

Beckoning Burma

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By John Lewis Tucker

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In recent years, the Chinese government has beckoned troubled Burma under its wing, and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Burma's oppressive military regime, becomes more compliant with China every year.

As Burma's largest trading partner and a constant source of arms, China is a large financier of the regime. In return for more than \$1 billion worth of arms since 1990, the SPDC recently allowed China to build its first military base on the Indian Ocean, providing China access to every sea frontier in Southeast Asia. As it benefits from American disinterest in the area, China continues fostering SPDC ties.

This is very dangerous for the U.S. and global proponents of democracy as the world braces itself for the Second Cold War.

In addition to the enormous strategic benefits Burma could hold for democracy, the international community faces a moral obligation to impede the military's tyranny. The SPDC oversees and executes a political agenda rife with social transgressions against minorities and political opposition. Its most notable prisoner is Nobel laureate and leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Aung Sun Suu Kyi, under house arrest for nearly two decades. However, when the U.S. proposed a formal discussion of Suu Kyi's release at the U.N. in 2004, Russia and China vetoed the issue before it reached the table.

To punish the Burma regime, the U.S. has pursued harsh economic sanctions.

However, as a recent article in the Economist notes, American allies like the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are conducting an economic plan in Burma completely contrary to that of the United States.

While the U.S. banned Burmese imports in 2003, the EU pursues increased commitment, and Japan recently reopened trade with the regime for the first time since 2003.

Even if the U.S. manages to coax its allies into matching its harsh economic policy, the SPDC will be forced to cement its strong ties with China. The resulting isolation would punish only the regime's victims, as it has in North Korea.

These victims desperately anticipate more involvement from the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. invasion of Iraq inspired hope among the oppressed Burmese and fear among the generals, who nervously prepare to move government headquarters 400 miles inland to a fortified, 10-square-mile military complex.

While bitter toward the regime, locals are also unhappy with the Chinese. Last month,

a former member of the Burmese Communist Party, Aung Kyaw Zaw, expressed to the Iriwaddy, a Burmese news organization, his belief China is ravaging Burma's resources without considering the consequences. "They are supporting the people who are ruining the country," he said, "a lot of people in Burma hate the Chinese."

Despite its tyranny, the regime does not entirely oppose democracy, at least not outwardly. In the last decade, it met twice to create a constitution, and in 2003 outlined a seven-point plan to move toward democracy.

Although it is widely assumed these efforts are simply props to quell international pressure, they are at least a small gesture of compliance. However, to achieve tangible democratic progress, the U.S. must act at first in concert with Burma's other potential democratic partners, namely India, the EU and ASEAN.

This coalition must present the regime with a list of demands, including a revised and legitimate plan for democratization, release of Suu Kyi, a constitution allowing representation of regime opponents, and eventually, a free, valid election.

In return for each political concessions, the democratic coalition must eliminate trade barriers and provide more financial aid to nurture the growing government.

The only way the U.S. can secure Burma as an ally is to outbid China with economic and political support. By offering more aid and protection alongside a daunting coalition of democratic nations, the U.S. can woo this troubled nation away from China's beckoning hand. Despite the grotesque social abuses by the regime and China's military exploitation, the Bush administration's cold shoulder says Burma is unworthy of our support and unnecessary to our cause.

Historically, it has not been U.S. policy to abandon people in need, but we need to act soon before China clenches its fist on this helpless nation.

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