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# **An unfulfilled relationship: US–Burma/Myanmar political relations**

## **Abstract**

*The main goal of this article is to examine policy of the United States towards Burma from the perspective of political science. First part of analysis is dedicated to political ties between Washington and Rangoon (later: Naypyidaw) till 1988 when mass demonstrations took place in Burma. Further, article concentrates on period between 1988 and 2011, when Myanmar has been criticized by the US over violation of human rights. Author points out that situation has changed in 2011 when Washington shifted its policy towards Myanmar from isolationism to engagement under Obama's administration but Burma has been neglected once again with Trump's coming to power, when bilateral relations were overshadowed by Rohingya crisis. On the basis of these factors, Author concludes that the US-Myanmar relations will remain unfulfilled for the next years.*

**Keywords:** *Burma/Myanmar, United States, US – Burma relations*

## **1. Introduction**

US – Burma/Myanmar relations represent an example of changing, promising, yet still unfulfilled relationship between a major power and a regional middle power. Since 1945 Washington-Rangoon (later: Naypyidaw) relations experienced ups and downs. From initial désintéressment via changing cold war circumstances and ideological pressure after 1988 to much proclaimed American pivot to Myanmar after 2011. And just when it seemed that Washington and Naypyidaw were on the best way to secure a spectacular rapprochement, the Rohingya crisis and unique

leadership of Donald Trump have put this into question again. Consequently, US-Myanmar relations are an example of a fascinating but unfulfilled political relationship. This paper gives an insight into US Burma policy and examines it from the point of view of political science. It tells the history of U.S.-Burmese relations and shows that Burma has never been vital to US policymakers. This situation, however, changed after 2011, when Washington shifted its Burma policy from isolationism to engagement. However, this new policy was discontinued after Obama's two terms. With Donald Trump's coming to power Myanmar has been neglected once again. Almost all the global (and American) attention on this country has been focused on the Rohingya crisis and its consequences.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Introduction

US-Burma relations are naturally asymmetrical. This asymmetry, however, does not necessarily mean that the more powerful dominate, the less powerful. There are different types of asymmetry, as using Brantly Womack's typology Maung Aung Myoe has shown. In the case of the US-Burma relation, two asymmetries apply: "distracted asymmetry" (both sides have other more important policy directions) and "normalized asymmetry" (when the relationship is not harmonious, but both sides are confident of fulfilling their basic interests and expectations of mutual benefits) (Maung Aung Myoe 2011, p. 5). This article demonstrates that US – Burma relations have moved from "distracted asymmetry" to "normalized asymmetry." Although the asymmetry of relations benefits the stronger partner, it does not necessarily mean the weaker state is helpless. Small states also play a role in the international system. When dealing with stronger states, they can adopt two general policies: to bandwagon or to balance (Waltz 1979, p. 73; Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 162–163). *The Burmese* elites have always chosen the latter one. The Burmese balance of power strategy tradition dates back to King Mindon's foreign policy (middle 19<sup>th</sup> century) and prime minister U Nu's neutralism (the 1950s). Since then, this foreign policy approach has never been seriously modified or questioned. It is in place even now.

Looking at Burma from the US point of view is more complex. US foreign policy is difficult to summarize in one sentence. Although there are some permanent features (belief in America's uniqueness, democracy, free-market economy), the means of US foreign policy do change. Since the

19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States has been trying to find a balance between isolationism and interventionism on the one hand and – since the 20<sup>th</sup> century – between idealism and realism on the other. Roughly isolationism was predominant until (and after WW I), whereas interventionism – after WWII. Idealism was mostly popular during WWI (“Wilsonism”) and after 1989, whereas realism dominated throughout most of American history, most considerably in the 1970s. After 2008 it is becoming popular again. This dichotomy, however, is not always contradictory: “just as isolationism and interventionism are in fact complementary concepts, idealism and realism can be connected with each other” (Wordliczek 2007, p. 59). They are, in other words, just tools to fulfill the national purposes of the United States. Generally speaking, where strategic national interests of the United States are at stake, their approach is usually based on rationality and traditional Realpolitik imperatives: national security and power projection as well as realist understanding of limitations and need for compromise. In areas where the US has fewer interests, export of values plays a more important role and the idealization of the world becomes dominant. As Marvit Ott’s aptly summarized: “the less national interest the United States has in a country, the more human rights loom large in policy” (quoted in Steinberg 2001, p. 302).

### **3. Between désintéressment and ambivalence: US – Burma relations until 1988**

Burma historically mattered little to the United States. There were few random encounters, like the one of Maung Shaw Loo, the first Burmese in the United States (the 1850s and 1860s, Thant Myint-U 2017). Politically, before the 1940s, Burma in Washington DC was considered an exclusive British zone of influence, except for American Baptist missionaries who, mostly in the nineteenth century, worked effectively among Burma’s ethnic minorities (most notable among Kachins and Karens). Those minorities readily responded to their new teachings (Steinberg 2006, p. 223). Before the war, Burma was visited by two US presidents – one retired and one to be. The former was Ulysses S. Grant, who called on to Rangoon as a tourist on his all-around-the-world tour. He described “gay colors” worn by the Burmese on the streets of Rangoon and noticed that “females are not shut up.” The latter was Herbert Hoover, who – twenty seven years before becoming US President – was

a successful mining engineer who called the Burmese “the only truly happy and cheerful race” (McLaughlin 2012, p. 3).

Once the Second Sino-Japanese war broke in 1937, the Western powers quickly realized that Burma offered Kuomintang government a lifeline to Europe. Thus Burma Road, a key supply route for Nationalist China, was constructed (Selth 2002, p. 44). Thanks to this road, Burma became recognized by the US public for the first time (Brooten 2005, p. 138). During the Second World War, Burma was a major theatre of operations: this country not only provided China with access to the Indian Ocean and dominated the Bay of Bengal but lay between Japan’s conquests in Southeast Asia and the Allied bastion of British India (Selth 2002, p. 44). The British firstly suffered humiliating defeat to the Japanese in 1942 (so called the “The Longest Retreat,” Carew 1969), but were able to regain it in 1945, with significant, though complementary, US contribution. After the war, however, Burma was no longer the same country. Things have changed. A new nationalistic, anti-colonial generation that would bring their country to independence emerged. Such people as Aung San, U Nu, or Ne Win “were not just students playing politics” (like before war – ML), they had guns, and they knew how to use them” (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 240). So the victorious British faced a strong emancipation movement in Burma. The US initially supported these, as well as other Asian liberation movements. During WWII, President Roosevelt was interested in freeing the colonies from their colonial masters throughout Asia due to his ideological convictions. However, little real action took place in that regard (Steinberg 2006, p. 223). Maybe his personal dislike is to blame for that. Contrary to Hoover, he did not like the Burmese, although his prejudice was based on a single encounter with then-prime-minister U Saw, who was the only Burmese Roosevelt ever met (Taylor 2012, p. 9). But more probable is that Roosevelt soon realized that liberating Burma too soon was against US interests. American anti-imperialism moderated with prospects of peace: the Americans could not jeopardize the British and the French too much and believed that US interests would be better served by “stable” colonial governments than potentially fragile nation-states (Stockwell 2007, p. 15). That is why the US did not support the Burmese independence movement after 1945. However, once it became obvious that Burma would achieve independence, the US symbolic gestures quickly followed: the United States recognized Burma in 1947, even before the formal declaration of independence (January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1948) and established the embassy in Rangoon with the first appointed ambassador, J. Klahr Huddle.

Soon after independence, Burma found herself caught in between emerging cold war rivalry. Her position, always delicate, as then-prime-minister U Nu said is his unique style: “Burma is hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cactuses,” (Butwell 1963, p. 193), resulted in the understanding that “siding with either the United States or the Soviet Union would rise greater threats to state security than abstaining from involvement”: this recognition evolved later into the neutral foreign policy of balancing powers (Taylor 2009, p. 265). For the Western world, Burma, since the beginning of her independence, was on “on the periphery of the free world” (quoted in Selth 2002, p. 45); it was a “domino” that must be kept. This is why the British backed U Nu’s government in the civil war against communistic revolt and Karen separatism that broke soon after independence. The anti-communist sentiment in the US resulted in grating Burma in 1950 US aid program to stem the perceived communist advance. Although it was not Marshall’s Plan, it nevertheless signified the beginning of US-Burma cooperation (Steinberg 2006, p. 223). Unfortunately, the cold war consideration stood in the way to develop Washington-Rangoon ties. For the US, it was China that mattered most, and after the Kuomintang humiliating defeat in 1949 CIA started covert operations of support to the twelve thousand KMT forces that retreated to the Burmese territories. The United States found Burma an ideal place for “listening posts” from which to observe developments inside China and even drew up plans to use Burma as a springboard from which to launch the southern half of a “double envelopment operation” against China (Selth 2002, p. 45). For Burma, this constituted a serious threat of Communist China retaliation. Out of the on-the-ground realities, Burmese neutrality has always been biased in favor of not irritating Beijing, so Rangoon stood firmly against US-backed KMT forces (first diplomatically and then militarily; the KMT forces were finally expelled in 1961 in a joint Burmese-Chinese communist operation). US policy confirmed the reservations of Burma’s leaders about involvement with foreign powers (ibid., p. 46). When the US covert support of KMT was brought out, Rangoon terminated the US aid program. The contacts with the US were not severed. American vice-president Richard Nixon visited Rangoon in November 1953, and while he met with anti-American sentiments, this visit was his personal success (Nixon returned to Burma once again, in 1985, long after leaving his presidential office, McLaughlin 2012, p. 9). In return for this, Burma’s prime minister U Nu paid a visit to the USA in 1955. He underlined Burma’s commitment to democracy, called Americans “brave

and generous people,” and rejected joining any military alliances, quoting... George Washington’s Farewell Address on the need to steer clear of entangling foreign alliances (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 270). On the US side Burma’s – as well as other non-alignment countries’ neutrality was considered suspicious (as JF. Dulles infamously said: “neutrality is immoral,” quoted in *New York Times* 1959).

This is why the bilateral contacts were clouded by mutual suspicion. Although the US assistance program (mainly foodstuff) was restarted in 1956 (Burma’s dire economic situation forced her leaders to look for assistance everywhere without compromising state’s independence), democratic Burma preferred assistance from third countries (India, Israel) and tried to keep, quite successfully, distance from both sides of civil war (Steinberg 2006, p. 223). As one old Burma hand summarized: “Burma was tacitly siding with one of its two largest neighbors India, without at the same time antagonizing Communist China in the way which an alliance with the United States would have done” (Taylor 2009, p. 266).

After a military coup d’état in 1962 that installed general Ne Win in power, Burma isolated itself even farther from the international system – into xenophobic autarchy. Fearful of almost all outside influences, the new military regime adopted and strengthened the former government’s neutral foreign policy, shunning most international contacts, including the US (Selth 2002, p. 46). Nevertheless, Burma was still seen as an important place on the geopolitical map of Southeast Asia. Her neutrality was important for everybody – all the major players: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the People’s Republic of China, were far from neglecting Rangoon: they all competed for Burma’s diplomatic support in forums like the UN General Assembly. That allowed Ne Win to conduct a wise, balanced foreign policy of accepting aid and assistance from all sides of the cold war – the USA, Soviet Union, West Germany and – most importantly – Japan (Taylor 2009, p. 346). This helped him to keep Burma away from the Second Indochina War and remains his biggest political success.

A good example of Ne Win’s balancing policy is his attitude toward the USA. Upon starting his rule, he kept Washington at arm’s length. He terminated the American assistance program and secured a border agreement with China. At the same time, however, he worried that his moves might be considered too far to the left, so he paid a state visit to the US in 1966. The Americans, as it turned out, needed Burma’s neutrality, no matter that Ne Win policy meant domestic disaster. So they wanted to

win Ne Win over. Contrary to his former visits, which have not gone well, this time he received a “red carpet” reception at the White House from President Lyndon Johnson and had a very pleasant tour in the US where he mainly played his favorite golf (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 302). The Americans were quite surprised that Ne Win did not ask for anything: “the American press was impressed, almost to the point of disbelief that Chairman Ne Win did not ask for American aid. He asked for nothing but to be left alone” (Taylor 2012, p. 9). Informally, however, United States proved to be cooperative with Burma, particularly in the provision of military training (*ibid.*). This came just in time – soon, Burma’s relations with China collapsed, and Beijing started a covert invasion of Burma in 1968. The Chinese-backed forces captured the frontier but – thanks to Ne Win’s army capabilities – were unable to seize “Burma proper.” Soon after Burmese forces stopped the Chinese offensive at the Salween river in 1973, the US started military assistance to Burma to stem the Communist tide (Lintner 1999, p. 315). Officially it was “for narcotics suppression purposes” because, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was narcotics that became the most important concern for the US in Burma. Heroin from the so-called Golden Triangle flooded the USA. Stopping the production and supply lines became an important goal; therefore, Washington officially supplied equipment and helicopters to carry out narcotics surveillance and interdiction. The equipment was supposed to be used solely for antinarcotics activities, but it was probably never used for this purpose. Burma Army (Tatmadaw) used it against her opponent from ethnic minorities’ guerillas, most notable Karens, who shot down one helicopter and also used to transport military officials on non-narcotics-related trips (Steinberg 2006, p. 224). Washington had more important problems elsewhere, so American leaders connive at this practices: “the Americans (...) had no objections to their being used in ordinary counterinsurgency operations, even against such rebels as Karens who were not involved in the (heroin) trade” (Lintner 1999, p. 315). The improvement of American-Burmese ties prompted Rangoon – then in a dire economic situation – to request restarting the American assistance program in 1978; Washington accepted and American help arrived in Burma. That program focused on basic human needs lasted until 1988, when it was terminated by the United States due to the massacre of protesting students (see below).

To sum it up: US primary interests in Burma before 1988 were of secondary importance: to limit communist influence (itself a primary US political goal in the cold war, but Burma has always been a marginal front,

so her importance to US policy was low) and narcotics production (within US foreign policy struggle with narcotics has always been far behind other foreign policy goals). With general US *désintéressment* towards Southeast Asia after 1975 and the global decline of communism in the 1980s, Burma became even more marginal. Washington had no national interests there and no intention to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Burmese regime. Within the Burmese military regime, the general attitude toward the USA was neutral, if not positive. The more conscious members of the military elite understood the country's economic plight and the need for reform. They hoped for doing this with US help: "what we really want is to change from being an isolated left-wing military dictatorship to a pro-American right-wing military dictatorship" said one officer in 1987 (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 328). Unfortunately for them, their hopes failed to materialize.

#### **4. Overshadow by ideology: US – Burma/Myanmar relations 1988–2011**

The year 1988 was politically critical for Burma. Mass demonstrations that started in March forced Ne Win to resign in July and effectively toppled the government during the summer of 1988. The military reacted with the slaughter of demonstrators on August 08 and then staged another coup d'état on September 18 and conducted another slaughter. Mass repression followed. The new junta, known under the acronym SLORC (Burm. Na-Wa-Ta), restored military power. The regime, however, soon changed the tactics to a "carrot" approach: junta announced free-market reforms and democratic elections. The latter turned out to be the military's political mistake. During the campaign, the opposition managed to rebuild its strength, and a new leader emerged: Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San: Burma's father of independence. Suu Kyi became enormously popular nationwide and constituted a threat to the military's dominance in the political sphere. This prompted Tatmadaw (the Burmese Army) to imprison Suu Kyi in house arrest and repressed her followers. The regime also, in a desperate move to restore legitimacy, changed the international name of the country from Burma to Myanmar (old pre-colonial, royal name). Despite all this, Suu Kyi's party, National League for Democracy, won the 1990 elections with a landslide. The army, however, never recognized the results. There is an unresolved controversy (Tonkin

1997) whether the 1990 elections were parliamentary elections (as NLD and majority of the Burmese claimed) or constitution assembly elections (as the Tatmadaw claimed). The majority of the population believed the former was true. Consequently, after Tatmadaw's unwillingness to share the power with the opposition, the army continued to govern without legitimization (but with force). Suu Kyi, imprisoned under house arrest for 15 years (1989–2010, with intervals), hoped to force the generals to make concessions: she pleaded with the West to introduce sanctions and isolate the regime. This was the domestic Burmese background for a new period in US–Burma relations.

The international landscape changed as well. The end of the cold war and the fall of the socialist camp contributed to the euphoric atmosphere in the West, best described by the (in) famous essay “the end of history.” According to this point of view, democracy is always beneficial, non-alternative, and unavoidable worldwide system, whereas human rights are a universal value. Both democracy and human rights, sooner or later, will be won everywhere and are the only ideology consistent with progress and prosperity. In political terms, this ephemeral intellectual epoch shifted Western policy agenda toward non-important countries like Myanmar into human rights instead of security. As Southeast Asia's geopolitical importance after 1989 fell even lower – it became even more marginal for the US and Western Europe than it used to be – it was much easier and painless to criticize Rangoon for its human rights violations and atrocities. That was bad news for the Burmese government: it suddenly turned out to be “a brutal regime,” although, in fact, it has been such one since 1962.

A separate role in influencing this policy towards Burma has been played by Aung San Suu Kyi. Suu Kyi, after decades of socializing in the West, spoke fluent English (she was married to an Englishman) and understood Western societies and media mechanisms well. And she knew how to use it all. Suu Kyi eclectically combined Buddhism with democracy and human rights, which gave her intellectual recognizability. But it was first and foremost her dramatic family story with political background (she chose to remain in Burma and lost her family) that won the hearts and minds of the Western people. Unfairly convicted for her ideas, with dramatic family tragedy, she was perceived as one of the last romantic figures in politics. She became an epitome of the universal battle of good and evil, an icon, a part of popular culture. She was also the most recognized Asian woman and – alongside the Dalai Lama – the most famous Asian dissident. For her stance and proclaimed ideas, she received a deluge of

awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. She *became* “a personalized avatar of democracy to much of the Western world” (Steinberg & Fan 2012, p. 158). She dominated the picture to such an extent that even when the junta achieved sporadic successes, like the cease-fire agreements with the ethnic minority guerillas, the West failed to notice it: “for the outside world, there was really only one story in Burma in the 1990s, the story of Aung San Suu Kyi and her struggle against the ruling generals” (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 332).

Suu Kyi, a quick learner in the art of the possible, used foreign backing for her case. She pleaded for help (“everybody can do his bid, everybody outside Burma,” Aung San Suu Kyi 2008, p. 218) and for termination of foreign investments into the country, she backed tourism boycott and even spoke in favor of limiting humanitarian help (“no aid trade or investment”) (Levy & Scott-Clark 2001, p. 2). Suu Kyi, having a South African example in mind, believed she would be able to force generals to make concessions. Her voice, resonating through the plethora of NGOs and pro-democracy lobbyists that repeated her message, became the dominant one among US policymakers on the Burmese dimension.

The existence of this pro-democracy Burma lobby in the US was an important political factor. This lobby comprised many nongovernmental organizations and expatriate Burmese and used the new ways of communications (internet) to spread its understanding of conflict: “in just a couple of years, Internet activists have turned an obscure, backwater conflict into an international issue and helped make Rangoon one of the world’s most vilified regimes” (quoted in Houtman 1999, p. 3). This lobby have regarded the Burma cause as “one of the most clear-cut moral, political issues in the world,” reflecting the views of Aung San Suu Kyi, these activists have advocated a boycott on tourism, trade, investment, and NGO activities as providing support to and legitimating that military junta (Steinberg 2006, p. 236). There were, of course, differences on strategy tactics and of opinion, but the lobby “has managed to largely stay on message: the military government is bad, Aung San Suu Kyi is good, and the international community needs to apply pressure on Rangoon and pressure means no aid, trade sanctions, and more isolation (...)” (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 343) This message can be best shown in the following quote from a die-hard activist Jack Healey who proclaimed in 2009: “(Suu Kyi) is the living symbol (...) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If she takes power, immediately torture disappears, 70,000 child soldiers disappear; the drug trade gets knocked off its feet for a while” (quoted in Sydney Morning Herald 2009).

It is where the US moral stance on Burma originated from. Since the US and other Western countries had little interest in Myanmar, this moral approach prevailed. With Burma as one of the lowest priorities on the complex Asian policy agenda, the West looked at this country through ideological lenses and applied moralistic attitude: “essentially, US policy from 1988 (...) was on a single track: human rights. Economic, strategic, narcotics, even humanitarian issues were not pursued” (Steinberg 2006, p. 225) The Western regard of Myanmar started being based on ideology pure and simple.

That is why it was after 1995 (the year when Suu Kyi was released from house arrest for the first time and called for sanctions), not 1988 (when the regime annihilated protesters) when the deluge of sanctions started hitting Myanmar. In 1988 Washington withdrew only antinarcotics support (heavily criticized for its ineffectiveness anyway), introduced arms embargo, and closed down the assistance program (*ibid.*, p. 226) but did not introduce sanctions. This happened only in 1997 after Suu Kyi became recognized and admired in the West. In 1996 US Congress introduced executive order no 13047 prohibiting new investments in Burma (it was signed by Bill Clinton in 1997) (*1997 Executive Order*). This bill is very interesting for one reason. Although it prohibited new investments, it did not cover older investments such as the Unocal pipeline, the most profitable US-Burmese joint-venture.<sup>1</sup> This sheds light on the real motivations of US policymakers who wanted to appease public opinion but not by harming US business interests. This was followed by withdrawal of assistance by the World Bank and other Washington-controlled global financial institutions as well as aid agencies resulting in the suspension of even humanitarian aid in the 2000s. In 2003, after the Burmese government unsuccessfully tried to kill Aung San Suu Kyi, the US introduced new sanctions, restricting imports of textiles and gems into the USA and halted the activities of most financial transactions from most countries into the country (Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003). Finally, in 2007, after Burmese generals crushed the so-called saffron revolution, the US imposed personal sanctions on top dignitaries (Than Shwe, Maung Aye), froze bank accounts, and restricted the import of gems (Sanctions Against Burma 2015). Besides, the US refused to nominate an ambassador until 2012 (the US embassy has been headed by *chargé d'affaires*).

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1 The Yadana/Unocal pipeline was one of Burma's largest investment projects. Therefore, it never appeared on any US sanction lists on Burma.

It has been denying visas to high-ranking Burmese officials and their families and stated that the Burmese are not in compliance with US antinarcotics desiderata (Steinberg 2006, p. 229). Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, thanks to successful PR campaigns of lobbyist groups calling for Burma boycott, many private companies (including Wal-Mart, Pepsi, Levi-Strauss, and others) who had rushed into Myanmar after economic opening in 1988, pulled out due to activists pressure. This all represented an “asphyxiation” strategy based on the conviction that isolation would force the generals to make concessions or even topple the military regime (quoted in Steinberg 2001, p. 244).

Unfortunately – and predictably – this has not led to regime change. The Burmese government “fed itself”: it survived the sanctions and boycotts. It was possible due to the trade with Asian neighbors, huge offshore natural gas fields discovered in the late 1990s, and the isolating nature of Tatmadaw’s regime. If Myanmar was a country where leaders want to engage with the wider world or have something to lose by being isolated, then sanctions would make sense. But the Burmese elites since Ne Win were accustomed to isolationism and perceived it as a value. As the regime interests were secured by external trade with China and others, the generals had then no strategic reason to seek engagement with the West. That is why the assumption that Burma’s military government couldn’t survive further isolation was incorrect: “precisely the opposite (was) true: much more than any other part of the Burmese society, the army (would) weather another forty years of isolation just fine” (Thant Myint-U 2006, p. 342).

So the sanctions failed – they weakened the country but were unable to displace the regime; sanctions hurt the normal people, the poor people: thousands of factories had to close down because their products could not be sold to the West (Osnos 2012). The direst example is given by British Burma scholar Michael Charney. He shows the impact of the ban on important exports to the US introduced in 2003. As Burmese exports to the US were dominated by textiles, the sanctions-hit textile workers – putting between 40.000 to 80.000 textile workers out of work. Since the textile industry mainly employed young women, many of these women were forced into Rangoon’s thriving sex industry (Charney 2009, p. 186).

What is really worth noting is the fact that when Western politicians introduced sanctions, they already knew them to be ineffective. Neither policymakers nor their advisers believed in the efficiency of sanctions to contribute to positive change in Myanmar (foreign trade composed around 3.5% GDP then), and the army has survived on minimal foreign

resources for decades: the impact on the sanctions on the state-qua-state was minimal and led to a further entrenchment of army power (Taylor 2009, pp. 467–468). Myanmar was never a major political issue after 1988, but when specific events occurred that highlighted human rights issues and the continuing role of the military in the management of the state, particular politicians made Myanmar a momentarily personal cause. Policymakers were forced to respond, knowing their political leaders' actions would probably be counterproductive (*ibid.*). Tom Malinowski, a Burma expert who worked in the Clinton White House when the first round of sanctions was imposed, said, "They imposed sanctions not because they genuinely believed that they would work but because they wanted to do something." (quoted in Osnos 2012). This something proved to be a smokescreen for failure. Yet this failure cost the US little, as Myanmar's significance for American strategic interests was small. This changed only after the early 2010s and prompted policy change in Washington DC.

## 5. Back to engagement: US pivot to Myanmar

Barack Obama's presidency changed US Burma policy considerably. Hoping that the window of opportunity opened for influencing a change in the country, Washington modified its policy towards Myanmar. Moralistic political idealism was modified into "pragmatic engagement," which meant a departure from the "regime change" agenda into "regime modification" (Clymer 2015, pp. 288–320). This all happened within the larger policy shift of Obama's administration: its pivot to Asia.

Until 2008 USA concentrated its global attention mostly on the Middle East, but Obama's term saw reorientation of US foreign policy away from the Middle East and back to East and Southeast Asia. This was done for good economic and strategic reasons. Economically, India, China and the countries of Southeast Asia are the most economically dynamic in the world today. With Europe in economic decline and the Middle East with constant political instability, the best regions for the development of trade and investment are in Asia-Pacific. Strategically the reason must have been China (Taylor 2012, p. 9; Lintner 2013). despite vehement rejections of the Obama administration's members who claimed that their main reason for engaging with Burma was Aung San Suu Kyi (Clymer 2015, pp. 308–311; private conversation, Burma Conference 2016, de

Kalb, Illinois). Notwithstanding the reason, “the pivot to Asia” was born and Myanmar became its hallmark.

Since it takes two to tango, the Burmese regime also wanted to adjust its policy and – despite bumpy road to rapprochement during early Obama’s years (Clymer 2015, pp. 298–300) – it did. Little noticed by outside observers the Myanmar military establishment made generation change. Ministers were “permitted to retire” and replaced, military commanders were reassigned: “rather than ‘battle-hardened’ soldiers, ‘well-educated’ commanders with knowledge of economic and political matters were given influential post” (Zöllner 2011, p. 469). The Burmese generals were no longer non-political “warfighters” (Callahan 2003). They became real politicians with a better understanding of global realities. That is why the junta officially dissolved itself in March 2011 and was replaced by a nominally civilian government headed by the former general, Thein Sein.

The post-generals understood because they were aware of the economic plight – they simply compared their situation with their neighbors. But it was first and foremost China’s dominance that made generals seek rapprochement with the West. For two decades, China served the regime’s needs for “guns, funds, and friends,” but it was not in the longer-term interest of the Burmese state (Steinberg 2001, p. 234). The nationalistic Burmese leaders did not want to become a Chinese colony: they had enough Beijing economic dominance and exploitation combined with Chinese arrogance and pride (Clymer 2015, p. 303). „US pivot to Asia” has given them a great opportunity to use the “US card” against China. Better relations with the West were essential for the generals to restore the traditional “neutralism” that had been the hallmark of Burma during the Cold War (Steinberg & Fan 2012, p. 364). Thanks to the US pivot to Asia, American and Burmese generals’ interests for the first time in two decades became convergent.

Concrete actions followed. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit in fall 2011, the nomination of US Ambassador in Yangon in 2012, visits of Secretary John Kerry and – most significantly – two visits of President Barack Obama in Myanmar (2012 and 2014) marked the changing US agenda. What is more, Burmese President Thein Sein paid an official visit to Washington in May 2013 – first on such level since Ne Win. He told his hosts, “my people want democracy” (BBC 2013) which showed that the Burmese regime had finally done the homework in the sphere of political rhetoric.

Although officially and rhetorically American policy was made on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi – US policymakers claimed that she was the

major reason for engagement in Myanmar (Clymer 2015, pp. 309–311), the changed Washington DC’s agenda put Aung San Suu Kyi into an uncomfortable position. Suu Kyi opposed (in vain) Obama’s visit to Burma and was forced to change her stance on sanctions and engagement (Aung Zaw 2012, pp. 104–137); moreover, she realized that the Americans were happy with the Thein Sein’s regime and were not going to die for her cause (Wai Yan Hpone 2015). Washington comforted her with the best American tradition: gestures. When she received Congressional Golden Medal in 2013, Senator McCain said she “can teach him a lesson or two about courage” (Courier 2012) and Barack Obama, while visiting Burma, hugged her and offered many words of comfort. Suu Kyi, realizing that what is rational is real, decided to adjust to the new reality. She played a risky game with (post)generals’ terms without foreign backing. She won the by-elections in April 2012. These elections gave her and her opposition party 10% in parliament while giving the (post)generals international credibility. Moreover, she put all her cards on the 2015 general elections and won it by a landslide (78%). Since she was unable to achieve the position of president, she bypassed the limitations by establishing a new post for her – that of a “state counselor” – and since early 2016 has been ruling Myanmar in cohabitation with the army.

But that came later and was partially a consequence of US engagement (Clymer 2015, pp. 311–320). In 2012 the US government suspended sanctions and, by the end of the Obama administration, removed all of them.<sup>2</sup> After 2012 by-elections, Myanmar was flooded with grants, assistance, and loans from Washington-controlled organizations such as World Bank or Asian Development Bank. The foreign money that poured into Myanmar changed this once isolated country and contributed to an unprecedented growth level (which, however, slowed down after 2016). Myanmar finally started reforming and catching up with the globalized world.

Obama’s administration proclaimed the US Burma policy a big success. In the administration, there was a sense that Burma is a risky source of pride: a successful test of President Obama’s commitment to engagement and a vast new market for American business, but also a high-profile bet on men of immense moral flexibility (Osnos 2012). Obama himself said bluntly at West Point in 2013: “look at a country like Burma, which

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2 After the Rohingya crisis of 2017, the US government reintroduced, a rather symbolic, personal sanctions against some military commanders.

only a few years ago was an intractable dictatorship and hostile to the United States – 40 million people (...) (in fact 52 million – M.L.) Because we took the diplomatic initiative, American leadership, we have seen political reforms opening a once closed society, a movement by Burmese leadership away from partnership with North Korea in favor of engagement with America and our allies. We're now supporting reform and badly needed national reconciliation through assistance and investment (...) if Burma succeeds we will have gained a new partner without having fired a shot" (Remarks 2014). Echoing his statement, Secretary Clinton considered Burma's transformation "the administration greatest foreign policy triumph"; even if Obama administration's boasting about their successes bordered on arrogance and was indigestible aesthetically, it is fair to admit that the US indeed, "was not insignificant in the process of change" (Clymer 2015, p. 318).

However, the real winners of the changes were neither USA nor Aung San Suu Kyi on behalf of whom the changes took place, but the Burmese generals. They "remained entrenched in business and politics, controlling key ministries responsible for the security and retaining a guaranteed quota of a quarter of parliamentary seats" (Pennington 2017). More importantly, they became legitimate global citizens, liberating themselves from the pariah status. Despite losing the 2015 elections, the army remained influential and has been able to check and balance Suu Kyi. The State Counsellor, remembering bitter lessons of the past, has not tried to undermine the privileged position of the armed forces and accepted the Tatmadaw-dominated political system. Without naming it, she has also implemented a blanket amnesty policy which left the army unaccountable for past crimes (Lubina 2018a). This all testifies to an extraordinary achievement of the Tatmadaw establishment: the generals were able to craft a system that forces their former foe, Suu Kyi, to conduct policy in accordance with their interests. Certainly, rapprochement with the USA helped them in their endeavor significantly.

## 6. Back to indifference: Trump and Rohingya

Obama administration's spectacular engagement with Myanmar came to a halt after Obama left office. His successor, Donald Trump, paid little attention to Myanmar. Malignant voices comment that Trump is yet to locate Myanmar on the map, but add that his indifference has positive

aspects as well: at least he does not tweet about Burma or any South-east Asian country (Kean 2018). Trump's ignorance on Myanmar – seen in such details as his lack of intention to talk with Aung San Suu Kyi, even by telephone – is not that bad given his campaign “to erase much of Obama's overseas legacy;” in Burma's dimension, Trump is simply doing nothing; consequently, “Myanmar's troubles involve many factors, but none involve US President Donald Trump” (Pennington 2017).

On the international level, Myanmar's trouble number 1 is the Rohingya crisis. Rohingya is a disputed and unrecognized in Myanmar Muslim ethnic minority that lived in Rakhine State and in Bangladesh (majority lived in Rakhine but was expelled in mid-2017 and before; now around 4/5 of all Rohingya live in exile in Bangladesh). Although the Rohingyas have been prosecuted and repressed for many decades (most notably in 1978, 1991, 2012, 2016 and 2017), their plight became well-known globally only in the mid-2010s, especially after the 2017 crackdown. The Rohingyas are the single most hatred group in Myanmar – dislike towards them characterize almost all Burmese political actors (the army, the NLD, the society and even the former democratic dissidents), which makes supporting their case a politically suicidal attempt in Myanmar (this is precisely the reason why Suu Kyi did not back them). At the same time, Rohingya achieved global recognition and critical moral support from the West, which created an unresolved political conundrum: any Burmese politician, including Suu Kyi, cannot support Rohingya for domestic reasons, but if s/he does not support Rohingya, then s/he is exposed to Western criticism. This is precisely the fate of Suu Kyi. Her previous deification in the West now backfires, as she is being widely accused (in the West) of betraying democratic principles (more, see: Lubina 2018b, pp. 352–358). Consequently, she lost much of her moral capital, mostly in the USA, but in Burma, her popularity is still enormous. Given the fact that the Rohingya issue dominated the perception of Burma in the USA, this has complicated Suu Kyi-led Myanmar's policy in the West. Luckily for Suu Kyi, in the USA, she still finds more understanding of her position on the Rohingya issue than in Western European countries.

Donald Trump was one of the very few Western politicians who did not raise the Rohingya issue, but this is probably due to his ignorance and negligence of Myanmar. Trump's indifference to Myanmar does not mean that there is no US policy at all. On the one hand, there is a continuation of the Obama policy, if only by inertia. On the other, a more or less unified approach during Obama has been replaced by a patchwork of conflicting

agendas, such as these of Congress, State Department, NGOs and other lobbies as well as think tanks; there is a “chaos of policy formulation,” as these conflicting views struggle to take the lead of US policy on Burma at the absence of will to do so by the nominal leader, the president; they “represent a curious mix of hard-nosed pragmatism and lofty idealism” (Kean 2018). Vice-president Mike Pence should be mentioned first. He openly criticized Myanmar for the handling of the Rohingya crisis at the presence of Aung San Suu Kyi during their meeting in Singapore (Remarks 2018), which in Burmese conditions added insult to injury. Pence’s agenda is that of evangelical Christians in the White House (another one is Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo) for whom religious freedom (regardless of what religion it is) is of primary importance. Unsurprisingly, they tend to look at Myanmar through the Rohingya lenses. But evangelical Christians are not alone. They are challenged by National Security Council (e.g., Matt Pottinger, senior director for Asian affairs) straightforward geopolitical agenda: China first; for Council, Myanmar should be handled with care (that means supported politically and economically) so that it won’t gravitate further into China’s orbit (Kean 2018). NSC is also sympathetic to Myanmar due to an unexpected factor. The International Criminal Court decided to start an investigation into the Rohingya issue, even when Myanmar is not its signatory (Statement of ICC 2018). Neither US is the signatory and given the unholy American practices in their war on terror, Washington, just like Naypyidaw, has no reason to like ICC. That is probably why State Department has not called the atrocities against Rohingya a genocide (The Washington Post reported on November 15, Kean 2018), despite the fact that the view is gaining popularity in the US (see, e.g., Holocaust Memorial statement).

This pro-Rohingya view is naturally shared by a plethora of human rights organizations, supported by former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and Kelley Currie, US representative to UN Economic and Social Council, by increasingly influential Muslim politicians in the US and by powerful media whose coverage on Rohingya crisis has made this issue the single most important one on Myanmar in the US. There are also strong voices in favor of reintroducing sanctions in the Congress, which, in the absence of the White House’s ambition to take the lead in Burma’s policy, became once again the leading policy formulating institution. At Capitol Hill, however, Suu Kyi has not lost all her allies. Among those who still believe in Suu Kyi is powerful Mitch McConnell, Senate majority leader, who blocks attempts to reintroduce state sanctions on Myanmar

and rejects criticism on Suu Kyi. Finally, there is the State Department which implemented a continuation of Obama's policy without major changes; its civil servants are pro-engagement with Myanmar and against the sanctions as they understand very well the counter-productiveness of the latter (for this reason, the State Department is unwilling to use terms such as "ethnic cleansing," let alone "genocide"). Consequently, all these conflicting agendas notwithstanding, "fundamentally, the differences in policy towards Myanmar are relatively small"; US policymakers "agree on the goals – to stay engaged and to tackle Rakhine." (Kean 2018). Given Myanmar's government appreciated position on the former and unwillingness to tackle the latter, the results are mixed at best. Consequently, inertia and lack of direction lead American policy on Myanmar and are here to stay for a while. That is why despite little changes in American policy and despite the fact that the US still remains an important player in Myanmar, Washington has clearly lost the initiative in Myanmar in favor of China (Beijing is skilfully regaining its dominance in Burma), followed by Japan, Thailand and other Asian countries that chose to overlook the Rohingya issue. To make matters worse, Washington has neither ideas nor willingness to reverse the negative trend. As long as Donald Trump remains the president, this state of affairs is unlikely to change.

## 7. Conclusions: an unfulfilled relationship

The recent cooling in US-Myanmar relations is just the recent episode in this intriguing yet unfulfilled relationship. Since the beginning of American-Burmese political relations, those two nations have experienced many ups and downs. Despite some common interests during Cold War, Burma and the US stayed at arm's length, with the latter choosing neutrality and the former preferring Thailand instead. On the other hand, the distance had never been total, too. Even after 1988, when the US started heavily criticizing Myanmar over human rights abuses, the bridges have never been burned totally. When an opportunity turned out – change of US policy during Obama and a new, reform-oriented regime of Thein Sein in Myanmar – both sides jumped to mend fences successively. Years 2011–2016 experienced the best period in the US – Burma/Myanmar relationship, with two visits of the American president in Yangon and one of Burmese president in the US (plus Suu Kyi's visits in the US). The momentum, however, was not maintained after Donald Trump became

president in late 2016. Trump has been neglecting Myanmar, while the Rohingya crisis overshadowed the perception of Burma in the US and beyond. Given these circumstances, it is likely that the US-Myanmar relationship will remain unfulfilled for the next years to come.

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