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US and Myanmar: Need for Rapprochement

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Synopsis

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's ground-breaking visit to Myanmar signals a shift in US attitude towards that country. Quicker rapprochement could benefit both countries as well as Southeast Asia.

Commentary

SIGNALLING A significant shift in US attitude towards the military-dominated regime in Naypidaw, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's landmark visit to Myanmar on 1-2 December 2011 could well inaugurate a new era of relations between the two countries. Mrs. Clinton is the first US secretary of state to visit Myanmar in 50 years since the military seized power in 1962. The visit comes in the wake of national elections in November 2010 and the installation of a military-turned-civilian president and government. This reflects international recognition of the political and social changes that have occurred in Myanmar.

While the characteristics and evolution of this new era remains very much in question, recent reforms suggest that the United States, long disapproving of the military regime in Myanmar, should accelerate its efforts to re-engage the country. High level visits are an important first step, but Washington should back these largely symbolic efforts with concrete engagement policies if it hopes to help influence developments in Myanmar in a positive way.

Softly, Softly Approach

The US has been pursuing a 'wait and see' strategy in Myanmar, an approach for which it cites several justifications. Substantial reforms are in their infancy, the power structures that defined decades of military rule are clearly not set to simply evaporate, and the future of governance, human rights and economic progress in the country is fraught with uncertainty. As Mrs. Clinton has pointed out, there are still untold numbers of political prisoners, ethnic divides remain largely unaddressed and the country still has leagues to go before attaining the electoral, judicial and pluralistic earmarks of a mature democratic society.

These concerns notwithstanding, changes in Myanmar require the US to be more responsive. In short order, reformers within the Myanmar leadership have paved the way for more freedom of the press, legalised the right to protest, released over 200 political prisoners, allowed the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi more political space and fostered a parliamentary process defined by lively debates. These movements are not insignificant, and should be rewarded by the US, not simply with cautious approval and diplomatic visits, but with tangible actions that send the message that reforms bring attractive benefits.

Such actions would not only signal to Myanmar American intentions, but would also bolster the US' strategic position in the region.

Getting into the Game

Left behind in terms of development, Myanmar, as with other developing countries, requires investment and economic partnerships to progress. US economic intransigence towards Myanmar, while understandable in the past, now risk rendering it a perpetual outsider in Myanmar's economic future. This comes at a time when Myanmar seems eager for ties that consider the environmental and social implications of development projects. As a resource-rich and capital-poor country, Myanmar can easily regress further without improvements in the lives of its citizens.

A more robust US economic presence in the country would offer an alternative source of investment to those coming from other regional players. At the same time, more vigorous economic partnerships between the US and Myanmar would strengthen the American presence in Southeast Asia, and provide it a foothold in Myanmar and benefit from its strategic location.

Despite these potential gains, few expect that there will be swift, bold or particularly creative US policy shifts in Myanmar. Mrs. Clinton has been clear during the lead up to her visit that sanctions would continue for the foreseeable future and that the US would not be making "any abrupt changes" in policy. This conservatism results from a number of factors.

Engagement: Easier Said than Done

The first major obstacle impeding incremental US engagement in Myanmar is its heavy policy reliance upon Ms SuuKyi. Although undeniably an icon in Myanmar's democratic struggle, she has been made both gatekeeper and conduit for bilateral relations by the US. Recently, for example, President Obama sought the NLD leader's approval of the pace and direction of US engagement efforts with the Myanmar government before deciding to send Mrs. Clinton to the country. This peculiar approach to policy formulation prevents a deeper appreciation of developments within Myanmar and of other stakeholders.

A related obstacle to diplomatic warming is the oversimplification of Myanmar's internal political landscape by US commentators and policymakers. Myanmar has been presented such that its internal affairs are seen as a morality play between protagonists and antagonists. This culminated under the George W. Bush administration in Myanmar being called an "Outpost of Tyranny". Connections between actors in Washington and Christian-dominated minorities such as the Chin, Kachin and Karen have also skewered perception towards Myanmar. These perceptual factors have limited the scope of possible engagement between Myanmar and the US and should not be underestimated.

A vocal pro-sanctions, anti-engagement lobby in Washington consisting of Myanmar dissidents and human rights activists also has considerable sway in determining America's foreign policy. A general lack of development in Myanmar's domestic political status quo over the past two decades has rendered this polarised foreign policy sclerotic. The most stark example is the continuation of counter-productive sanctions against Myanmar. Despite mounting evidence on the inefficacy of such sanctions, the current bout of reforms and Myanmar's repeated calls for the lifting of sanctions have even been construed by some as proving that the sanctions have been successful.

These obstacles have contributed to ineffective US policies toward Myanmar that reflect ostensible political morality over pragmatism. This has only worsened the impasse in bilateral relations. Ongoing developments in Myanmar necessitate that the US reengage the country as a matter of priority.

Need for Political Will

While Mrs. Clinton's groundbreaking visit is significant, the Obama administration needs to go beyond recognition and guarded praise to demonstrate to the fledgling government of Myanmar that Washington is a willing partner. Doing so requires incremental diplomatic rewards for changing behaviour in Naypyidaw; in this regard the US is already running a deficit. Doing less will mean a missed opportunity.

The US needs to muster the political will and domestic support to pursue a policy of rapprochement with Myanmar. Doing so will benefit both countries as well as Southeast Asia in general.

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