



NCAFP Roundtable on Burma & Southeast Asia

June 2015

I. Introduction

On June 25, 2015, the NCAFP's Forum on Asia-Pacific Security convened a roundtable on Burma and Southeast Asia featuring presentations by prominent area experts including Professor David Steinberg of Georgetown University, Professor David Denoon of NYU and Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt of the Center for Naval Analysis. The following report outlines some of the main findings.

II. Burma/Myanmar

U.S. Interests in Burma

The first presenter began by outlining the changing nature of U.S. interests in Burma. For two decades prior to the Obama Administration, the U.S. policy toward Burma focused almost exclusively and simplistically on human rights and democracy with the goal of somehow changing the regime from one dominated by the military to a democratic system with free and fair elections. After the last general election in 2010, the nominally civilian government in office has made some partial and limited reforms and the Burmese military has ceded some rights to elected officials and committed to further democratic development. But the military has no intention to give up its grip on power, it continues to control the bureaucracy and other key levers of power, it controls much of the civil society, including the institutions of Sangha Buddhism which carries real weight with the public, and it has revised the Constitution to ensure that Madame Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the main opposition party, cannot run for President in the next election scheduled for November 2015.

The Obama Administration is no longer focusing on regime change as its predecessors did but is now concentrated on the more realistic goal of encouraging the fragile and potentially hopeful, albeit limited, process of political change that has begun.

Another emerging U.S. interest in Burma now has to do with geopolitics and the rise of China. The new U.S. policy of rebalancing towards Asia has encouraged strengthened U.S. alliances and partnerships with members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Burma is a member, and the U.S. wants a strong ASEAN to help balance China.

Influences on Burmese Politics

In discussing some of the main influences on Burmese politics, the speaker singled out the overwhelming impact of nationalism and the deep sense of vulnerability fostered by a legacy of colonialism. There is deep suspicion of all foreigners, including Chinese, and this contributed to the recent cancellation of a Chinese project for building a huge dam in Burma. Also, although Burma desperately needed humanitarian aid following the 2008 cyclone, it would not allow U.S. supplies to be given directly to the Burmese—a development that this speaker attributed to fear of invasion in advance of a national referendum on Burma's constitution. This fear of Western and foreign influence may explain why the Burmese have agreed to allow foreign observers, but not foreign monitors, at the next election.

This speaker stated that the most important issue facing the state is minority-majority relations, especially relations between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority. There are over 80 political parties in Burma and a grouping of minority parties could hold the balance in the coming elections.

The Role of Aung San Suu Kyi

On the topic of Madame Aung San Suu Kyi, the speaker felt that U.S. policy toward Burma put too much emphasis on Aung as a standard bearer of democracy. She may be less interested in a free and fair society than many in the West assume, particularly when it comes to the rights of Muslim minorities. The speakers described her as an autocrat who is interested in modernization, but not necessarily willing to accommodate public opposition. It is also unclear how successful the NLD will be at governance, since up to now their primary goal and preoccupation was gaining power, not exercising power.

Aung will not be able to run for President of Burma because the new constitution disqualifies those whose immediate families include foreign citizens (as is the case with her son). Even if, as the speaker predicted, Aung's National League for Democracy (NLD) wins the largest number of seats in the November 2015 elections, they will not be able to amend the constitution without the military's approval, because amendments require a 75% majority and the military officers already occupy enough positions to secure a veto. Moreover, Aung does not have the military's trust, despite the fact that her father was a founder.

Another major actor in Burmese politics are the Buddhist monks. About 88% of the population are Buddhists, and it is impossible for Burmese to disagree with a monk, so they hold considerable influence. They are the only group that is large enough to challenge the military (about 400,000), and they were at the center of the anti-colonial movement.

The Role of Outside Powers

The Chinese policy toward Burma echoes Chinese policy toward North Korea, with priorities on maintaining peaceful borders, encouraging opportunities for Chinese businesses, ensuring that no Americans come near the border, and working with the UN to address other issues. However, Burma was never a client state of China and it often expresses dissatisfaction with Chinese policies. One of China's provinces, Yunnan province, where most of China's minorities live, is situated on the border with Burma and the vast majority of its trade is with China.

U.S. interests in the region are now largely related to the rise of China, though many in the meeting agreed that the U.S. is not attempting to, nor could it succeed at, containing China. Instead, the U.S. is interested in a strong ASEAN as a regional balancing force against China. Specific to Burma, the U.S. is interested in a functioning democratic system with free and fair elections. The speaker's recommendation is to exercise some patience—Burma will not change from a military authoritarian regime to an American style democracy overnight, and we should view the small steps it is now taking as positive developments toward a more open, pluralistic and inclusive society.

Japan's interests lie in strengthening relations with neighbors on China's periphery in order to balance China's growing power. It has an industrial park and port in Burma that it would like to use to sell cars made in India to Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, India's interests include balancing against China and developing Northeast India.

More concretely, the speaker recommended that the U.S., China and Burma work together on an earthquake study group to build capacity and cooperation, but so far China is not willing to discuss this.

III. Broader Strategic Trends

A speaker began this part of the discussion by calling attention to the immense diversity of government systems, levels of development and levels of per capita income among the ASEAN member nations. This diversity complicates efforts at ASEAN cohesion which in turn is reflected in documents that are not substantive. The grouping still has a value, but it should not be counted on as a productive organization. Additionally, the rise of nationalism in the region is exacerbating trends toward fragmentation.

One speaker then highlighted three strategic trends: first, Southeast Asia is experiencing a growing North-South divide between the continental countries which cooperate with China and the island countries that are more skeptical of China's intentions. A prominent exception to this rule is Vietnam, which may be seen as more of an island nation in this analysis because of its territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Second, there has been a rise of territorial disputes over islands in the South China Sea and that debate is intense and confrontational.

Third, ASEAN states are concerned that the U.S. commitment to the region is shaky, whereas China will be there indefinitely and is gaining in power in strength. In other words, they would like to see a balancing force to counter China's growing power, but they are not convinced that the U.S. is a reliable partner in this effort.

A second speaker on this topic stated that the most important strategic trend in East Asia is the explosion in Chinese comprehensive power and a trend since 2000 toward military, and especially naval, modernization. The Chinese seem to have "rediscovered" the ocean in a strategic sense and have signaled that the focus of modernization has moved from the land to the sea. This is creating volatility in the regional balance of power.

China is increasing its maritime capabilities because it has legitimate strategic concerns. All of China's unresolved territorial issues are maritime issues (including Taiwan). China's economic centers are primarily located on the eastern seaboard which is vulnerable to attack. China's own history narrative is dominated by a sense of victimization by people who invaded from the sea. So, China is developing a so-called 'anti-access, area denial' or A2/AD strategy to deal with this perceived vulnerability. And it has recently declared that its naval mission is no longer just defending the Mainland but also now extends to the open seas. The question that preoccupies China's neighbors is whether or not the U.S. has the political will and the capacity to deal with area denial tactics.

It remains to be seen what effect the slowing of China's economy will have on its relations with ASEAN member nations. Currently, many of the products 'made' in China are constructed with parts made in Southeast Asia. One participant predicted that China will become more protectionist as its economy slows, particularly because most of the Chinese growth is in savings and not in high-quality jobs. For the ASEAN states to build their respective economies in such an environment, supply chains must be reconfigured to suit other markets. In short, they need to diversify.