

US encourages Burma to distance itself from China

John Roberts
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The US has taken the first tentative steps toward lifting sanctions on Burma (Myanmar) as part of its efforts to facilitate a rapprochement with the military junta and undermine the country's economic and strategic ties with China.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed a waiver on February 6 that will end formal US opposition to the World Bank and other international financial institutions conducting assessments of the Burmese economy. The step potentially paves the way for Burma to receive international economic aid.

World Bank vice-president Pamela Cox announced on February 16 that the bank was reengaging with the Burmese government “to support reforms that will benefit all of the people of Myanmar, including the poor and vulnerable.” In reality, the World Bank agenda is aimed at opening the country to foreign investors to exploit its raw materials and cheap labour, which will only deepen the social divide between rich and poor.

The European Union last Friday suspended visa restrictions on 87 top Burmese officials, including the president, vice presidents, and members of parliament in response to the junta's release of hundreds of political prisoners last month. Earlier in the week, European Union Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs met with President Thein Sein and announced \$US200 million in aid for Burma.

Most of the international sanctions were imposed following the junta's decision to ignore the outcome of the 1990 national election, which resulted in an overwhelming win for the opposition National League

for Democracy (NLD). The US and EU have already made clear that any other lifting of sanctions is dependent on further moves to ease restrictions on the opposition party and end the longstanding ethnic conflicts in the country's north.

Reference to “human rights,” however, is simply a convenient cover for the Obama administration's overriding aim: to wean the junta away from its close relations to Beijing, which regards Burma as vital for providing transport and pipeline routes directly from the Indian Ocean to southern China. Washington's diplomatic efforts in Burma are part of a broader strategic plan to counter Chinese influence throughout Asia.

Clinton visited Burma in December—the first such trip by a US Secretary of State for more than half a century. Less than a month later, Washington announced that an ambassador would be sent to Burma for the first time in 20 years.

The so-called democratic reforms in Burma are extremely limited in character. Elections were held in 2010 under a restrictive constitution drawn up by the military in 2008 and pushed through in a phony referendum. The process ensured the victory of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, and reserved 110 of the 440 parliamentary seats for appointed military officers.

Thein Sein, a former general, was installed as president last year and began the process of dialogue with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, with a view to securing an accommodation with the US and European powers.

All eyes are now on by-elections due on April 1. Suu Kyi and her NLD, which dropped their opposition to the country's anti-democratic constitution, are standing and will probably win most of the 48 seats. Suu Kyi had been banned from standing, as she had been previously arrested by the military, but the regime modified the rule.

The EU and the US have insisted that steps to improve relations with Burma depend on the outcome of the elections. Suu Kyi and the NLD represent sections of the Burmese elite whose economic interests have been sidelined by the junta's control over substantial sections of the economy. The NLD has been pushing for an opening up to foreign investment that would see Burma develop as a cheap labour platform.

The Burmese ruling class as a whole—the opposition as well as the junta—has been unnerved by the “Arab Spring” which has led to the toppling of regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. Suu Kyi has publicly warned against an “Arab style” uprising in Burma, calling instead for “change through peaceful means, through negotiation.”

Suu Kyi's stance is in line with the Obama administration's agenda. Following a policy review, the US shifted its policy from one of ultimatums under the previous Bush administration to attempting to establish a dialogue. Prior to Clinton's visit last December, several high-level US officials made trips to Burma to lay the groundwork for a rapprochement.

Suu Kyi's own dialogue with the regime has made it easier for the White House to gain bipartisan support for its Burma policy. Last month senior Republican senators John McCain and Mitch McConnell visited Burma. McConnell said it was too soon to lift sanctions, but added he would take his cue from Suu Kyi.

The clearest sign of closer US-Burmese ties was a report in the *New York Times* earlier this month indicating that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director ex-general David Petraeus had been asked by Clinton to visit Burma later this year. Robert Fitts, an

academic at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, said the trip would allow for detailed discussion and deeper dialogue. “They can set up channels that wouldn't have been possible for Secretary Clinton,” he said.

The article noted that the United States and Myanmar had relatively close military and intelligence cooperation until 1988, when the junta crushed a mass uprising by students and workers. The renewal of “deeper dialogue” by the CIA with the Burmese generals will in the first place be directed at re-establishing old links and weakening Chinese influence, with a view to more actively undermining China's position throughout the region.



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