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It's Complicated: United States, Aung San Suu Kyi and U.S.-Burma Relations

Abstract

Until 2011 Aung San Suu Kyi has been the point of reference for U.S. policy towards Burma/Myanmar. Her struggle with Burmese military junta has attracted a widespread attention and a global affection for her. As a result, Suu Kyi enjoyed an unquestioned support from subsequent U.S. president administrations. This, however, has changed in 2011 when Suu Kyi was politically sacrificed by the U.S. pivot to Asia. Nevertheless, she faced it bravely and did not give in; just changed her tactics from confrontation to cooperation with the post-military regime. That gave her a stunning electoral victory in 2015 and power from behind-the-scenes in Myanmar. Suu Kyi's relations with Washington have remained cordial, yet complicated ever since.

Introduction

This article deals with bilateral relations between Burma/Myanmar¹ and United States of America from the perspective of political science, particularly focusing on the role of individuals in politics.

Although writing on individuals in politics is not popular within academic circles² – Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi are different here out of two reasons. First, Burma is not a democratic country with the check and balances system; thus the importance of individuals increases here (let alone given the personalized concept of politics in Burmese political tradition).³ Second, Aung San Suu Kyi's position within Burmese

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¹ I find the distinction between Burma and Myanmar quite artificial and I will use both of them – “Burma” when referred to pre-1989 period and Myanmar when after 1989.

² Robert Keohane, ‘Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond’ in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, Robert O. Keohane (ed.), New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 198.

³ David Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar. What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 53; David Steinberg, *Burma. The State in Myanmar*,

political system is absolutely unique thanks to two facts. She is the daughter of Burma's independence hero, Aung San and thus possesses "moral capital";⁴ and throughout her long and full of sacrifices career she proved that she is a significant politician on her own. This has all elevated her to the position above ordinary politicians in Burma.⁵

As for U.S.-Burma relations they are naturally asymmetric. This asymmetry, however, does not necessarily mean that the more powerful dominate less powerful. There are different types of asymmetry. In case of US-Burma relation, two asymmetries apply: "distracted asymmetry" (both sides have other more important relationships to worry about) and "normalized asymmetry" (when the relationship is not harmonious but both sides are confident of fulfilling their basic interests and expectations of mutual benefits).⁶ Throughout period written in this article US – Burma relations have moved from "distracted asymmetry" to "normalized asymmetry".

Burma has historically been of little interest to the United States. Before WW II for the United States, Burma was a British preserve.⁷ Only once Burma Road was constructed did Burma become known to the US public.⁸ After the war Burma was not included in Franklin

Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2000, pp. 39–51; Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, Tokyo 1999, pp. 214–215.

⁴ John Kane, *The Politics of Moral Capital*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 147–171.

⁵ Visits to Burma/Myanmar, 2010-2016; see also my biography of Aung San Suu Kyi: Michał Lubina, *Pani Birmy. Biografia polityczna Aung San Suu Kyi* [Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma. A Political Biography], Warszawa: PWN, 2015.

⁶ Brantly Womack, 'Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: China, Vietnam and Cambodia', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, June 2003; Maung Aung Myoe, *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw. Myanmar's China Policy Since 1948*, Singapore 2011, p. 5.

⁷ Tim McLaughlin, *Creeping Tigers, Intelligent Elephants and Befriending Communists: Memoirs of Visits by Three Former US Presidents in Sanctions to Success*, Myanmar Times Special Report, 2012, p. 3; David Steinberg, 'Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese Relationship and Its Vicissitudes' in *Short of the Goal, U.S. Policy and Poorly Performing States*, Nancy Birdsall, Milan Vaishnav and Robert L. Ayres (eds.), Washington D.C.: Brookings, 2006, p. 223.

⁸ Andre Selth, 'Burma And Superpower Rivalries in the Asia-Pacific', *US Naval War College Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2, spring 2002, p. 44; Lisa Brooten, 'The Feminization of Democracy under Siege: The Media, "the Lady" of Burma, and U.S. Foreign Policy', *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2005, p. 138.

Delano Roosevelt's anti-colonial agenda.⁹ With Harry Truman's ascending to power American anti-imperialism moderated even more and Burma was considered to be better left in the British sphere of influence.¹⁰

Soon after independence Burma chose to conduct a neutral foreign policy.¹¹ In 1950 US aid program was granted to Burma and marked the first step in US-Burma cooperation.¹² Unfortunately, cold war consideration prevented strengthening of Washington-Rangoon ties which made Rangoon stop the U.S. aid program.¹³ The bilateral contacts, however, were not cut and US assistance program (mainly foodstuff) was restarted in 1956.¹⁴ Nevertheless, both sides kept distance.¹⁵

After military coup d'état in 1962 Burma retreated even farther from the international system.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Burma's neutrality played off for every major power, including USA.¹⁷ Ne Win ended U.S. assistance program and signed border agreement with China; on the other hand, he paid state visit to the U.S. in 1966¹⁸ during which informally United States had provided him military training¹⁹. That came right in time given Burma's deterioration of relations with China.²⁰ U.S. – Burma cooperation intensified in the 1970s when Washington started military assistance to Burma to stem the Communist tide.²¹ U.S. – Burma

⁹ Robert H. Taylor, 'Bilateral relations: then and now' in *Sanctions to Success...* p. 9; David Steinberg, *Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese...*, p. 223.

¹⁰ Anthony J. Stockwell, 'Southeast Asia in War and Peace: The End of European Colonial Empires' in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Nicolas Tarling (ed.), Vol. 2, Part 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 15.

¹¹ William C. Johnstone, *Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.

¹² Steinberg, *Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese...*, p. 223.

¹³ Selth, *Burma And Superpower Rivalries...*, pp. 45–46.

¹⁴ Steinberg, *Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese...*, p. 223.

¹⁵ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, p. 270.

¹⁶ Selth, *Burma And Superpower Rivalries...*, p. 46

¹⁷ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2009, p. 346.

¹⁸ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps...*, p. 302.

¹⁹ Taylor, 'Bilateral relations...', p. 9.

²⁰ Martin Smith, *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, London, Dhaka and Bangkok: Zed Books, 1999, pp. 248–258.

²¹ Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, Chiang Mai: Silkwood Books, 1999, p. 315; Steinberg, *Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese...*, p. 224.

relations improved to such extent that in 1978 Burma requested restart of U.S. assistance; the program lasted until 1988.²² Despite that Burma had remained marginal for the USA.

Overshadowed by “the Lady”

The year 1988 was a turning point in Burma. Mass demonstrations toppled the government during summer of 1988. The military reacted with slaughters of demonstrators, another coup d'état on 18th September, repression and establishment with the new junta, the SLORC.²³ To improve their image they announced general elections. During the campaign a new star emerged: Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero, Aung San.²⁴ This forced army to lock Suu Kyi in the house arrest, prosecute her supporters and nullify the victorious for Suu Kyi's party, NLD, elections of 1990. The army continued to govern without legitimacy. Suu Kyi, locked under house for 15 years (1989–2010, with intervals), hoped to force the generals to make concessions: she appealed to the West for economic sanction. Her voice was heard because the world has changed. In the West the political agenda towards such peripheral states as Burma had transformed from security to human rights.

Aung San Suu Kyi herself played another, distinct role in shaping this new Western policy towards Myanmar. Unfairly convicted for her ideas, with dramatic family tragedy, she became enormously popular in the West.²⁵ Suu Kyi herself became “a glocal – both global and local – icon”,²⁶ a “saint who was above criticism”.²⁷ For her stance and proclaimed ideas she received a deluge of awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Suu Kyi dominated the picture to such an extent

²² Lintner, *Burma in Revolt...*, p. 315.

²³ More on 1988 revolution, see: Bertil Lintner, *Outrage. Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1990, pp. 70–140.

²⁴ Her popularity and her ideas can be traced in the collection of her text and speeches, Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings*, London: Penguim Books 1991, pp. 167–227.

²⁵ Justin Wintle, *Perfect Hostage. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma and the Generals*, London: Arrow Books, 2007, p. 330.

²⁶ Hans-Bernd Zöllner, *The Beast and the Beauty. The History of the Conflict between the Military and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, 1988-2011, Set in a Global Context*, Berlin: Regio Spectra, 2012, pp. 277–359 and 281–282.

²⁷ Bertil Lintner, *Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2011, p. 78.

that even when the junta achieved authentic (and rare) successes, like the cease-fire agreements with the ethnic minority guerillas, the West never acknowledged them.²⁸ Being skilful politician Suu Kyi new how to use this priceless card of foreign backing. She called for help and appealed for no more foreign investments, tourism boycott and even cancelling humanitarian assistance.²⁹ Her voice was heard very loudly in the West. Since USA and other Western countries had little interests in Myanmar, support for Suu Kyi portrayed in moral colors prevailed.³⁰

That is why sanctions started being introduced against Myanmar. Since 1997 new investments in Burma were prohibited,³¹ including the assistance from World Bank and other Washington-controlled global financial institutions and aid agencies, imports of textiles and gems into the USA were halted, activities of most financial transactions into Myanmar were restricted,³² personal sanctions introduced and freezing of bank account implemented.³³ Moreover, since mid 1990s due to successful PR campaigns of lobbyist groups calling for Burma boycott, many private companies pulled out of the country. This was all an “asphyxiation approach” to Burmese government: calling for essential isolation of the regime unless changes are forthcoming.³⁴

The regime, however, withstood the pressure thanks to trade with Asian neighbors, huge offshore natural gas fields and the “hermit” nature of this regime.³⁵ That is why the sanctions “were only strong enough to weaken the country, not strong enough to remove the

²⁸ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps...*, p. 332.

²⁹ Aung San Suu Kyi and Alan Clements, *The Voice of Hope. Conversations with Alan Clements*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997, p. 218; Levy Adrian, ‘Portrait. Aung San Suu Kyi’, *Prospect Magazine*, No. 65, July 2001, p. 2.

³⁰ David Steinberg, *Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese...*, p. 225.

³¹ *1997 Executive Order 13047 of May 20, Executive Order 13047 – Prohibiting New Investment in Burma*: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/13047.pdf> (accessed 10.06.2016); *Sanctions Against Burma*, Treasury of State: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/burma.txt> (accessed 10.06.2016).

³² *Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003*, Public Law 108–61, 28.06.2003, U.S. Department of the Treasury: http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/bfda_2003.pdf (accessed 10.06.2016)

³³ *Sanctions Against...*

³⁴ Quoted in: Steinberg, *Burma...*, p. 244.

³⁵ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps...*, p. 342.

leaders”.³⁶ However, the pressure from pro-democracy activists and supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi was so enormous that it forced the Western politicians to maintain the policy of sanctions. Sometimes it was useful for them in their domestic policies, too.³⁷

Furthermore, in 2000s U.S. policy towards Burma underwent modification. During Clinton administration Burma was consistently linked with the concept of human rights, but since Bush took office, the emphasis has shifted, and “Burma has been linked with the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi”.³⁸ Years 2003–2009 saw the peak of pro-Suu Kyi activities in the West supporting her.³⁹ For Aung San Suu Kyi it meant one thing. Thanks to above mentioned lucky combination of geopolitical and ideological factors, media’s popularity and personal skills Suu Kyi herself became a dimension in Western countries’ foreign policies. Unfortunately for her, in 2011 the changed geopolitical situation has forced United States to abandon this policy.

Aung San Suu Kyi: the first victim of U.S. pivot to Asia

Barack Obama’s presidency marked the important shift in U.S. Burma policy. Faced by China’s rise, Washington started understanding the geopolitical importance of Myanmar which translated itself into major policy shift. Instead of isolating the military regime, Washington started engagement policy.

Obama’s reorientation to Asia-Pacific was done for good economic and strategic reasons.⁴⁰ With these in mind, “Burma has emerged as the frontline of the Obama administration’s ‘pivot’ towards Asia, or, in plain language, the U.S.’ China containment policy”.⁴¹ Myanmar has an important place in this concept. With its priceless geographical location,

³⁶ Evan Osnos, ‘The Burmese Spring’, *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2012: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/06/the-burmese-spring> (accessed 17.06.2016); more about the impact of sanctions on ordinary people’s lives: Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 186.

³⁷ Breton, *The Feminization of Democracy...*, p. 139.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ See for example: *Burma: It Can’t Wait* / U.S. Campaign for Burma.

⁴⁰ Taylor, ‘Bilateral relations...’, p. 9.

⁴¹ Bertil Lintner, ‘Burma, North Korea Stay Brothers in Arms’, *Asia Times Online*, 5 September 2013: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-050913.html (accessed 17.06.2016).

Myanmar closes US “necklet on Chinese string of pearls”.⁴² This explains why Myanmar quickly moved from a non-important place in US political agenda to a key one. And why the Burmese generals became important for Washington again.

One, however, “need two to tango”.⁴³ The Burmese generals changed as well – little noticed by outside the Myanmar military underwent a generation change;⁴⁴ new, better educated army technocrats removed the battle hardened commanders, “war fighters”,⁴⁵ while nominally civilian government (consistent, however, of former generals) took office in March 2011. In a way the generals were forced to do reforms: “when Laos overtakes you in per-capita G.D.P., it’s time to rethink your basic national strategy”.⁴⁶ But Myanmar’s economic plight was insufficient explanation for their actions, since the army has enjoyed a privileged position anyway. More important was growing dependence on China which steadily colonized Burma economically and even socially (mass migration).⁴⁷ After little known to the outside world behind-the-scene strategy considerations and power struggles within the junta’s inner circle, the ruling generals decided that enough China is enough and to balance its influence, they needed reforms, domestic change⁴⁸ and better relations with the West to regain the traditional neutral foreign policy.⁴⁹ U.S. pivot to Asia gave them the chance and

⁴² Bogdan Góralczyk, *Amerykański „naszyjnik” wokół Chin – USA zwiększają obecność w Azji* [US necklet on China. The Americans increase their presence in Asia], 7 May 2014, WP.pl: <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,1329,title,Amerykanski-naszyjnik-wokol-Chin-USA-zwiekszaja-obecnosc-w-Azji,wid,16584874,wiadomosc.html?ticaid=117350> (accessed 17.06.2016). “String of pearls” is a popular name of Chinese bases and ports on the raw materials supply line from Africa to China via Indian Ocean; Beijing has been building them in order to have an insurance should relations with the USA deteriorate. Without Myanmar this “string of pearls” is incomplete.

⁴³ I derived this phrase from one of the reviews and I am grateful for the anonymous reviewer for it as well as for pointing me the fact of junta’s own “pivot”.

⁴⁴ Zöllner, *The Beast and the Beauty...*, p. 469.

⁴⁵ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies. War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003.

⁴⁶ Quoted in: Evan Osnos, The Burmese Spring, *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2012: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/06/the-burmese-spring> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁴⁷ Steinberg, *Burma...*, p. 234.

⁴⁸ About junta’s inner circle consideration, see more: Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan, *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma. Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State*, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013.

⁴⁹ David Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, *Modern China-Myanmar Relations...*, p. 364.

they used it. Thus, at the same time when US was pivoting to Asia, Burmese junta, made its own pivot – against China. Thus, “China factor” was crucial on calculations on both sides.⁵⁰

The results of U.S.-Burmese generals mutual re-engagement have been outstanding. Lifting of sanctions, appointment of an ambassador, massive grants, assistance and loans from Washington-controlled organizations such as World Bank or Asian Development Bank, large investments from Western companies and diplomatic activity, these all proved the intensifying ties between USA and Myanmar. As for Obama’s Administration, it proclaimed U.S. Burma policy a big success⁵¹ and was generally right: the country reformed itself and started developing rapidly, and – what was most importantly from Washington’s perspective – liberated itself from Chinese control.

It was Aung San Suu Kyi, however, who paid the price of the changed geopolitical environment. The “China factor” for Burmese domestic scene meant one thing for Suu Kyi: her foes – the generals – had just started to struck deals with her patrons – the Americans. Unsurprisingly, her position greatly diminished. In a way, she was the first political victim of the “US pivot to Asia”. As one influential commentator put it: “Obama administration changed the policy of sanctions and begun to initiate a policy of fuller engagement with the junta in the dual beliefs that that the strategy of isolating Burma had been unsuccessful and that the dialogue could convince the generals to change their ways (...) the US consider Suu Kyi robust enough to fight for democracy without their constant support”.⁵² Suu Kyi opposed in vain Obama’s visit to Burma and equally futilely warned against the “reckless optimism”;⁵³ she was “forced to review her own cautious

⁵⁰ The last phrase is taken from the review; the reviewer is right that “without generals’ decision to reform, the U.S. just could do nothing *vis-a-vis* Myanmar, even within its ‘pivot’”.

⁵¹ *Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony*, The White House, 28 May 2014: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁵² Aung Zaw, *The Face of Resistance. Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma’s Fight for Freedom*, Bangkok: Mekong Press, 2012, pp. 104–137.

⁵³ Evan Osnos, ‘The Burmese Spring’, *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2012: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/06/the-burmese-spring> (accessed 17.06.2016).

position on engagement and sanctions”.⁵⁴ Suu Kyi herself revealed in a meeting with party cadres that “she had come to realize the United States was prioritizing stability over democratization”, and she now “believed the US would prefer to see the USDP (the military ruling party) remain in power until at least 2020”.⁵⁵ Washington comforted her gestures. She received Congressional Golden Medal in 2013, an emotional speech from Senator Joseph McCain⁵⁶ and Barack Obama’s hug and moral support.⁵⁷

What is worth mentioning, however, is Suu Kyi’s attitude towards USA all along. She did not accuse Washington of betrayal and did not complain in public that the Obama Administration had put her under the bus, effectively ruining her hopes to remove generals from power. Even in the closed meetings with foreign policymaker she limited herself to calls for caution and warnings against reckless belief in the general.⁵⁸ No public complaints or moral condemnation: nothing. On the contrary, officially Suu Kyi has thanked USA for its support⁵⁹ and accepted praises from Obama and others – she was maximizing her options for the future. Being a classy politician Suu Kyi behaved as a skilful stateswoman who knows that being sacrificed by stronger partner is the inevitable part of playing politics. And that if one is in the position of junior partner one cannot allow oneself to complain and have the luxury of being morally right. That would be not only futile but also counterproductive.

⁵⁴ Aung Zaw, *The Face of Resistance...*, p. 137.

⁵⁵ Wai Yan Hpone, ‘The Lady’s Predicament’, *The Irrawaddy*, 31 March 2015: <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2015/04/06/the-irrawaddy-the-ladys-predicament-wai-yan-hpone/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁵⁶ ‘In Emotional Tribute, Sen. John McCain Tells Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi She Taught Him ‘A Thing or Two about Courage’, *Courier-Journal*, 19 September 2012: <http://blogs.courier-journal.com/politics/2012/09/19/in-emotional-tribute-sen-john-mccain-tells-burmas-aung-san-suu-kyi-she-taught-him-a-thing-or-two-about-courage/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁵⁷ *Remarks by President Obama and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma in Joint Press Conference*, 14 November 2014, The White House: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/14/remarks-president-obama-and-daw-aung-san-suu-kyi-burma-joint-press-confe> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁵⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi’s visit to Poland and her meetings in Polish Parliament (Sejm, Senate), personal attendance.

⁵⁹ *Remarks by President Obama and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi...*

“No hope without endeavor”

Being a determined and stubborn politician Suu Kyi did not give in. Loyal to her own words “no hope without endeavor”⁶⁰ she decided to fight on and “never allow the military to marginalize her”.⁶¹ For Suu Kyi, however, the revise of U.S. policy meant an uneasy choice: keep her “moral icon” position, respected but politically irrelevant, or playing a risky game on (post)generals’ terms without foreign backing. Being a real politician she chose the latter.

After twenty years of struggle, Suu Kyi yielded and accepted the inevitable: army’s dominance. She agreed to function within rules determined by the regime: changed her tactics from confrontation to cooperation and tried to convince generals to her person (the army has formalized its dominance over political sphere in Myanmar by implementing a constitution that guarantees the military forces three key ministers in any government, budgetary autonomy for the army, legal possibility for staging coup anytime and ¼ of all parliamentary seats – a minority that blocks any amendments to the constitution).⁶² By doing so Suu Kyi compromised a lot: accepted donations from army cronies,⁶³ publicly proclaimed “love” for the army,⁶⁴ participated in military parades and did not backed social fight for the land grabbed by the military.⁶⁵ She sat pat during the offensive against the Kachins⁶⁶ and did not say a word in support of the Rohingyas.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought Acceptance Speech*, 22 October 2013.

⁶¹ Personal conversation with Aung San Suu Kyi, Naypyidaw, 5 February 2015.

⁶² *Constitution of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*, Burma Online Library: http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs5/Myanmar_Constitution-2008-en.pdf (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶³ Simon Montlake, ‘Myanmar Democracy Icon Suu Kyi Taps ‘Crony’ Capitalists for Charity Fund’s’, *Forbes*, 16 January 2013: <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶⁴ Jonathan Owen, ‘Why Suu Kyi Still Loves Burma’s Army’, *The Independent*, 27 January 2013: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/why-suu-kyi-still-loves-burmas-army-8468363.html> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶⁵ Aung Zaw, ‘The Letpadaung Saga and the End of an Era’, *The Irrawaddy*, 14 March 2013: <http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/29405> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶⁶ Hanna Hindstrom, ‘Kachin Rebels Refuse to Invite Suu Kyi to Mediate Peace Process’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 14 February 2013: <https://www.dvb.no/news/kachin-rebels-refuse-to-invite-suu-kyi-to-mediate-peace-process/26397> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶⁷ For the latter she was heavily criticized in the West. Human rights activists that passionately supported her for two decades still cannot get over this kind of attitude, accusing her of betrayal, e.g. Tim Robertson, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi: Colluding with

Unfortunately, this all did not convince the ruling military. The generals contrary to initial promises did not change the constitution and did not allow Suu Kyi to become president. Suu Kyi however, did not give up. She considered all her compromises a “relatively trivial matters that can be addressed once she and her party are in power”.⁶⁸ That is why she put all her cards on the parliamentary elections in November 2015. It was a risky and brave decision given the fact that she was steadily losing her support and her victory was not sure, and that she had no guarantee that the generals would not falsify or nullify the elections. Moreover, by taking part in the partly-free elections she accepted that the military sets rules in political sphere and army’s position remains dominant. Finally, given the 25% reserved to the military Suu Kyi must have scored 66% of the voters to get majority and balance army’s structural dominance. That was a poker game: in the worst case Suu Kyi might have ended up without anything – neither power nor domestic and international prestige which she had sacrificed by dealing with the regime. She put all her cards on the elections.

That proved to be the right decision. Suu Kyi’s NLD won overwhelmingly by scoring 78% of the voters and gaining absolute majority. After winning the elections Suu Kyi made the next necessary step – on a series on behind-the-scene talks with top military commanders persuaded the regime to give back the power in return for economic benefits and – probably – security guarantees for military apparatus, including the regime leaders and their property.⁶⁹ By securing military safe landing and – after 27 years of political struggle being finally recognized by the military commanders⁷⁰ – Suu Kyi bore the fruits of her victory and made it possible for Myanmar to move forward. After having nominated herself at the position of “state counselor” as

Tyranny’, *The Diplomat*, 12 November 2014: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/aung-san-suu-kyi-colluding-with-tyranny/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶⁸ Wai Yan Hpone, ‘The Lady’s Predicament’, *The Irrawaddy*, 31 March 2015: <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2015/04/06/the-irrawaddy-the-ladys-predicament-wai-yan-hpone/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁶⁹ Aung Zaw, ‘Than Shwe-Suu Kyi Meet Intensifies Intrigue During Testing Transition’, *The Irrawaddy*, 5 December 2015: <http://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-irrawaddy-archive-burma/from-the-archive-than-shwe-suu-kyi-meet-intensifies-intrigue-during-testing-transition.html> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁷⁰ ‘Army to rebrand itself as new political reality sets in’, *The Irrawaddy*, 16 May 2016: <http://www.irrawaddy.com/commentary/army-to-rebrand-itself-as-new-political-reality-sets-in.html> (accessed 17.06.2016).

well as two ministerial positions, including foreign minister, Suu Kyi is in charge of Myanmar now and she is responsible for Myanmar's foreign policy.⁷¹

A complicated relationship

A conventional approach would predict that Myanmar under the role of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi would naturally lean towards democratic countries of the free world and make a full-embracing turn to the West. The more thorough view, however, shows that the reality on the ground is much more complicated, as are Suu Kyi's relations with the United States.

To start with, the political reality forces Suu Kyi as a national leader to conduct balancing policy instead of bandwagoning to the West. She must take into account economic reality which is that China and other Asian partners are Myanmar's most important partners. Particularly China matters here.⁷² Beijing is the most important economic partner, which given the fact that Suu Kyi's government prioritizes economic development,⁷³ must play decisive role. Moreover, China is informally supporting some anti-governmental guerillas; China may use them against Myanmar government should it moves too close to the West.⁷⁴ Suu Kyi is aware of that⁷⁵ and her first actions (her first meeting was with Chinese foreign minister) prove that. There are even some who interpret these actions as a beginning of Suu Kyi-China rapprochement. According to this argument domestic circumstances (good relations between Myanmar military and United States) may force Suu Kyi to lean towards China to balance it – "Myanmar's complex political

⁷¹ Naturally, the government of Myanmar is formally headed by President HtinKyaw, a former Suu Kyi's staff member but nobody, including HtinKyaw hides the fact that it is Suu Kyi who is in charge of the country.

⁷² Quoted in: Bi Shihong, 'Suu Kyi's vision shapes Myanmar foreign policy', *Global Times*, 26 April 2016: <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2016/04/26/global-times-suu-kyis-vision-shapes-myanmar-foreign-policy-bi-shihong/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁷³ 'High mountains, distant emperors', *The Economist*, 23 April 2016: <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21697287-aung-san-suu-kyi-extends-wary-welcome-china-tries-regain-lost-influence-high-mountains> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁷⁴ Yun Sun, 'Has China Lost Myanmar?', *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2013: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/15/has-china-lost-myanmar/> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁷⁵ Quoted in: Yola Verbruggen, 'NLD to look West, but not ignore its tough neighbours', *Myanmar Times*, 22 April 2016: <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/19911-nld-to-look-west-but-not-ignore-its-tough-neighbours.html> (accessed 17.06.2016).

dynamics, may produce surprises as Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw reverse roles in addressing the imbalances in their relations with Beijing and Washington, respectively”.⁷⁶ This argument claims that given the good Tamtadaw-U.S. relations China bet on Suu Kyi instead of supporting the generals. That would indeed be an interesting phenomenon to see Beijing supporting Nobel Peace Prize winner against United States! Although nothing is impossible in politics and ideology usually plays secondary role here, this scenario is unlikely given the domestic dislike for Chinese in Burma.

More likely, however, is that Suu Kyi would maintain the balancing policy of her predecessors (let alone that neutral policy had been the hallmark of her father's generation that she claims to follow). Suu Kyi was left with a comfortable international position and there is no reason to undermine it by moving to close to the West. Suu Kyi will rather try to maneuver herself more room strategic room when dealing with United States, China, Japan, India, Korea and ASEAN.⁷⁷ She has already praised Burma's "non-aligned" principle and insisting that her party will maintain "friendly relations with all countries".⁷⁸ Burma-watchers see that: Gregory Polin from Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies says that under Suu Kyi "Myanmar will balance its foreign policy, but it will not do so between 'east' and 'west'; it will do so between a plethora of different countries (...). I expect we will see a serious effort to balance Myanmar's relations between China, India, Japan, the rest of Southeast Asia, and the West".⁷⁹ Therefore, from the point of view of international position of Myanmar there is no reason for Suu Kyi to abandon the balancing policy and bandwagon to the West.

Another reason that makes a pro-Western turn unlikely is the personality of Suu Kyi. She is and has always been a politician, not a moral icon.⁸⁰ It was the West that made her a moral icon (Suu Kyi being

⁷⁶ K. Yhome, 'Why Aung San Suu Kyi will not abandon China for the US', *The Wire*, 12 April 2016: <http://thewire.in/27629/myanmars-new-government-foreign-policy-challenges-and-options> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁷⁸ Quoted in: ibidem

⁷⁹ Quoted in: Verbruggen, *NLD to look West...*

⁸⁰ Personal conversation with Aung San Suu Kyi, Naypyidaw, 5 February 2015.

a politician used it to her purposes brilliantly);⁸¹ but she is not as pro-Western as most of the world though before. Since entering Burmese politics in 1988 she wanted to re-establish democracy and protect the human rights in Burma but these serve for her as tools only. Suu Kyi's rationale in politics and her life-long dream has been to fulfill her father's dream of restoring Burma's greatness.⁸² That makes Suu Kyi firstly a Burmese nationalist, and only secondly a cosmopolitan and global citizen attached to democracy. Asian analysts see that clearly: "Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is also a nationalist. She supports the development of Myanmar, not Western nations," says Tang Xiaoyang from Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy in Beijing.⁸³ Suu Kyi's attachment to democracy has its limits and these are Burmese national interests (and her own interests).⁸⁴ That is why despite widespread Western criticism she kept silent on Rohingya issue – otherwise she would seriously risk undermining her own position at home and weakening Myanmar's international profile.

The Rohingya issue is what may distance Suu Kyi from the United States clearly. The million-like group of Muslim people that calls themselves Rohingya is a thorny issue in Burma;⁸⁵ resentment against

⁸¹ See for example her interviews with Alan Clements, which can be used as a textbook for other non-Western politicians on how to play on Western emotions, Aung San Suu Kyi and Alan Clements, *The Voice of Hope...*

⁸² At her first major speech at Shwedagon pagoda in 1988 she already declared that: 'Speech to a Mass Rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda' in Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom...*, pp. 192–199.

⁸³ Quoted in: Verbruggen, *NLD to look West...*

⁸⁴ Probably the best illustration of her understanding of democracy comes from this speech from 1999: "It is very important for our members to be extra loyal... According to democratic principles, everyone has the right to have their own beliefs, to think independently and to have freedom of expression. But if one acts disloyally in exercising those rights, one is a renegade, a traitor", *Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Speech on 27-5-1999*, Online Burma/Myanmar Library: <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199906/msg00285.html> (accessed 10.03.15).

⁸⁵ More about Rohingya, see from two different perspectives: Robert H. Taylor, 'Refighting Old Battles, Compounding Misconceptions: The Politics of Ethnicity in Myanmar Today', *ISEAS Perspective*, December 2015: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_12.pdf (accessed 17.06.2016); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Myanmar Conflict Alert: Preventing communal bloodshed and building better relations*, 12 June 2012: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/alerts/2012/myanmar-alert.aspx> (accessed 17.06.2016).

this minority unites all political actors in Burma, most notable the society and the army which gains support and restores its national credibility for its strong stance against Rohingya. Although persecution of the Rohingya from the perspective of Burma concerns marginal groups in the deep province, due to the Western media attention it has become the most well-known issue of that country, globally famous and wrongly compared to the threat of genocide.⁸⁶ That is why Suu Kyi domestically has little reason to support Rohingya (that would undermine her popularity) but her silence undermines her international profile. Should Suu Kyi not handle Rohingya issue in accordance with Western civil rights expectations – and it is unlikely that she would – “it may invite criticism from the international community; this will embolden those in the US who want the continuation of sanctions on Myanmar and may become a source of tension between the NLD administration and Washington”.⁸⁷

These all mentioned arguments give a clue to the future relations between Suu Kyi’s led Myanmar and the United States. Although it public both sides may present the bright vision of bilateral relations, with a lot of grandiose words about democracy, human rights and civil society etc., in reality their relationship might be much more complicated. Myanmar has no reason to become a US vassal state and will try to keep its balance between China and United States. Washington on its turn will be forced by its ideological background (human rights groups) to raise the issue of Rohingya which, given the domestic landscape that makes it difficult for Suu Kyi to resolve this issue, would be the source of tensions between United States and Suu Kyi’s government. That is why U.S.-Burma relations will not be as smooth as people who would look at it through democratic lenses would expect it to be.

Conclusion

U.S.-Burma relations have never been most important to both sides. Burma became widely recognized in the USA thanks to Aung San Suu Kyi’s charisma and her struggle with the military regime. The mistake many did in the West and in the USA in particular, was to consider her

⁸⁶ *Al Jazeera Investigates – Genocide Agenda*, 26 October 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrQRYrpp2cI> (accessed 17.06.2016).

⁸⁷ Yhome, *Why Aung San Suu Kyi will not abandon...*

a democracy icon, whereas Suu Kyi has been a politician all along. Due to lack of important interests US Burma policy had been combined with the person of Suu Kyi – she herself became a dimension in American foreign policy towards Myanmar. In 2011, however, out of strategic reasons Myanmar became important again so U.S. policy makers sacrificed Suu Kyi for winning over the generals and liberating them from Chinese economic and political domination. Being a responsible politician Suu Kyi did not blame Obama administration openly, but instead she fought on and was able to win the general elections in 2015 and convince the generals to accept her leadership. Now, when she in charge of Myanmar's government she will probably try to keep the equilibrium in Burmese foreign policy and balance USA and China's influences. Her approach to the United States, although cordial, is not without strings, the most important one being the thorny issue of Rohingya that is to blame for the general disappointment towards Suu Kyi in the West. This all makes U.S.-Burma relationship a complicated one.

Nevertheless, despite complications, Myanmar-U.S. lack serious contradictory interests and seems to be stable in the nearest future. That is why this relationship falls into theoretical category of a “normalized asymmetry”⁸⁸ a situation when the relationship is not harmonious but both sides are confident of fulfilling their basic interests and expectations of mutual benefits.

⁸⁸ Womack, *Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception...*, p. 5.