

The Obama Administration on Burma
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Constructive Engagement 2.0

The argument put forth in the United States that the US is moving too fast on Burma. It seems out of touch. At the present time, the US is not in Burma but it should and will be shortly thanks to efforts by the Obama administration.

Representing the views of many in Washington these days, Asia Specialists Michael Green and Daniel Twining have lashed out against the administration for moving too swiftly in rewarding the Burmese government for recent reform efforts. In a July 15 **Washington Post Op-Ed piece**, the two, leftovers from the administration of George W. Bush, accused Obama of "moving too fast on Burma." Their core argument is that despite recent democratization efforts, the "military retains firm control over parliament, stands ready to repress organized dissent and continues military campaigns against ethnic minorities."

However, during a recent research trip to the potholes -- and not the trenches -- of Rangoon, the average Burmese contacted believed these concerns are increasingly unfounded. Access to parliamentary session transcripts is becoming available, the military is largely overlooking organized dissent, and ceasefire agreements are being brokered with ethnic minorities.

The progress that the world has seen so far may plateau, but Burmese who were interviewed believe it will not be reversed, as Green, Twining and most conservatives fear. It appears that gained democratic ground will not be lost. In an interview with a successful Burmese businessman and longtime supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD) the source argued, "The country is moving in the right direction. There is no doubt. There will be no turn-around; we don't have to worry about that."

When asked if the US is acting prematurely by easing sanctions, he remarked, "No, the US is actually late. The Chinese are here and the European Union already suspended their sanctions."

When queried about the recent reforms, a formerly risky line of questioning, there was a general aversion by those interviewed to speak to the topic. From the NLD headquarters to officers at NGOs to citizens on the street, the legitimacy of the reforms -- a recurring theme of the Green and Twining article -- is seen as moot. As a senior advisor at the United Nations Resident Coordinator's office in Rangoon put it: "Look, that debate is not productive. The change has happened; it has taken place. The onus is on us (the people of Burma) to make sure the reforms are accelerated."

Critics of Washington's easing of sanctions correctly acknowledge that major tectonic shifts in Asia, namely the rise of China, have resulted in Burma hedging its bets by forging more partnerships like those with the US and EU. This, of course, has been done in part through democratic reforms. The most current issue that Green and Twining cannot be blamed for missing, but must acknowledge now, are the implications of the July 2012 Asean Summit in Cambodia.

For the first time in Asean's history, as has been widely reported, the 10 Southeast Asian member states, Burma included, failed to issue a joint communique. The cause of the breakdown was due to a small minority of states, led by Cambodia, taking issue with the inclusion of the South China Sea disputes linked to China in the document.

What appears to have happened is that the strings that did not come with the \$10 billion in foreign aid from China to Cambodia over the last two decades were suddenly pulled. China's increasing influence has changed the atmosphere of Asean.

At a time when China is putting pressure on client states in Asia, the US needs to be doing the same. The Obama administration appears to understand this as reflected by the recent round of sanctions easing. It is a step in the right direction for the developing US-Burma bilateral relationship. The statements coming from President Obama on the US's pivot back into Asia, and Burma specifically, sound a great deal like President Clinton's "constructive engagement" of China nearly 20 years ago. After billing the US's attempts to isolate China as "unworkable, counterproductive and potentially dangerous," Clinton engaged China through a deepened economic relationship in an effort to avoid the reality that "If we treat China like an enemy, it surely will become one."

The same can be said for Burma today. By once again pursuing constructive engagement, the Obama Administration will succeed in not only forming a lasting political and economic ally in Southeast Asia, but also arresting what appears to be the free rein of Chinese influence throughout the region.

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