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Crisis in Burma: Choosing Our Friends

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On September 26, the People's Republic of China (PRC) prevented the U.N. Security Council from condemning the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators that is now underway in Burma.

China's representative did relent and allow a brief press statement expressing "concern" for the situation and calling for "restraint." Any Security Council statement on Burma—even one as weak as this—should be welcomed. But rather than providing a ray of hope, this bit of tentative diplomacy at the U.N. crystallizes the Burma dilemma facing the United States.

President Bush's announcement of tighter sanctions provides vital moral support for pro-democracy forces in Burma. Those braving the guns and truncheons of the junta deserve full American support. But moral clarity has its cost: The effectiveness of our Burma policy relies more than ever on appeals to the enlightened self-interest of others. This being the case, the United States needs to drastically reorder its approach, relying less on China and more on its democratic friends in the region.

China Is Proving Unreliable on Burma. Unfortunately, very few countries have any influence at all with the junta; certainly not the United States. The world of the Burmese generals is very small. They are not much interested in the views of the American president, the American market, or the loss of American investment. Their handling of the protesters is only the latest testament to their lack of sophistication and thuggish nature.

Few countries have a large enough stake in the outcome to develop a serious, sustained policy

approach. Those with both position and stake have shown little to no inclination to help. The Chinese—by far the most influential outside players in Burma—are holding a winning hand. Burma's isolation is Beijing's windfall. China is building ports and pipelines in Burma and is forging a lucrative relationship with the Burmese military.

The PRC conceives its interests in the same narrow way that its allies in Burma do: cold calculation. China is not about to compromise its gains in Burma just to comply with requests from the United States—even with the designation of "responsible stakeholder" dangled before them.

The Chinese have had their chances to intervene in Burma—and they have severely disappointed. There is no evidence to suggest that China is doing *anything* to restrain the Burmese junta. Faced with a clear moral outrage, their public statements on the crisis have been tepid and hedged.

Case in point: The Chinese statement accompanying yesterday's U.N. statement called for "stability, national reconciliation," and "progress on the road of democratization." These words carefully—and not accidentally—appeal to definitions Americans would not easily recognize. In fact, the Burmese government would claim this is exactly what they have

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been trying to do with their undemocratic “roadmap to democracy,” and that it’s the protesters (ironically, the real democratic forces) that stand in the way.

Of course, when the Burma situation came before the U.N. Security Council earlier this January, the Chinese representative famously vetoed a non-punitive resolution condemning the government for its abuses. With that resolution, the United States and eight other members of the Security Council sought to empower the U.N. Secretary General’s Special Envoy in much the same way that the recent informal Security Council statement did. It took the tragic turn of events in Burma this week—and the recoiling of the international community—to drag the Chinese even this far.

A Role for ASEAN and India. Burma is first and foremost the problem of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). ASEAN bought the problem in 1997 when—against strong international opposition—it admitted Burma as a member. ASEAN leaders rationalized that bringing Burma into the fold would help foster positive change. As it has turned out, not only has there been no change, but the net effect of Burma’s membership has been to sully ASEAN’s international image.

ASEAN is in a position to help. All the players in the Burma drama converge in ASEAN’s markets, corridors of power, and multiple official forums. Compensation in the form of global, responsible stakeholder-hood might be over the heads of the Chinese. But China is seriously interested in geopolitical advantage in ASEAN. If the democracies in ASEAN, particularly Indonesia, take an energetic, principled stand on behalf of democracy in Burma, the Chinese cannot ignore it.

The September 27 statement from ASEAN condemning the Burmese government for the crackdown is fine as far as it goes. They had to say something given the events unfolding in their fellow ASEAN member state. But speaking out about Burma is something ASEAN is getting used to. ASEAN first broke with their policy of non-interference four years ago during a crisis over an attack on Burmese democracy crusader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. ASEAN has also officially consulted and commented on the situation since. Two years ago, it pressured Burma into giving up its turn

at chairing ASEAN for fear of being too closely identified with the regime.

Commendably, the ASEAN statement, unlike both the U.N. Security Council and the Chinese, calls for national reconciliation “with all parties concerned,” and “the release of all political detainees including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.”

Now, the more important matter is what ASEAN does to follow up. As the ASEAN statement points out, the Burma issue seriously impacts the organization’s “credibility.” ASEAN cannot simply condemn the crackdown and move on; the fundamental problem in Burma must be addressed. ASEAN is going to have to use real muscle, including the threat of expulsion, to force the junta to heed the cries of its people for democracy.

ASEAN will soon have two representatives on the U.N. Security Council, one of which will be Indonesia. It is encouraging that although the Chinese and the Russians voted against the January resolution, Indonesia abstained. Given the situation now unfolding in Burma, an abstention is going to be hard to hold. Democracy exerts a strong pull on the collective conscience of the Indonesian people—stronger, in fact, than does its ASEAN identity.

One would hope that the United States can also persuade India to get involved on behalf of democratic change in Burma, but it will be a tough sell. The Indians share a border with Burma and a decades-long rivalry with China. Indian leaders are alarmed by the close friendship the Chinese are striking up with the Burmese generals. India is a proud democracy, however. The free world certainly expects better of them than cold calculation.

Conclusion. Long after the traffic in New York returns to its normal chaos, the problem of Burma will remain. A real solution will require new, clear-eyed distinctions among potential partners in Asia. On the Burma issue, the United States needs to abandon its misplaced confidence in China and build confidence in its democratic friends in ASEAN and India, imparting responsibility for a problem that is, in reality, more theirs than that of the United States.

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