

Obama's move on Burma

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The announcement last week that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would travel to Burma (Myanmar) in early December indicates a further shift by the Burmese junta away from its longstanding ally China toward closer relations with the US. The two-day visit is part of a broad diplomatic offensive being waged by Obama administration throughout Asia to undermine China's growing influence.

Clinton's trip follows visits in recent months by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell, Obama's special envoy for Burma Derek Mitchell, and Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour Michael Posner. In September, the US waived a travel ban on Burmese officials to allow Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin to visit Washington for talks.

Announcing Clinton's visit at the East Asia Summit in Bali, President Barack Obama declared that she would "explore whether the United States can empower a positive transition in Burma and begin a new chapter between our countries." Clinton will meet President Thein Sein, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and senior officials.

Obama is dressing up the still tentative rapprochement with the Burmese junta in the language of democratic reform. "After years of darkness, we've seen flickers of progress," he declared. Obama is no more concerned about democratic rights in Burma than in Libya, Afghanistan or Iraq where the US has imposed client regimes through military force.

Whether Washington brands a regime as autocratic or "travelling down the road to democratic reform" is determined solely by its willingness to further American strategic and economic interests. On this score, the Burmese generals have shown "flickers of progress"—most significantly by suspending a huge Chinese-financed dam project in late September.

While Clinton has been at pains to deny her visit was aimed at curbing the influence of China, the *Financial Times* noted, "A senior administration official said that one of the encouraging recent signs from the government had been its decision to stop the construction in the north of the country." Burma has been heavily dependent economically on China as a

result of hefty sanctions imposed by the US and its European allies.

The junta's "democratic reforms" are nothing but scanty window dressing, aimed primarily at reaching a political accommodation with opposition leader Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). The regime held tightly-controlled elections last November under a new constitution that leaves the military with extensive powers. In March, it formally handed power to the new president Thein Sein, a former general.

Suu Kyi, who was released from house arrest last year, met with Thein Sein in August and gave a widely reported interview to Agence France Press in September that lent legitimacy to the new government. She warned against any "Arab-style" uprising, and called for "change through peaceful means, through negotiation."

Following recent constitutional and legal changes to allow NLD to participate in elections, Suu Kyi announced last Friday that the NLD would end its opposition to the current constitution and field candidates in upcoming by-elections. She indicated that she would stand for one of the seats.

By running in the elections, Suu Kyi and the NLD give their stamp of approval to the constitutional framework concocted by the generals, who retain much of their power. For decades, the US and its allies have promoted Suu Kyi as a "champion of democracy." In reality, she and the NLD represent sections of the Burmese bourgeoisie that resent the military's political and economic dominance and seek to open up the country as a cheap labour platform for Western investors.

The US is pushing for Suu Kyi's inclusion in the political process as a reliable representative of American interests. Significantly, Obama phoned Suu Kyi before announcing Clinton's visit. He told the media in Bali that Suu Kyi "supports American engagement to move this process forward."

Suu Kyi defended the decision to take part in elections, declaring: "Some people are worried that taking part could

harm my dignity. Frankly, if you do politics, you should not be thinking about your dignity. I stand for the re-registration of the NLD party. I would like to work effectively towards amending the constitution. So we have to do what we need to do.”

Clinton’s visit will mark a sea change in US relations with Burma. The trip will be the first by a US Secretary of State since John Foster Dulles visited Burma in 1955, during the Eisenhower administration. US relations with Burma deteriorated markedly after the military seized power in 1962. Following the junta’s savage repression of mass strikes and protests in 1988, the US and European powers imposed sanctions, which were further tightened after a second crackdown on protesters in 2007.

After taking office in 2009, Obama made a sharp change in US policy toward Burma, which under President George W. Bush had amounted to a series of ultimatums and tougher sanctions. Following extensive policy review, the Obama administration announced a significant shift to what it termed “a carrot and stick approach”—maintaining sanctions, but offering step-by-step improvements if the junta made concessions.

The junta’s decision to move cautiously toward a rapprochement with Washington has been driven by several factors. The sanctions have limited access to Western investment and markets and impacted on the Burmese economy, despite Chinese aid and investment, mainly in infrastructure and resource projects. This lop-sided economic development has fuelled inflation, unemployment and the threat of further social unrest.

The Burmese regime has been following events in the Middle East closely. In an interview with Reuters in Bali, Ko Ko Hliang, chief political advisor to President Thein Sein, explained: “As you can see in the Arab states and also in Syria, there is some turmoil. Even in Egypt. There were mobs. So what our leaders would like to see is a stable and smooth transition to democracy.”

No doubt the junta also watched the NATO bombing of Libya and the ousting of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi with a degree of trepidation. While there have been no signs of any plans for US military intervention in Burma, the generals are determined not to become the next target for regime-change as Obama turns his focus to the Indo-Pacific region.

The Obama administration and the US political establishment regard the opening in Burma as something of a diplomatic coup against China. While urging caution, an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* on Sunday, declared: “Now President Obama has an opportunity to press for greater liberalisation in Burma,

bring it more into a pro-American orbit, and add its weight as a counterbalance to an encroaching China.”

China has invested considerable money and effort in Burma, not only as a source of raw materials but as part of Beijing’s strategic calculations. Chinese military strategists have been especially concerned that key shipping routes for imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa pass through the Malacca Strait, which is effectively under US naval hegemony. Construction began in 2009 on oil and gas pipelines from the Burmese deep-water port of Sittwe to southern China that would provide an alternative energy supply route. If Burma shifted decisively into the US camp, these plans would be jeopardised.

For the Obama administration, its diplomatic machinations with Burma are only one aspect of a sweeping scheme to challenge China throughout the region. While the refocussing of American foreign policy has been underway since 2009, Obama used his trip through Asia last week to make the new agenda explicit.

Every leg of Obama’s trip was aimed at strengthening the US position in Asia at China’s expense. At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Honolulu, Obama unveiled a new trade deal designed to dictate US terms, especially to China. In Canberra, he announced the stationing of US Marines in northern Australia and the greater use of Australia naval and air bases. In Bali, despite China’s opposition, the US forced a discussion on the South China Sea—a strategically sensitive area close to China that is subject to competing territorial claims.

For China, the announcement of Clinton’s visit to Burma will have confirmed that a decade of careful diplomatic effort backed by significant economic investment is now in danger of being undone by Washington. Whatever the immediate response by Beijing, Obama’s aggressive thrust into Asia marks a serious escalation of tensions between the world’s two largest economies that can only lead to further confrontation.



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