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The US and Myanmar: Moving into a New Phase

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At the recent United Nations general debate, US President Barack Obama outlined his vision for US foreign policy, making a clear break with the previous administration. The shift has significant implications for Southeast Asia and in particular for the people of Myanmar.

ON 23 SEPTEMBER 2009, the general debate of the 64th session of the United Nations opened with Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon reaffirming the UN Charter and faith in the principles of peace, justice, human rights and equal opportunity for all. This was subsequently followed by a significant address by US President Obama. In his speech, the American leader said the US has entered a “new era of engagement” with the world, based on “mutual respect” but cautioned that solving the world’s problems “cannot be the sole endeavour of the United States”.

This shift to a broad multifaceted foreign policy has re-energised efforts to solve various global problems from crafting a successor agreement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to human rights issues in Burma or Myanmar. This re-engagement illustrates the Obama Administration’s commitment to *smart power*, which has significant implications for Southeast Asia and, in particular, the people of Myanmar.

Smart Power

The concept of Smart Power grew out of the need for an alternative response to the neo-conservatives after September 11. The essence of smart power is liberal internationalism, which argues the world is a safer place if it is made up of liberal democratic states. This theory also posits the use of multiple foreign policy tools to achieve this end, rather than simply coercion through the use of force. These tools include diplomatic, economic as well as military means to achieve strategic ends.

What this means for the international system is that there will be various strategies across different levels of governance to resolve international disputes. This shift in ideology underpinning US foreign policy has brought a renewed commitment by the US to lead and provide an opportunity to resolve

human rights and democratic transition issues in Myanmar.

Engaging the Military Regime

Indeed, in the past few months, this new strategy has turned the limelight back on Myanmar. It has increased pressure on the military to drop the charges against Aung San Suu Kyi, which had the initial effect of reducing her sentence and returned to house arrest, rather than incarceration in Insein jail. Additionally, as a result of US diplomatic efforts, the American John Yettaw was deported after a visit by Senator Webb. This new strategy of using multiple foreign policy tools has started to bear fruit but there remains a long road ahead – one the US is willing to pursue.

Recently, US Secretary of State Clinton stated that the US is willing to engage with the military in Myanmar while continuing sanctions. This shift is yet another clear sign that Myanmar has re-entered the US foreign policy agenda. Indeed, Clinton said that while sanctions are an important part of the strategy towards the military government, “by themselves they have not produced the results that had been hoped for on behalf of the people of Burma”. These new policies of diplomatic engagement alongside economic sanctions are the hallmarks of smart power.

Positions of Responsibility

This multifaceted US foreign policy has also seen the US engaging at the regional level through its signing of the Southeast Asian Treaty of Amity and Cooperation earlier this year. While a largely symbolic gesture, it signalled the US’ commitment to “mutual respect” by subscribing to regional norms, working for peaceful conflict resolution, and respecting national sovereignty. It also signalled that while the US is willing to lead, it is looking for other leaders: locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally.

In this vein, the US is looking for regional players like Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to take a lead role in exerting bilateral pressure on Myanmar to improve the situation. Additionally the US will be looking towards these countries to take a regional lead in garnering support to pressure Myanmar through ASEAN and related institutions, while also offering assistance to Myanmar to improve its human rights and democracy.

At the national level, the recent visit by US Senator Webb included an audience with Aung San Suu Kyi. While an obvious choice as a national leader, she continues to be under house arrest, so other avenues need to be pursued, such as through the National Democracy Party executive committee, and other civil society leaders. For this renewed diplomatic engagement to work, however, the other players in this effort need to play their part. While Aung San Suu Kyi “warmly welcomed” the US strategy of engagement with the military government, she also suggested that this engagement include the opposition. The US lead should be replicated with Myanmar’s local and national opposition leaders.

While there is a focus on building support across and between different levels of governance, there is also a need for fallback plan. What happens if the current diplomatic push for a significant improvement in human rights and democratic change does not occur in Myanmar? In such an eventuality, then further economic sanctions should be an option. The UK has recently touted an arms embargo on Myanmar.

Indeed, the UK could well be another leader the US needs to make its smart power work well. While the US provides diplomatic leadership alongside other local, national, and regional leaders, the UK can build support for an arms embargo should there be a lack of progress in Myanmar. This would reinvigorate diplomatic initiatives to improve human rights and produce democratic change there. Certainly the recent diplomatic overtures triggered by Obama’s strategic shift in foreign policy

provide a glimmer of hope that progress on these issues can and will happen.

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