

Japan's Myanmar Policy: Four Principles

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The environment for dialogue between the international community and Myanmar (Burma) has been improving. The country that has done the most to help build the diplomatic infrastructure for such discussion is Japan. Will Japan's diplomacy with its emphasis on dialogue, as opposed to the European and American stress on sanctions, begin to bear fruit in the near future?

The political situation in Myanmar, stalled for decades, has at last shown signs of positive change. The military regime and prodemocracy forces finally compromised, and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) leaders representing the former met with Aung San Suu Kyi, general secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD), who speaks for the latter. The SPDC has set forth measures to ease domestic tensions by, for example, reopening universities and releasing detained NLD members. Hopes are rising in the international community for a rapprochement between the ruling and opposition parties and for democratization in Myanmar.

The emergence of dialogue between the opposing forces is, of course, a welcome development, but the record so far of politics in Myanmar does not encourage too much optimism. In any case, the process of dialogue bears careful watching. Japan must steadily maintain its own dialogue with both the SPDC and NLD in order to counter their sense of isolation in the international community.

Japan has established a distinctive policy toward Myanmar. Among the major industrial nations Japan alone has sustained a continuous dialogue with the Myanmar government as well

as with NLD General Secretary Suu Kyi. Preferring not to support the "north-wind" policy of Europe and the United States, it has opted for a "sunshine policy" toward the military regime, and that amicable position has helped lay the foundations for ongoing negotiations between the SPDC and NLD.

The Role of the U.N. and Malaysia

The strain in SPDC-NLD relations began to ease toward the end of 2000 as a tenacious U.N.-led dialogue finally began to take effect. Greatly to his credit, Razali Ismail, who was made special envoy to Myanmar by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, visited Yangon (Rangoon) several times in 2000 and was able to establish numerous contacts with both the SPDC and NLD. His predecessor, Alvaro de Soto, also visited Myanmar but was unable to achieve anything approaching a SPDC-NLD dialogue. The general impression is that in the recent dialogue process, as well, the initiative was taken by the United Nations.

Also noteworthy, however, is the role Malaysia played behind the scenes. Razali is a Malaysian diplomat who had previously served as Malaysian ambassador to the United Nations. Behind him is Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and finance minister Tun Daim bin Zainuddin.

With the backing of these influential political leaders, and carrying the title of U.N. special envoy, Razali is exercising Malaysian-style diplomacy in an endeavor to change the course of history in Southeast Asia.

In January 2001, Prime Minister Mahathir went to Yangon and presented a forceful argument in favor of the dialogue process to the leaders of the SPDC. This kind of indirect support adds impact to Razali's U.N. diplomacy. Along with Singapore, Malaysia is among the Myanmar military regime's most reliable neighbors in Southeast Asia. For one thing, as ASEAN's presiding country, Malaysia was instrumental in helping Myanmar gain entry to the organization.

Presumably it was Razali who persuaded Suu Kyi to talk with SPDC leaders. She has not

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made any statement about those discussions, and she apparently did not seek cooperation from the United States and European countries, her usual sources of political support. If these observations are correct, we may assume that Razali's role is far greater than it appears. Further, in a studied effort to build mutual trust, everyone involved in the meetings has remained silent about what was discussed.

Beyond Albright Diplomacy

As if keeping step with the U.N. and Malaysian diplomacy, American policy toward Myanmar has shown signs of change. The most notable development was a visit to Yangon by Ralph Boyce, a high-ranking U.S. government official, one month after the inauguration of George W. Bush. As one of the first diplomatic acts of Washington's new, Republican-dominated administration, that visit opened up the possi-

bility of improving U.S.-Myanmar relations, a factor that may help to break the stalemate in Myanmar's international relations.

In Yangon on February 26, 2001, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Boyce (in charge of East Asia and Pacific region) met separately with Khin Nyunt, secretary-1 of the SPDC, and with Suu Kyi. It was an indication of change in the rigid human rights diplomacy pursued until then by the United States. Boyce is a former U.S. minister to Thailand, and having participated in multilateral conferences held to discuss the Myanmar issue, including meetings at Chilston Park in Britain and Walker Hill in South Korea, he is the person most familiar with Myanmar in the U.S. State Department.

The United States is one of the major countries that champion the principles and tradition of human rights diplomacy, but its application of such a policy has not always been consistent and the level of its commitment has tended to be selective. Thus, under the Clinton administration, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's human rights diplomacy differed from one country to the next. She practiced a tough human rights diplomacy toward Myanmar and threw her weight completely behind Suu Kyi, while taking slightly different approaches elsewhere.

Human rights and democracy issues in Myanmar are similar to those in China and North Korea, but Albright followed a policy of engagement in the cases of Beijing and Pyongyang and a nonengagement policy plus economic sanctions vis-à-vis Myanmar. American policy toward China and North Korea at that time placed higher priority on security strategy than on human rights diplomacy, following a pattern that often emerges whenever the United States perceives the possibility of a military threat.

Some observers note what is known as the "Madeleine element," meaning the former secretary of state's strong personal imprint on U.S. policy toward Myanmar. They argue that her direct meetings with Suu Kyi were seminal in shaping Washington's hard-line, human rights diplomacy toward that government. Now with the Republican party in power and Albright no longer secretary of state, the Madeleine element

is gone and a new Myanmar policy is taking shape in Washington.

Different Diplomatic Positions

In its diplomatic stance toward Myanmar, the international community is divided between the United States and Europe, on the one hand, which maintain a hard-line attitude—the so-called "north wind" policy—and Japan and ASEAN, on the other, with their "sunshine" policy. Australia takes an intermediate position between these two extremes. Australia was once part of the hard-line camp, but in the face of the prolonged political stalemate in Myanmar, its government decided around 1998 to approach the military regime through dialogue, thus drawing closer to the Japanese position.

Among the hard-liners are countries firmly committed to human rights issues, like the United States and Britain, as well as France, Germany, and others that are strongly interested in normalization of economic relations. The ASEAN countries, likewise, do not take a uniform position toward Myanmar: Singapore and Malaysia have very close ties with Myanmar while Thailand and the Philippines opted for "constructive engagement," taking Yangon to task for human rights abuses and suppression of democracy. These two countries, however, may change their approaches in the near future. The administration of Thaksin Shinawatra that came to power this year in Thailand likens state policy to business management, and the Philippine administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is supported by the middle class and the armed forces.

Particularly important is the position of China, which of all countries has maintained an independent line toward Myanmar. Starting when the country was still called Burma (its official name was changed to Myanmar in 1989), or more precisely, dating from its retreat into national seclusion in 1962, when the government established a distinct form of socialism that it still maintains, China has penetrated Myanmar through trade conducted across the national border. Also, China's Yunnan province is a landlocked area, and so access to the Andaman Sea (the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal) via an



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overland route through Myanmar is crucial. For these reasons, plus Beijing's wish to restrain possible territorial ambitions on the part of India, Myanmar has great strategic importance to China. The signing of an economic cooperation agreement between Beijing and Yangon, Chinese assistance for highway and railway construction projects, and arms trade, are among other factors in the relationship that can only be explained from a strategic point of view. In short, China's Myanmar policy is founded exclusively on strategic considerations and has nothing to do with the diplomatic game involving human rights and democratization. One might call China's stance toward Myanmar a "strategic sunshine policy." Of the industrially advanced nations and world powers, therefore, Japan is the only one that has pursued a consistent sunshine policy toward Myanmar in the area of human rights and democratization.

Japan's Ultimate Goals

Ultimately, Japanese policy toward Myanmar is premised on the possibility that at some point a national government elected by democratic means will come to power in Yangon, paving the way for political stability, improvement of the human rights situation, and establishment of a market economy. In Japan's view, good relations with Myanmar would also enable the two countries to work closely together in promoting regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. Strategically speaking, Myanmar's geopolitical position is also important. The interests of Japan would be well served by a diplomatic partnership with this nation sandwiched between the two huge and powerful countries of China and India.

Political stability will be difficult to forge

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without economic development. A growth economy would nurture the middle class, which would in turn support the process of democratization. Other Southeast Asian countries have experienced this pattern of development, and it is likely to apply in Myanmar as well. Barring a political upheaval that leads to the introduction of a democratic system to Myanmar overnight, the present military regime is likely to go on governing the country for some time. Japan can do little right now but bide its time, helping Myanmar with gradual democratization and economic development. Japan has neither the imagination nor the means for more radical forms of intervention, such as helping to set the stage for a democratic revolution, directing rebellion from abroad, or sending in operatives to manipulate popular democratic forces. The kind of political maneuvering the United States has practiced to prompt coup-d'etats in Central and South

America, for example, is not an option for Japan. I would say that the keynote of Japan's diplomacy must continue to be facilitation of the democratic process through peaceful means and support for economic development.

Democratization and economic development are the main objectives of Japan's Myanmar policy, but the issue of minorities is also high on its agenda. Japan wants to see the harsh treatment of ethnic minorities within Myanmar come to an end. Something must be done to give minority peoples in Myanmar's rough, mountainous regions a way to subsist other than cultivating poppies and producing amphetamines for sale abroad. As concern about the Southeast Asian origins of much of the international drug trade grows, this issue has become the focus of increasing attention. The problem will not be solved without new initiatives in rural development. Projects such as the introduction of buckwheat as a cash crop to replace poppy farming are the only way to assure a real solution through agricultural development. Japan's official development assistance can play an important role in this regard.

Once the diplomatic objectives outlined above were set, Japan adopted its sunshine policy while the United States and Europe stuck to their hard-line north wind policy. Japan has consistently emphasized dialogue as the way to break the political stalemate in Myanmar, whereas the United States and Europe have opted for strong sanctions. The two approaches seem to be polar opposites, at least on the surface. Japan is often accused of toeing too tightly to the U.S. line and taking little initiative in its foreign policy. As far as Myanmar is concerned, however, this is not the case.

Four Principles

Japan's Myanmar policy has been developed around four principles: (1) dialogue, (2) active engagement, (3) collaboration with the United States, and (4) gradualism. The current environment supporting dialogue between the international community and Myanmar conforms to the path Japan has assiduously followed for many years. It should be noted that

the military regime began listening to the United Nations and showing willingness to prepare even tentatively for some kind of democratization largely because of Japan's efforts to keep the regime from being internationally isolated and to encourage it to seek gradual reconciliation with prodemocracy forces.

In those ways Japan has been steadily helping to improve the international diplomatic infrastructure surrounding Myanmar. Even if the current dialogue process fails, I believe Japan will be wise to maintain the four principles in its diplomatic relations with Myanmar.

Principle One: Dialogue

In 1988 prodemocracy demonstrations took place in Myanmar, and in the general elections of 1990, the military regime was defeated. Refusing to step down, the regime's leaders placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest. After releasing her for a brief period in July 1995, they confined her to her home again in 2000. Her release in 1995 was the result of patient persuasion by the Japanese embassy in Yangon and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Myanmar regime informed the Japanese government of Suu Kyi's release prior to the public announcement, allowing Japan to announce soon thereafter its decision to consider restoring official development assistance (ODA) to Myanmar. Japan decided to reinstate ODA only after it had ascertained that the first step had been made toward democratization.

Progress in Japan's dialogue with the leaders of the military regime has been promising especially in the last few years. Three important talks were held in November and December 1999. At the ASEAN nonofficial summit held at that time in Manila, Japan's Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo spoke separately with SPDC Chairman (prime minister of the Union of Myanmar) Than Shwe. Immediately after that, former prime minister Hashimoto Ryutaro visited Yangon accompanied by a private-sector mission, and talked with the SPDC chairman and other leading Cabinet ministers. A few days later, a Keidanren (Federation of Economic Organizations) mission followed them, also meeting with the SPDC chairman. In this way, dialogue between

the Japanese side and the military regime acquired multiple layers that helped build mutual trust and increased the prospects of progress toward democracy and a market economy in Myanmar.

Even during these continuing overtures to the military regime, Japan maintained frequent contact with Suu Kyi. At the time when she was released from house arrest in 1995, embassy personnel from the Japanese ambassador's residence, located across a street from her house, often crossed the street to visit her. Thus Japan's tenacious diplomacy of dialogue with both sides was clearly a factor in the military regime's decision to release Suu Kyi. Although contacts with Suu Kyi fell off for a time after she made critical remarks about Japanese ODA, Japan's policy did not basically change.

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Principle Two: Active Engagement

Japan's foreign policy has often been characterized as passive and easily swayed by immediate circumstances. Be that as it may, its Myanmar policy is proactive and committed to engagement, based on a core premise of economic cooperation. After the military regime seized power in Myanmar following the prodemocracy demonstrations in 1988, Japan cut off ODA to Myanmar, although it has continued to provide funds for humanitarian purposes. In this regard Japan's stance differs from that of the United States.

Japan's ODA in Myanmar apparently is determined by actual or potential progress in Myanmar's democratization and human rights and also reflects Tokyo's wish for further progress. Under the category of grant aid, Japan provided assistance for increased food production (approx. ¥ 1 billion in March 1995;

approx. ¥800 million in July 1998), expansion of a college of nursing (approx. ¥1.6 billion in October 1995), and for a child and maternal health service program provided through the United Nations Children's Fund (approx. ¥300 million in 1999; approx. ¥600 million in 2000). In technical cooperation, in which the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) plays a central role, Tokyo provides some 400 million yen mainly in the areas of personnel training and support for basic living. Japan also extended some 2.5 billion yen in loan assistance in March 1998 for the Yangon international airport expansion project. Although it had already been approved, Japan froze the loan in 1988, but ultimately it was implemented ten years later. Japan explains these assistance and cooperation projects as justified responses to humanitarian needs.

A typical example of Japan's proactive and engagement approach is a series of workshops organized at the government level aimed at assisting Myanmar's economic and structural adjustment. Originating in a meeting between Japanese prime minister Obuchi Keizo and SPDC chairman (prime minister of Myanmar) Than Shwe in 1999, the focus of these workshops is Japanese cooperation extended by both the government and the private sector to work out economic reforms in Myanmar. At workshops held in Yangon and Tokyo in 2000, the topics of discussion included monetary and fiscal policy, industry and trade, and agriculture and rural communities. Japan assisted Vietnam in carrying out economic reforms, and Tokyo hopes to extend the same sort of assistance to Myanmar as well.

Principle Three: Collaboration with Washington
Whenever necessary, Tokyo and Washington hold consultations on problems related to Myanmar, discussing issues and exchanging information. There is nothing unusual in this—over the last half century, Japanese foreign policy has been heavily influenced by the bilateral relationship that has grown out of the alliance with the United States, and in important diplomatic matters, Japan has relied on information exchange, discussion, understanding, and agreement with the United States.

When Japan's diplomatic approach swings completely away from that of the United States and Europe, as it does in the case of Myanmar, Tokyo still takes special care to prevent misunderstanding and suspicion from arising in Washington regarding its intentions. As Japan has learned through experience, through the twentieth-century history of its relations with America, an accumulation of small misunderstandings can lead to misgivings on both sides, creating a vicious circle of distrust. In dealing with something that can be so politically controversial as its policy toward Myanmar, Japan takes care to keep the United States informed and, to some extent, involved.

At those junctures when Japan has drawn up and is ready to carry out what might appear to be a drastic policy, Japanese foreign ministry officials make it a rule to visit Washington to call for American government support or to explain the circumstances that gave rise to its decisions. For example, when the Japanese government partially resumed ODA payments for the Yangon international airport expansion project, a move deemed necessary in order to assure the safety of commercial air traffic there, Japan laid out in advance its rationale to the United States. Whether the United States supports or agrees with Japan's policies, the important thing is to try to make its position understood beforehand. The two countries, in fact, have been able to collaborate fruitfully on issues involving Myanmar because the U.S. state department has high-ranking officials well versed in Japanese affairs who are well equipped to understand.

Japan also maintains close relations with Britain. The Chilston Park conference held in October 1998 by the British foreign ministry brought together representatives of ASEAN countries and the nations that provide them assistance. At this meeting, government officials from Japan, the United States, Europe, and ASEAN countries, as well as representatives of international organizations, held open and candid discussions on what could be done to break the stalemate in Myanmar. Since British and Japanese diplomats originally proposed the conference, and their governments arranged it together, they were particularly eager to find some solutions for Myanmar.

Principle Four: Gradualism

Japan's fourth principle is to maintain a long-term perspective on democratization, encouraging Myanmar to move gradually rather than hastily. We might hope that the country will achieve democratic freedoms sooner rather than later, but considering the prolonged confrontation between the military regime and the NLD, the gradualist approach remains the best, and perhaps the only feasible, one.

American and European criticism of and sanctions against the military regime could simply stiffen its position, which would only deepen its sense of isolation in the international community and make the chances of democratization even more remote. Considering the overwhelming NLD victory in the general election of 1990, it is wholly understandable that the United States and Europe should support Aung San Suu Kyi. Yet while this is a reasonable position, it will not help to resolve the political confrontation in Myanmar. That is the reality of politics.

In the face of prolonged political confrontation in Myanmar, Japan has developed a policy of gradualism as the most realistic and probably most promising, in the long run, diplomatic approach. It has committed itself to continuing dialogue with both the military regime and Suu Kyi and to providing humanitarian assistance to the impoverished people of Myanmar. Thailand and the Philippines, it will be recalled, achieved democracy only after many years. Gradualism, though it does not bring immediate results, will certainly foster trust over the long term. It offers the best way for Japan to help Myanmar attain democratization and a market economy by peaceful means.



Translated from the original Japanese article published in the May 2001 issue of *Gaiko Forum* focusing on the Japanese economy in the global economy. Among feature articles in this issue was an interview of the executive vice president of a foreign securities firm in Tokyo who declared that if Japan were a corporation, then it would have been the time to purchase it.