

White House welcomes Burmese president as new ally in “pivot to Asia”

John Roberts
24 May 2013

A meeting between US President Barack Obama and Burmese President Thein Sein in the Oval Office of the White House on Monday signalled Washington’s embrace of the Burmese military-dominated government, as part of its efforts to strategically encircle China.

Thein Sein is the first Burmese leader to be hosted in the White House since former junta leader General Ne Win’s visit in 1966. Following the meeting, Obama enthused about the limited political changes made by the Burmese military. “We’ve seen credible elections and a legislature that is continuing to make strides in the direction of more inclusivity and greater representation of all the various groups within Myanmar,” the president declared.

Obama made a passing reference to Washington’s “deep concern” over the brutal treatment of the country’s Rohingya Muslims at the hands of chauvinist Buddhist mobs and the government’s security forces. But he emphasised that respecting “the rights of all people” would see Burma “not only be a successful democracy, but also a thriving economy.”

Obama referred to the country as “Myanmar,” the name proposed by the military junta, rather than Burma, which is still favoured by the opposition National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi. White House spokesman Jay Carney explained that the break with previous State Department protocol was “a diplomatic courtesy” to President Thein Sein.

The Obama administration’s sharp shift on Burma, formerly treated as a pariah state, has nothing to do with any improved recognition of the population’s democratic rights. Just before the White House meeting, Thein Sein, himself a former general, told the *Washington Post* that the military had a proud history and “will always have a special place” in government.

The *Post* noted that in the interview, “Thein Sein made little attempt to promote a picture of vigorous reform in Burma, also known as Myanmar, or to sell himself as the pivotal leader who will turn the former prison state into a democracy.”

Washington’s rehabilitation of the Burmese regime is driven by US imperialism’s “pivot” to Asia. Burma was previously one of Beijing’s few close diplomatic allies, and Obama has worked hard to secure the military regime’s backing for the US strategic and military encirclement of China.

Burma has been a vital consideration in China’s economic and strategic planning. In 2009, Beijing signed an agreement with the military junta to construct two parallel pipelines, for oil and gas, running from the Indian Ocean port of Kyaukphyu through Burma to the Chinese province of Yunnan. The aim of the project was to provide an alternative route for China’s oil and gas shipments from Africa and the Middle East, lessening dependence on naval chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait, which the US navy plans to cut off in the event of a military conflict with China.

Moves to re-establish close diplomatic ties between the US and Burma began in earnest with the Burmese government’s decision to suspend work on the giant Chinese-financed Myitsonne Dam hydro-electric project in September 2011. That was a clear signal that the regime wanted to lessen its reliance on Chinese economic investment and political support. Obama visited Burma in November 2011, followed immediately by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Before lifting sanctions, Washington insisted on bringing the National League for Democracy (NLD), representing the pro-Western section of the Burmese ruling elite, into the government. In April 2012, Suu Kyi, working in lock step with Washington’s

requirements, participated in sham by-elections that gave the NLD 44 seats in the 440-seat House of Representatives. The chamber remained under the control of 110 uniformed officers and the army-controlled Union Solidarity and Development Party. This is the “credible” election to which Obama referred.

Suu Kyi has since worked as an unofficial foreign minister for the regime, successfully urging the abolition of most diplomatic and economic sanctions. At the same time, she and the NLD have tacitly supported the regime’s increasingly violent prosecution of the war against a separatist movement in Kachin state and the persecution of the Muslim Rohingya in the Rakhine state.

During Thein Sein’s visit, Senate Republican leaders like Mitch McConnell were among those calling for the lifting of the remaining economic sanctions, allowing Burmese exporters access to US market.

In addition to the strategic calculations involved in the rapprochement with Burma, the US ruling class is eyeing significant economic opportunities in the resource-rich country. Thein Sein addressed the US Chamber of Commerce and encouraged American investment. “Although it remains one of the world’s poorest nations, Burma, squeezed between India and China and rich in natural resources, presents new energy opportunities, new markets for American-made cars and other products, and new possibilities for low-cost manufacturing,” the *Washington Post* commented. “There is also the lure of a new business-friendly perch for US companies and banks seeking access to China’s vast market.”

Moves are underway to re-establish ties between the US and Burmese militaries. After his meeting with Obama, Thein Sein noted that they had discussed new US “assistance so that our police and military force become more professional.” No details were provided of this “assistance,” but the remark follows a series of overtures by the Obama administration to the Burmese military.

On April 25, Acting Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Yun told the US Congress that the administration was “looking at ways to support nascent military engagement” with Burma. Pentagon spokesperson Cathy Wilkinson told the media last month: “The United States is in the initial phase of a

limited and calibrated defence engagement with Burma which is designed to promote the continuation of the reform movement in the country.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact