



INDIA-US INSIGHT

"Advancing the Strategic Potential of India-US Relations, Accelerating India's Economic Development"

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US rapprochement with Myanmar – an Indian perspective

by Ambassador Rajiv Bhatia



If a week is too long in politics, a year is filled with limitless possibilities in diplomacy. This was illustrated dramatically in the recent improvement in US-Myanmar relations, a phenomenon with the potential to have a significant impact on regional politics.

"... it was somewhat extraordinary for President Thein Sein to hail Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's December 2011 visit as 'a historic milestone.'"

It is normal for the US secretary of state to be received by the head of state or government of a country she visits. But it was somewhat extraordinary for President Thein Sein to hail Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's December 2011 visit as "a historic milestone." The last visit from the US at this level was in 1955. What the president seemed to signal was that this visit was exceptionally important, being the conscious result of a series of changes in the mindset of both sides as well as developments in the region. The world would no doubt watch, with considerable interest, how the next stage of the US-Myanmar journey unfolds.

Backdrop

"Just a year ago, President Obama, while on a state visit to India, had articulated the conventional US view..."

Just a year ago, President Obama, while on a state visit to India, had articulated the conventional US view, namely that Myanmar generals were up to no good and Aung San Suu Kyi alone bore the torch of the country's struggle for democracy and human rights. He dismissed the elections of November 2010 as "neither free nor fair." Welcoming Suu Kyi's release from house arrest, the US President declared: "She is a hero of mine and a source of inspiration..." He did not hesitate to berate the host country – India. While addressing the Indian Parliament, he said India had often avoided issues of human rights violations in international fora and urged it to condemn such violations in Myanmar. India did not react – nor indeed flinch from its approach.

However, subsequent months witnessed a markedly stepped-up interaction between the US and Myanmar through numerous visits by senior State Department officials, US politicians and a visit by the Myanmar Foreign Minister to Washington. As this process unfolded, I had the opportunity to represent India at an international seminar in Yangon, hosted by the Myanmar Institute of International Affairs. I returned with a

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clear impression that the US government would proceed cautiously towards re-building ties unless Suu Kyi could be brought on board. Prior to the elections, the Obama Administration's policy review had heralded a shift from isolating Myanmar to a policy of 'constructive engagement'. Months after the elections, Suu Kyi was busy advocating the need for 'a critical engagement' with the new government which had introduced a system of guided or controlled democracy under a new constitution.

Clinton visit

The secretary of state's visit in December 2011 was partly confirmatory of earlier understandings and partly exploratory. It had three significant components: meeting with the president and other dignitaries, discussions with Suu Kyi, and interaction with the media. Clinton conveyed calibrated support for the reforms already introduced by the Thein Sein government and encouraged it to proceed further down this path. She indicated that the US would take some matching measures now, but it would hold back on lifting of sanctions. This was an endeavour to make a virtue out of necessity. The State Department found it possible to ease restrictions on UNDP operations in Myanmar and clear the World Bank and IMF missions to study Myanmar's developmental needs, but tackling the Congress for reconsideration of sanctions is a far bigger challenge. Clinton laid out various expectations from the Government regarding its internal policy and relations with North Korea. Clearly, negotiations are likely to continue after the visit.

Her interaction with Suu Kyi was imbued with both symbolic and substantive value. Visual coverage of the two famous women greeting each other warmly – one with admiration, the other with Asian grace – demonstrated how the rapprochement was shaping up. It resulted from a process of triangular negotiations involving the military and government, Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy, and the US government.



"The US may now be interested not just in bringing democracy to Myanmar but also in weaning the country away from China's close embrace."

While affirming support for Suu Kyi, Clinton may have advised her to be resilient because US interests now demand a multi-dimensional approach towards Myanmar. The US may now be interested not just in bringing democracy to Myanmar but also in weaning the country away from China's close embrace. If so, it will be a welcome and judicious admixture of realpolitik and ideals in foreign policy formulation.



Hillary Clinton and Aung San Suu Kyi

A key challenge for the Administration is to win back control of its Myanmar policy which had been "outsourced" to Suu Kyi in the past. Clinton's success in attempting a balancing act that

touches on the core concerns of Washington, Naypyidaw, and Suu Kyi in Yangon needs to be noted. But it is worth underlying that one high-level visit cannot change everything overnight. Reconciling of conflicting interests will take much longer. Referring to "flickers of progress" in Myanmar mentioned by Obama earlier, Clinton pointed out that they could die out, be stamped out or ignited, adding: "It will be up to the leaders and the people to fan those flickers of progress into flames of freedom that light the path toward a better future."

What drives the rapprochement?

During my tenure in Myanmar (2002-05), I always found it odd to see the US Chargé d'Affaires at the end of the diplomatic line (as she was outranked by ambassadors). The US Embassy conducted dialogue with Myanmar authorities on drug trafficking, terrorist activities, insurgencies and health sector issues as well as kept in contact with the opposition and NGOs. But it had little interaction with the highest echelons of the military government. Much of this has changed in recent years as the bilateral agenda has expanded. So, what has brought about the change in US-Myanmar relations?

Several explanations have been offered. One view is that sanctions by the US and EU forced the Myanmar military to change course, a view very few find credible. Another theory is that the policy of engagement followed by ASEAN and India served to induce change in Myanmar, which, in turn, set the stage for change in US-Myanmar relations. I was recently asked by the BBC if India "pushed" Myanmar on to the path of

democracy. This is a questionable way to look at a highly complex situation. The third explanation is that China's deepening influence on Myanmar in vital domains compelled the US to open up towards Myanmar. But critics might argue that this last trend was also manifest in the past two decades, and wonder why the change has come now.

“..an unusual combination of internal and external factors relating to Myanmar and the region has led to this improvement in US-Myanmar ties.”

My assessment is that three factors have been responsible for the turnaround in Myanmar's relations with US. Firstly, the succession of military government by a 'civilian' government and bold reforms introduced thereafter created space for opposition forces. It was a notable departure from the past that the US could not ignore. Secondly, Myanmar gave sufficient signals of its growing unease with China's increasing hold on the former's economy and strategic space. The quest for additional options probably began in the past two or three years, an opening the US could not have missed. Thirdly, China's aggressive behaviour in the region, especially during 2010-11, created a new situation. This required the re-assertion of US authority and role in the Asia-Pacific region. A rapprochement with Myanmar was an essential building block in the new strategy. This explains why the US endorsed ASEAN's decision to bestow its Chair on Myanmar in 2014. Thus, an unusual combination of internal and external factors relating to Myanmar and the region has led to this improvement in US-Myanmar ties.

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Will this trend gather momentum? It will no doubt be moulded by further progress in negotiations involving the Government, NLD and the US as well as the continuation of a policy consensus between conservatives and reformers within the military. The guiding motive for the Thein Sein government is to secure accelerated improvement in the country's economy. For achieving this, the military appears ready to pay a price in terms of easing of its control upto a point, provided changes are within the framework of red markers set by it. The military's preponderant role should continue for the present; the new constitution should not be jettisoned; the country's law and order, stability, unity and territorial integrity should not be disturbed; and, above all, there should be no trials of previous military leaders. If Thein Sein, Suu Kyi and Obama Administration respect these basic concerns of the military, change within Myanmar and improvement in US-Myanmar relations can be expected to move forward.



Clinton at Yangon's Shwedegon Pagoda

Reactions in Asia

“ASEAN clearly welcomes the US-Myanmar rapprochement... (this) development would also embolden ASEAN in dealing with 'the China factor' in the future.”

A brief reference needs to be made here to the more important reactions in Asia. ASEAN clearly welcomes the US-Myanmar rapprochement. In fact, as soon as the Clinton visit was announced, ASEAN Secretary General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan said it was “the best dividend of all” as it would help Myanmar's reintegration into the international community and promote positive changes within the country. He added that the US move to engage Myanmar was “a reaffirmation” of the strategy ASEAN had adopted “all along.” What has been left unsaid is that the development would also embolden ASEAN in dealing with ‘the China factor’ in the future.

Japan has always felt a special emotional and historical bond with Myanmar, given the former's role in overthrowing British rule and assisting General Aung San and his comrades in their liberation struggle. While adhering to the broader Western line on Myanmar in the past, Tokyo always found a way to be helpful to its constituency in that country. This trend is now gathering strength. During his visit to Myanmar in late December 2011, Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba announced the resumption of Japan's development assistance and negotiations for an investment agreement, while at the same time emphasising progress on democratisation and national reconciliation. His visit is likely to lead to progressively closer Myanmar-Japan ties.



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Reactions in China have been more complex. After the unceremonious suspension of the Myistone dam project, the spectacle of Hillary Clinton lunching with the President of Myanmar and embracing Suu Kyi was hardly a source of joy in Beijing. At a formal level, reactions, however, were correct. The Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed the hope that Myanmar and the US would strengthen contacts and improve relations “on the basis of mutual respect” and that this would help “Myanmar’s stability and development.” Playing her part, Clinton stressed that the US initiative in Myanmar should not be seen “in light of any competition with China.” Underneath the formality, and despite the consultations that have already taken place between the US and China after the Clinton visit, it may be accurate to argue that the rapprochement seems to have caused considerable anxiety to the Chinese and this development is not exactly a source of concern to the US!

Indian Perspective

“The hope in Delhi is that the US will now proceed further and consider phased lifting of sanctions soon.”

Considerable satisfaction prevails in South Block on the ground that the US, after having criticised the Indian policy of pragmatic engagement for years, has at last come around to emulate it. For at least the past seven years, the Ministry of External Affairs had impressed on the State Department the wisdom of pragmatism and folly of supporting the cause of democracy to the exclusion of other legitimate considerations. The hope in Delhi is that the US will now proceed further and consider phased lifting of sanctions soon.

“India too needs a re-appraisal of its Myanmar policy.... There is a compelling need to augment the political quotient of the bilateral relationship...”

India too needs a re-appraisal of its Myanmar policy. Delhi is beginning to

comprehend the long-term impact of changes in the neighbouring country, which have further enhanced its importance for India’s national interests. There is a compelling need to augment the political quotient of the bilateral relationship by opening a high-level dialogue with Suu Kyi and increasing the scope and frequency of political-level interaction with the Thein Sein government. The recent visit to India of a Myanmar parliamentary delegation, led by the Speaker of the lower house of the Parliament who is a powerful supporter of the reforms, is a positive sign.

“... Delhi will do well to consult and coordinate its initiatives with ASEAN, the US and Japan for the larger benefit of the region.”

While pursuing a more active and innovative political relationship with Myanmar, Delhi will do well to consult and coordinate its initiatives with ASEAN, the US and Japan for the larger benefit of the region.

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