

The Strategic Implications of the Burma Problem

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Madame Chair, I appreciate the opportunity to address this committee on the situation in Burma from the perspective of international security. The members of this committee are to be commended for their consistent support for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the legitimate winners of the 1990 election in Burma. Your bipartisan stand for democracy and human rights in Burma is a source of inspiration for those who quietly prepare for the day when this nation of fifty million citizens can rejoin the international community as a free people in a beautiful and well-endowed land at peace with its neighbors.

Today I want to call the committee's attention to the international security implications of the demise of Burma under General Than Shwe. Than Shwe and the military junta are responsible not only for the reversal of a democratic election result, but also for abuses ranging from persecution of ethnic minorities to systematic rape and the recruitment of child soldiers. Our ideals will not allow us to turn our attention from the fate of the people in Burma or to relent in applying pressure on the regime to return to the path of democracy.

Some argue that these ideals are blinding us to larger strategic interests in Burma. They maintain that a pragmatic and "realist" national security strategy would point to a different course – one of increased engagement with the regime and a relaxation of pressure. They assert that by isolating the military junta in Burma, we are weakening our own strategic position in Asia.

This argument could not be more wrong. I stepped down as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Asian Affairs on the National Security Council staff in December and I come away from that experience firmly convinced that on the question of Burma, our ideals and our national security interests coincide. In short, a strong and unrelenting stand for democracy in Burma is an indispensable element in our overall strategy for maintaining peace and stability in the Asia Pacific region.

I say this for two reasons. First, the tragic mismanagement of Burma's internal affairs by Than Shwe and his government has created an arsenal of trans-national security problems that threaten to undermine stability in the entire region. Since 1996 the Burmese Army's "Four Cuts" strategy has led to the destruction of over 2500 villages and the internal

displacement of about one million people, mostly from the Karen, Shan and other ethnic minorities. Millions also live in hiding or as open exiles in Thailand, China, Bangladesh, India and Malaysia. These refugee flows are a social and security burden on the neighboring states that are further complicated by the attendant problems of trafficking in persons, drugs and transmission of HIV/AIDS. The most chilling example of how these problems build on each other is the practice of drug traffickers to distribute heroin with HIV-tainted needles to villagers as they ply their illegal trade across the borders into India, China and Thailand. Avian influenza now also joins the list of transnational threats emanating from Burma.

The regime in Burma has done almost nothing to address the health and social disasters their Four Cuts strategy has caused. I suspect that this is not just a crime of omission, but part of a deliberate strategy that parallels North Korea's own approach to China and the Republic of Korea. These regimes use their status as a source of transnational instability as tools of blackmail to deter their larger neighbors from stepping up pressure for reform. They are behaving like criminal gangs extorting money from shopkeepers in the neighborhood in exchange for keeping other criminal elements "under control." They can do this because they do not care about the vast majority of people under their care and find that leaving potentially disloyal segments of the population in a state of constant fear and near-starvation is a useful tool for maintaining control. The neighboring states make these bargains with the regime out of fear of what might come next and with the hope that they are contributing to stability, when in fact the problems are just being allowed to fester and grow and will inevitably reach beyond the borders with tremendous security and social implications.

The transnational problems caused by the regime's behavior represent a threat – perhaps a deliberate threat – to the peace and security of South and Southeast Asia. It is for this reason that the United Nations Security Council should take up Burma with its authority under Chapter VII (Article 41) of the United Nations Charter. The votes are there and I hope that the administration pushes with other like-minded nations for a resolution on Burma in the current session. Even if the resolution fails or the Security Council does not take immediate action, there is merit in sharpening our friends and allies' focus on the state of democracy and human rights in Burma. And this is because the debate over Burma in these countries has significance in the context of the broader national security strategy of the United States in the Asia Pacific region.

Let me turn to this second reason why the Burma question bears on our national security interests. The future of Asia is being debated in terms of relative power and rivalry among China, Japan, India and other rising states. What is often overlooked, and what will ultimately be just as important for peace and security in the region, will be the competition of *ideas*. China's rise thus far has been marked by a mercantilist approach coupled with an outmoded policy of "non-interference in internal affairs" of other states. Japan and India once held similar views in many respects, despite their democratic roots. However, increasingly these two nations are defining their national interests in terms of the democratic ideals that distinguish them from China and that they recognize are critical to their own stakes in the international system. Even in Southeast Asia where the

Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was created on the premise of “non-interference in internal affairs” – governments and parliaments are debating whether they can sustain peace and stability in their neighborhood without pressing members to clean up their domestic problems and adhere to norms and rules that are fundamental to the region’s continued economic success.

It is a critical U.S. interest that democracies in Asia continue moving towards national strategies based on shared values and shared rules. The debate over Burma in these capitals is the cutting edge issue. How Tokyo or Delhi or Jakarta decides to manage the Burma problem – whether they stick to non-interference or step up pressure on Burma to adhere to international norms – will prove the major proxy battle of how they approach the region’s broader agenda in the future. If Japan, India, Indonesia and other nations with influence on Burma choose to take a stronger stand in support of the norms that underpin their own democracies, this will not only accelerate the day when the citizens of Burma return their nation to the international community, it will also shape the choices of other nations in transition -- particularly China.

Realists who argue for more “engagement” on Burma are right, but the target of that engagement strategy should be the democratic nations that surround Burma and not yet the junta itself. I would therefore like to briefly review where the debate on Burma is in each of these neighboring states and then suggest steps we can take to mobilize them into a more effective coalition.

Japan is the most promising example of the positive evolution of interests and strategies that I am describing. Japan originally supported Burma’s entry into ASEAN. Tokyo was motivated by a sentimental attachment to Burma dating back to the Second World War and by a desire to distinguish itself from Washington in the region, particularly in the context of U.S.-Japan trade friction and disagreements over how to respond to the 1997 financial crisis in the region. In those days Japanese strategic thinkers took pains to distinguish “Asian values” from the so-called “global values” espoused by Washington. Japan also began worrying about China’s growing strategic influence in Burma as Sino-Japanese competition heated up and the Japanese government matched Chinese aid hundreds of millions of dollars at a time in order to keep up its own influence and not lose out to Beijing.

Things have changed, however. Prime Minister Koizumi himself has acknowledged that the Japanese government’s policy of engagement has not led to greater democratization. Just as important, Japanese political leaders have stopped alluding to distinct “Asian values” and have increasingly been pointing to Japan’s own democratic values as critical to its national identity and international role. I would particularly recommend to the members of the committee Foreign Minister Taro Aso’s December 7, 2005 speech on “Japan as the Thought Leader of Asia” in which he argued that Japan stands as a model for the rest of Asia based on its success through adherence to the principals of market economics and democracy.¹ Political scientists can debate the causes of this change. It

¹ Foreign Minister Taro Aso, “Asian Strategy as I See it: Japan as the Thought Leader of Asia,” December 7, 2005. The text is available on <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announc/fm/aso/speech0512>. Foreign Minister

may result from a distinctly realist assessment of the competition with a non-democratic China or from fundamental changes in Japan's own domestic politics and economy. The result, however, is a new ferment in Tokyo and a new articulation of Japan's purpose based on values that should have a bearing on Japan's approach towards Burma. Recognizing just how important these values are, the Japanese government is undertaking a top-to-bottom review of its Burma policy. The outcome is not certain and we should be fully engaged with Tokyo on that process.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is undergoing a similar shift in thinking. Originally, ASEAN opted for a policy of "constructive engagement" based on the assumption that inclusion in the regional grouping would incentivize the junta in Burma to make the right choices. For years our Thai counterparts argued that the so-called Bangkok Process of international meetings with Burma would lead to concrete results, including a detailed roadmap for returning to democratization, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, and inclusion of the NLD in the constitutional convention. It is now obvious that these results have not happened as Than Shwe has purged Kin Nyunt and others involved in the Bangkok Process.

As a result, ASEAN and its member governments have begun recasting their approach to Burma, calling on the regime to release Aung San Suu Kyi and convincing Than Shwe last year to pass on chairing ASEAN when his turn came up in 2006. ASEAN leaders' embarrassment at Burma's non-response to constructive engagement has led to even tougher words from the governments in the region both privately and publicly since then. With the first direct Presidential elections in Indonesia 2004 and increasing pluralism and parliamentary activism in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, the character of other ASEAN member states is itself changing and many within are taking their nation. These changes have been pushed by transnational groups within ASEAN such as the Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus. Indonesia's new activism is most encouraging, with President Yuduhono's early March visit to Burma to establish a joint commission between Rangoon and Jakarta with the primary focus of monitoring the junta's progress towards democratic reform. And just this week Malaysian Foreign Minister Hamid went last week to Burma on behalf of ASEAN to press for democracy, but left in frustration after being blocked from seeing Aung Suu Kyi or Than Shwe. He is set to report on his visit to the rest of ASEAN on April 17th and although he called his visit a success publicly, I expect the private discussion among ministers will be about how to deal with the further retrenchment and backsliding of the regime.

The picture is still decidedly mixed in ASEAN, however. The bureaucracies and foreign ministries worry about the transnational problems presented by the junta's mismanagement of the nation and continue to resort to the default position of paying them off with aid in order to avoid further troubles. The strategic mentality in these foreign ministries also remains mired in the non-aligned tolerance for bad internal governance and ideological resistance to interference in internal affairs from the developed world. New leaders like Susilo Bambang Yuduhono in Indonesia, Lee Hsien

Aso echoes this them with respect to Sino-Japanese relations in a March 13, 2006 op/ed in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Japan Awaits a Democratic China."

Loong in Singapore, and Abdullah Badawi of Malaysia, are often more enlightened than their bureaucracies and recognize the need to push Burma on democracy. However, these ASEAN leaders are also competing among themselves for the spotlight and the regime is using the competition for regional leadership within ASEAN to divide ASEAN leaders against themselves and to weaken the message many are clearly carrying on the need for change. The growing democratic instincts of ASEAN leaders are right, but are still not being met with results in implementation.

India is also embracing democracy as a central tenet of its international role and is moving away from older, mercantilist and non-aligned ways of thinking about international security. Like Japan, India's strategic culture may be shifting because of a combination of internal political and economic change and the implications of China's rise. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has clearly articulated this aspect of India's identity in speeches, declaring in 2005, for example that:

If there is an "idea of India" that the world should remember us by and regard us for, it is the idea of an inclusive and open society, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society. All countries of the world will evolve in this direction as we move forward into the 21st Century. ²

This shared value with the United States has become one of the pillars of the United States' transformed strategic relationship with India under President Bush. In their March 2 joint statement in New Delhi, for example, Prime Minister Singh and President Bush agreed to work together on the promotion of democracy through the UN Democracy Fund, and cooperation in international forums such as the International Centre for Democratic Transition (ICDT).³ Rhetorically, the Indian government has said that it wishes to see a strong, prosperous and democratic Burma and Prime Minister Singh has said that he would like to see the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, where the rubber meets the road the Indian government has been sending mixed signals to the regime. The lure of enhanced economic interaction with ASEAN through the Burma road and fears that Burma might allow cross-border destabilization of the Assam region in India have both led Delhi to opt for aid over pressure for real change. Indian President Abdul Kalam's March 12 visit to Burma with a new \$40 million aid package and a deal on natural gas was dissonant with the Bush-Singh joint statement on democracy, to say the least. President Kalam did call on his counterparts to release Aung San Suu Kyi and to keep on the path to democracy, but the theme he emphasized much more was the importance of Burma as India's "gateway" to Southeast Asia. There are also contradictory signals being sent by the Indian military's ongoing engagement with the Burmese Army.

Nevertheless, I believe that India's new focus on democracy promotion is real and that there is an intense debate about overall strategic purpose and direction in Delhi. For now,

² The transcript of Prime Minister Singh's remarks at the India Today Conclave, New Delhi, February 25, 2005 is available on <http://www.pmindia.nic.in/speeches.htm> (cited in C. Raja Mohan, *Impossible Allies: Nuclear India United States and the Global Order*. Delhi: India Research Press, 2006, p. 93).

³ U.S.-India Joint Statement, March 2, 2006. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/03>.

the many actors in India's national security bureaucracy, the hard-edged realist mentality they bring to regional problems and the lingering NAM mentality, have all conspired to prevent the new strategic should therefore be a major topic for U.S.-India dialogue at all levels. It is critical that we keep Burma front and center as a point for U.S.-India cooperation, respecting India's interests but pushing Delhi to live up to its ideals.

That brings us to China. China is Burma's strongest supporter. China-Burma trade was \$1.2 billion in 2005 (of \$5 billion total trade for Burma) and Beijing is negotiating new investments in economic "free trade zones" in Syriam and in the construction of a pipeline to ship Burma's untapped offshore natural gas reserves to Yunnan Province. In February this year Premier Wen Jiabao visited Burma and told Soe Win that China opposes the imposition of economic sanctions. Fears that Beijing might "Finlandize" the regime or develop military facilities in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal have in turn been major motivating factors for Tokyo, Delhi and ASEAN's own counterbalancing policy of engagement with the regime. (I am once again reminded of North Korea, where fear of China's unchecked influence has propelled the Republic of Korea to take a more accommodating stance towards Pyongyang.) While it is unlikely that Beijing will adopt democracy promotion as part of its foreign policy toolkit anytime in the near future, I do think it is possible to have an influence on China's approach to Burma which is ultimately going to be indispensable if we are going to change the regime's behavior.

First, there is growing evidence to suggest that China is unhappy about the self-defeating behavior of the Than Shwe regime and that Beijing is beginning to push quietly for internal reforms. In part this is because of the export of drug and HIV/AIDS problems from Burma into neighboring province of Yunnan. I suspect that Beijing also worries about the possible implosion of Burma under Than Shwe. Chinese leaders clearly fear the domino of "colored revolutions" that began spreading from Eastern Europe through Central Asia and would probably not like to see collapse of an authoritarian regime right in their own neighborhood. In short, Beijing has real self-interest in stopping the leadership in Burma from taking further steps that lead to instability internally and in the region.

Second, we must make it clear to Beijing that China will be held accountable in Washington for the "company it keeps." Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's Senior Dialogue with Chinese Executive Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingqun on China's role as a "stakeholder" in international society has been effective in this regard. Hu Jintao has espoused a policy of "peaceful development" to emphasize that China's concerns are internal and China seeks to be a benign force in international relations. Through the Zoellick-Dai dialogue, I believe the Chinese are learning that on questions like Burma, a policy of commercial engagement unencumbered by expectations of adherence to international norms is mercantilist and therefore anything but benign. I also think we can convince Beijing to appreciate that short term accommodation of the regime may only prolong and complicate longer-term problems of instability emanating from Burma.

Taking this argument directly to China is necessary but not sufficient. Beijing must also see that democracy and the rule of law are the *region's* agenda as well. A successful strategy to mobilize the regional actors that increasingly care about the internal state of affairs in Burma will create a coalition that Beijing cannot ignore. China will not want to be the anti-*status quo* outlier in Asia. I believe China will move pre-emptively for change in Burma rather than see the change dictated by democratic powers aligned with the United States. And this need not be seen in zero-sum terms in the U.S.-China relationship. Ultimately, action by Beijing to change the behavior of regimes like Burma and North Korea will provide the substance for a more strategic and mutual beneficial U.S. China partnership.

Given that the Burma question is one that touches not only on American values, but also on our national security interests, how should we organize ourselves? I have three specific recommendations.

First, the United States should press for the UN Security Council for a resolution on Burma based on Chapter VII of the UN Charter. This will take diplomatic energy and will rile some members whose votes we need for other Security Council debates over Iran. However, as I have argued here, the issue is larger and more strategic than Burma itself. And, frankly, it is the right thing to do.

Second, the United States should take the lead on organizing the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Burma to contain and reverse the transnational threats of HIV/AIDS and Avian Influenza. In fact, the United States, recognizing the serious threat that HIV/AIDS poses not just to Burma but to the region, led the effort to get the Global Fund involved in Burma and it was decisions by the junta that ultimately led to the unfortunate but unavoidable decision to pull back. The U.S. government has also provided the initial equipment necessary to help detect and contain Avian Influenza outbreaks and should continue to do so as necessary. Burma's neighbors and traditional advocates of "constructive engagement" have been far less willing to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Burma to respond to these health threats. We should press them to do so, for example, as part of a coordinated international approach to meet the World Health Organization's call for \$4 million in assistance for fighting avian influenza in Burma.

Third, we should organize an international coalition for change in Burma to replace the now moribund Bangkok Process. The President has raised Burma with every regional leader he has met and senior officials like Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns and Undersecretary for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky have carried on the message at their level. It is time to push for a common roadmap that can succeed through strength of numbers. I would organize this effort with Japan, India, Australia ASEAN and the European Union. The United Nations should also be involved, of course. And I would avail China of the opportunity to join other regional players to enhance stability by pushing collectively for changed behavior by Burma, but China's participation would have to be premised on recognizing the need to press for change.

In fact, my colleagues and I began some of this process informally while I was at the National Security Council and found that counterparts in key ASEAN states were eager for more. They know that “constructive engagement” and the Bangkok process have not led to results. They know that the *status quo* is fundamentally unstable and that they will only face more cross-border problems from Burma in the future. They see Than Shwe’s decision to move the capital to Pyinmana as evidence of an increasingly delusional leadership driven by the recommendations of soothsayers and astrologers. They recognize that ASEAN’s clout vis-à-vis other international actors is being weakened. They worry about China’s growing influence, but they say that they can build consensus for a new approach if we can bring on board Japan and India. They are not yet ready to abandon engagement, but they are ready to look at adding more sticks to their menu of carrots.

If we are to organize for a deliberate multilateral approach to the Burma problem, the goal should not be immediate “engagement” of Burma per se. Instead, we should focus our energy on the production of a common roadmap that outlines concrete goalposts we need to see as evidence of a return to democracy. These goalposts must include the immediate and irreversible release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the leadership of the NLD and ethnic leaders and their full participation in a transparent and sustained process of national reconciliation aimed at the restoration of democracy. In order to build a multilateral consensus even among our closest allies, we will have to include both carrots and sticks. The carrots can easily include reassurances about the territorial integrity of Burma, but will also have to involve incremental sanction lifting at some stage in the process. From regional actors we should insist on more sticks if the regime does not take the right steps. These sticks might include freezing further investment in commercial projects. We should also push for coordination on humanitarian relief.

The specific mechanics of this multilateral effort should be left to the administration, but I think the time is ripe to put forward a consensus message to the regime that its neighbors are willing to assist with the transition to democracy, but prepared to impose consequences on Burma collectively for non-action.

The Burma problem has reached the tipping point in the view of many of the regime’s neighbors. If we work with like-minded states on an approach that pools our collective sticks and carrots in a systematic way, the regime will not be able to ignore its neighbors’ collective will. Moreover, we will help move our friends and allies to a values-based strategy that strengthens the prospect for continued democratization and adoption of the rule of law across the entire region.

Thank you.