

The US re-engages with Burmese military

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A contingent of more than 30 American military and civilian officials held talks last week with their Burmese counterparts in the capital, Naypyitaw. Notwithstanding denials from Washington, the aim of both sides was clearly the resumption of military ties between the two countries.

The gathering was held under the banner of a “human rights dialogue”, but the presence of high-level US officers and defence officials pointed to other purposes. The American delegation was led by Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Michael Posner, and included officials from the White House national security staff and the departments of Defence and Homeland Security. Lieutenant General Francis Wiercinski, head of the US Army’s Pacific command, also participated.

The Burmese delegation was led by Deputy Defence Minister Commodore Aung Thaw, who told the media both sides “held talks on levels and operations of defence institutions of Myanmar and the US and exchanged views on future dialogue and bilateral cooperation.” US officials also spoke with opposition parties and groups and met with leaders of Burma’s ethnic groups.

Speaking to the media on Friday, Derek Mitchell, the US ambassador to Burma, indicated the nature of the “frank and encouraging” talks when he outlined some of the remaining obstacles to closer military ties. These not only included “human rights” and an end to Burma’s ethnic conflicts, but also a “lack of transparency” about the Burmese junta’s relations with North Korea.

The autocratic character of the Burmese junta has not deterred the US from pressing ahead with developing

military ties. Pentagon spokesman George Little announced at the end of last week that the US was “open to considering a request from the kingdom of Thailand to have a small contingent of Burmese military officers attend Cobra Gold as observers.” Japan’s *Kyodo News* reported that the Burmese regime indicated an interest via Thai officials in participating in Cobra Gold in February.

The annual Gold Cobra war games have been held in Thailand since 1980. Last year the military exercises involved 10,000 American troops and 3,400 Thai troops, as well as contingents from Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. While China was among the nine nations entitled to send observers, the US is using such joint exercises to strengthen military and strategic relations with countries throughout the region against Beijing.

Other tentative steps are also being taken. In August, Burmese military officers visited Hawaii for discussions on the resumption of investigations of sites in Burma by the US Joint Prisoner-of-War/Missing-in-Action Accounting Command (JPAC). Some 700 cases, including a large number of American pilots shot down carrying supplies to China during World War II, remain unresolved.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, analyst Ian Story pointed out that the Burmese military will take part in two multilateral exercises next year—one in Brunei dealing with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and another in Indonesia on counterterrorism. The American and Burmese defence ministers are due to meet in Brunei next October.

Less than a year ago, the US still treated Burma as a rogue state. The diplomatic, economic and now military

relations that are rapidly opening up between the two countries have nothing to do with any improvement in human rights in Burma. The Burmese military continues to dominate every aspect of political life.

Rather, the US engagement with the Burmese regime is part of the Obama administration's broader efforts aimed at stemming Chinese influence in Asia. Over the past three years, Washington has been strengthening military alliances and strategic partnerships throughout the region. The opening up of US relations with Burma, which previously relied heavily on China for support, further undermines China's position in South East Asia.

China has been planning to build major pipeline and transport routes from Burma's ports on the Indian Ocean through to southern China, to lessen its dependence on shipping lanes through South East Asia. These sea routes all pass through so-called choke points such as the Strait of Malacca that are dominated by the US and its allies. Burma's diplomatic shift now calls China's plans into question.

The Burmese regime is clearly looking for closer military ties with the US. Zaw Htay, a director in President Thein Sein's office, told the *Wall Street Journal* that talks with the US military would continue. He said that a near-term aim could be the training of mid-ranking Burmese military officers in the US, in areas including peacekeeping and human rights practices.

The influential US think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), sent a team of senior specialists to Burma in August. Its "Trip Report" released last month calls for the US to consider far more significant steps, including joint exercises with the Burmese armed forces and the selection of Burmese officers to access the US International Military Education and Training Program (IMET).

The report called "more immediately" for the US to engage with the Burmese military in the annual Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore and at meetings of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) defence ministers. It also called for US think tanks to

offer courses for Burmese officers. Earlier this year, the Pentagon had commissioned the CSIS to produce a wider report on US strategy throughout Asia, which also encouraged closer ties with Burma.

US military relations with Burma are not new. Between 1948, when Britain granted formal independence to the country, and the 1962 Ne Win military coup, 1,200 Burmese officers were trained in the US, more than in any other country. Ties continued even after the coup. From 1980 until 1988, 255 officers were trained in the US under the IMET scheme.

IMET training was cut off as part of the US and Western sanctions that were imposed on Burma after the junta crushed opposition protests and strikes in 1988 and abrogated the results of the 1990 election that was won by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Even though the US severed full diplomatic relations, it maintained a military attaché in Burma to keep dialogue open with the generals.

Following US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Burma last December, the Obama administration has quickly moved to restore diplomatic ties and to progressively dismantle economic sanctions. The head of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Locklear, made clear last week that the resumption of defence relations is now on the agenda. "If there is a decision to move forward with military-to-military operations with Burma, then we are going to be prepared to support that the best we can," he declared.



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