



THE GEOPOLITICS OF OBAMA'S VISIT TO MYANMAR

By Felix K. Chang



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President Barack Obama flew to Southeast Asia for a three-day trip on November 18. Principally, he was there to attend the Seventh East Asian Summit in Phnom Penh. The summit was first organized by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2005 and has since become not only a forum for national leaders from around the Asia-Pacific to discuss regional issues, but also a way for ASEAN to engage external countries. ASEAN invited the United States to participate in 2010 and Obama's attendance at this year's summit underscored American commitment to the region.

But beyond the summit, Obama also touched down in Bangkok and Yangon. While one can well understand his visit to Thailand—America's longtime ally on the Indochina peninsula -- his visit to Myanmar may appear incongruous at first glance. Only two years ago, the United States considered Myanmar to be a pariah state ruled by a military dictatorship. As late as May 2012, Obama ostensibly declared it to be an "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."¹ Along with other Western allies, the United States maintained strict economic sanctions against the country.² Hence Obama's visit marked a major milestone in the normalization of American relations with Myanmar. It was also indicative of how the United States has sought to deal with the rise of Chinese influence in the region, by more actively engaging the countries of the region's foremost multilateral organization, ASEAN.

Certainly, Myanmar's relations with the United States rapidly thawed after its military government held democratic elections in 2010, and the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi won a seat in Myanmar's legislature. Soon thereafter, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invited Myanmar to join the Lower Mekong Initiative, America's primary engagement tool with Southeast Asia, and visited its new capital of Naypyidaw in 2011. A year later, Suu Kyi toured the United States and accepted an honor from the U.S. Congress that she was unable to receive when it was bestowed in 2008. At the end of her visit to the White House, Obama pledged to allow American companies to "responsibly do business in Burma."³

¹ "Message -- Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Burma," White House press release, May 17, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/17/message-continuation-national-emergency-respect-burma>.

² The United States severed all trade with Myanmar under the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003.

³ "Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi given US Congressional medal," BBC News, Sep. 19, 2012.

Two years earlier, Myanmar faced a very different world. Its isolation from much of the West shaped its foreign relations. Despite years of mistrust, Myanmar's generals developed strong ties with China. Since the 1990s, Myanmar closely cooperated with Chinese companies to develop its natural gas reserves as well as construct the rail and pipeline infrastructure connecting its port of Kyaukpyu to China's border. The port, also built by Chinese firms, is largely used as a terminal for energy shipments bound for China, enabling it to skirt the Malacca Strait and avoid President Hu Jintao's famed "Malacca Strait dilemma." And when Chinese cities demanded more electricity, Myanmar worked with China to plan a series of hydroelectric dams on the Irrawaddy River, including the controversial Myitsone dam.

Yet even as Myanmar's ties with China bloomed, some within its military government remained wary of China's ultimate intentions, especially as Chinese companies have come to dominate the northern part of their country. But while Myanmar was under Western economic sanctions, their best option remained cooperation with China. So whatever reservations Myanmar's generals had, they were set aside.

But then sentiment started to shift. Myanmar's generals began to see the limits of their cooperation with China. Growing Chinese demands put China's interests at odds with Myanmar's. A prime example was the Myitsone dam project, which heightened the Myanmar military government's conflict with domestic ethnic groups, most notably the Kachin Independence Organization, which feared the dam's construction would destroy several of its hallowed sites. And surely, Myanmar has heard the grumbling of its fellow ASEAN countries over China's increasingly assertive behavior. Its continental neighbors have been frustrated with the lack of Chinese concern for their river-reliant communities as China builds mainstream dams on the upper Mekong River; and its maritime neighbors, most notably the Philippines and Vietnam, have been alarmed by what they perceive as Chinese bullying in their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

At the same time, the American foreign policy establishment awoke to the need to slow the rapid spread of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, especially after China's successful diplomatic "charm offensive," stretching from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.⁴ And so, the United States has since sought ways to deepen its engagement with the region.

Gradually the interests of Myanmar and the United States converged. Already aware that many of its original national goals remained unmet and reform was needed, the Myanmar military government took the first tangible step when it held democratic elections in the country for the first time since 1990. As they were structured, the elections fell well short of being fully democratic, given that 25 percent of the parliamentary seats were reserved for military government appointments and many political opponents were barred from running as a result of their prior imprisonment. Still, Myanmar's generals promised that the elections were only one in a number of steps in their "roadmap to democracy."⁵

For the United States, Myanmar's 2010 elections were enough for it to reach out to the long-ostracized country. Washington overlooked the election's flaws and feted the milestone and the election of Suu Kyi. For Myanmar's generals who were concerned about China, the elections provided them with the opportunity to diversify their country's sponsors and sent a message to Beijing that it should not take Naypyidaw for granted. If that was not sufficiently clear, Myanmar's president and former general, Thein Sein, first delayed and then cancelled the Myitsone dam project despite strong Chinese pressure for it to proceed. The dam project's cancellation was the first time any Southeast Asian country openly defied China's will. Other countries took notice. Some now speculate that when Myanmar assumes the ASEAN presidency in 2014 it may set an agenda decidedly cooler toward China, unless Beijing does more to assuage Southeast Asian concerns.

Meanwhile, the United States must still demonstrate to Myanmar how deeper engagement will brighten its lot. Failure to meet Burmese expectations may encourage pro-Chinese elements within the military government to reassert themselves. In September 2012, the United States took its first steps to dismantle its economic sanctions regime against Myanmar, which both Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi applauded.⁶ But given the current aims of

⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia," *Current History*, Sep. 2006, pp. 270-276.

⁵ Toshihiro Kudo, *One Year of Myanmar's Thein Sein Government* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies-Japan External Trade Organization, May 2012), pp. 2-5.

⁶ Andrew Quinn, "Clinton says U.S. to ease Myanmar import ban," Reuters, Sep. 26, 2012.

the Lower Mekong Initiative, it seems unlikely that the initiative will yield many more immediate gains for Myanmar.⁷ Hence it will invariably fall to American business and non-governmental organizations to establish America's imprimatur in the country. Already Japanese companies have taken advantage of the opening to extend their economic footprint into what they have heralded as "Asia's last frontier."⁸

Even so, some activists and human rights organizations believe that the reward of American engagement with Myanmar has come too soon, given that its government still holds political prisoners and is unable or unwilling to halt the violence against the Rohingya people in western Myanmar.⁹ No doubt Beijing feels the same way, though likely for reasons more associated with geopolitics. And it is in that geopolitical context that Obama's visit to Myanmar should be understood—part of a larger American foreign policy objective and one that is in line with his administration's "pivot" (or the somewhat more politically-sensitive term "rebalancing") to Asia.

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⁷ Felix K. Chang, "The Lower Mekong Initiative and U.S. Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: Energy, Environment, and Power," *Orbis* 57:1 (Winter 2013).

⁸ Yoree Koh, "Myanmar's Creaky Open Door," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 21, 2012, B1; "Myanmar: Reforms Spur Foreign Investment," NHK World, Jul. 1, 2012, <http://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/english/tv/asia7/archives201206290600.html>.

⁹ Sam Holmes, "Myanmar Activist Questions Reforms," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 24-25, 2012, p. A7.