized. A seeming myriad of anti-military, mostly uncoordinated, local defense forces have sprung up against the Tatmadaw (military). Each of these groups have divergent views of the degree of power to be shared, and at what level, if and when the military ceases to be in control.

The country is now more chaotic and has collapsed into what has been called a civil war. But the term and its use dangerously oversimplify something far more complex. Each local group and ethnic minority has distinct, conflicting views on their desired level of local authority and autonomy. The NUG, the nexus of the former NLD, has changed. Aung San Suu Kyi once led that government. Previously, she advocated and led the opposition in a non-violent political and moral campaign against the military. Now, it espouses targeted assassinations and violence in its self-declared “war” against the military. It has abdicated the high moral ground even if its authorized and performed violent incidents dwarf extensive military atrocities.

The NUG is engaged in a full-court press in international circles to attempt to get diplomatic recognition of its authority. It has established an office in Washington DC. Its lobbying forces have extensive access and support there. The military, instead, has turned to Russia, and a degree to China as well, for support. ASEAN has proven to be both inept and inconsequential in dealing with Myanmar in spite of the latter’s membership. India and Japan have their own national interests in Myanmar that are at least in part at variance with those of the European Union and the United States.

For US policymakers, the dilemmas are even more profound. Following the chaos of the failed people’s revolution of 1988, the Republicans strongly backed Aung San Suu Kyi (she was mentioned in the Congressional Record about double the times of Democrats just by Kentucky Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell, and a chair was established and funded in her honor at the University of Louisville). Even in the

late 2000s, when the Obama administration slowly shifted its policies, it did not want to use its limited political ammunition directly confronting Republicans on Myanmar, which was known as a “boutique issue” in the policy community. That pattern seems to have occurred again, with Myanmar now overshadowed by other international flashpoints like Ukraine, North Korea, Taiwan and others.

A great deal of bipartisan support still exists in the United States for Aung San Suu Kyi and in enforcing the sanctions she endorsed and it reimposed on the military regime after the coup. The complexity of the political issues internally in the U.S. are magnified by any administration’s political and diplomatic needs: to avoid insulting Muslims anywhere in the world (the Rohingya, for example, by Aung San Suu Kyi), and upholding democracy, which it interprets as supporting Aung San Suu Kyi as well. These positions are incompatible.

US policies are in favor of the NUG, and it will provide humanitarian assistance to the opposition. Some prominent observers in Washington are calling for political recognition and arming of the NUG. Any such move would exacerbate tensions with China, as one of its prime foci is the restriction of US power and influence on its southern periphery. Improvement in the economic conditions in one of China’s poorest provinces, Yunnan, is largely dependent on tranquility and trade with Myanmar.

As in the past, any major policy shift in US circles accepting some negotiated, modified military role in Myanmar will depend in part on the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from prison or house arrest. But the military leadership has clearly indicated their abhorrence of Aung San Suu Kyi ever assuming any degree of political power, a goal she seems to desire based on her father’s pivotal role in independence and her own extensive sacrifices. They have demonstrated that they believe the lengthy (and political) jail sentences imposed on her, together with her age, will effectively eliminate her from authority. In each case of military rule (Ne Win’s coup in 1962, the SLORC/SPDC rule from 1988 until 2012, and now) the military has thought it had devised a system of perpetual military rule or control. They are likely

thinking of that again. Their inept previous attempts failed. The present efforts are likely to follow in some inscrutable manner.

But there is no indication that the United States or the European Union has interest in dialogue with the military, or indeed the reverse, nor has it devised policies to mitigate future, but even now evident, problems. New approaches are badly needed and require serious exploration. Neither the military nor the NUG can effectively rule with any degree of equity in those multiple societies.

But the West seems locked into past policies that badly need reconsideration and should now be transformed as more blood flows throughout that poor society. Alternative approaches are badly needed and require serious exploration. Any amelioration or solution must be Burmese engineered. But the West has potential roles in helping to suggest and evaluate alternatives.

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