

Task Force Presents Strategy for U.S. Engagement with Burma

(Washington D.C., March 31, 2010) As the Obama administration turns to the thorny issue of engaging Burma's authoritarian government, a new Asia Society Task Force report offers a detailed strategy that positions the United States to respond effectively and flexibly to the twists and turns that a potential transition in Burma may take over time. The stakes are high. With Burma's military leaders preparing to convene elections later this year, coupled with continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, a comprehensive U.S. approach—taken in concert with regional and international partners—provides the best hope for bringing Burma into the world community.

The Task Force's report entitled *Current Realities and Future Possibilities in Burma: Options for U.S. Policy* recommends framing U.S. policy toward Burma based on changes taking place in the country with careful consideration of how the instruments at its disposal, including both the engagement and sanctions sides of the equation, can be tapped to encourage political and economic reform. To pursue these goals, the Task Force advises that the U.S. strategy should employ effective channels of communication, focused assistance programs, reform-oriented economic activity, coordination with Burma's neighbors and the international community, and, if and when necessary, the tightening of targeted financial sanctions.

The U.S. Task Force was co-chaired by General **Wesley Clark** and former Administrator of USAID **Henrietta Fore**, and directed by **Suzanne DiMaggio**, Director of Policy Studies at the Asia Society. During his 34-year career in the U.S. Army and the Department of Defense, General Clark was awarded many military decorations, several honorary knighthoods, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the UCLA Burkle Center. As the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance, holding the equivalent rank as Deputy Secretary of State, Ms. Fore oversaw U.S. relief efforts in Burma in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2007. Ms. DiMaggio is an expert on U.S. foreign policy in Asia and engaging repressive governments, including Burma and Iran. Other members of the Task Force included Nobel Laureate in Economics **Amartya Sen**, former U.S. Under Secretary of State **Thomas Pickering**, and Executive Director of Human Rights Watch **Kenneth Roth**, among others.

“Burma is at the center of a torrent of powerful economic forces, and at the same time its political system is frozen,” said Task Force Co-Chair **Wesley Clark**. “Decades of pursuing policies of isolation and sanctions by the U.S. have done little to influence change in Burma, so it's time to do something different. The U.S. must ensure that its policies do not inadvertently support or encourage authoritarian and corrupt elements in Burma. At the same time, if the U.S. sets the bar too high at the outset, it will deny itself an effective role in helping to move Burma away from authoritarian rule and into the world community.”

“Through its programs and support for the Burmese people, the United States can demonstrate that it is steady but flexible and quick to react to any potential overtures from the Burmese government,” said Task Force Co-Chair **Henrietta Fore**. “Specifically, during this period of transition, the United States should encourage economic and social development and opportunity, the process of political development toward democratic norms, press military leaders to improve governance, and assist the country's non-Burman nationalities in pursuing an equitable voice in national governance.”

The Asia Society is simultaneously releasing a wide-ranging review of Asian policy toward Burma, incorporating national perspectives from leading institutes and experts in nine Asian countries in an effort to foster global dialogue on Burma. Taken as a whole, the reports present an agenda of policy prescriptions for regional governments and the international community. A common thread running through all the reports is a concern about the lack of a cohesive international strategy to deal with Burma. While all acknowledge that the real impetus for change must come from inside Burma, the reports also call attention to the potential significance of external influence on the country. The reports offering regional perspectives were contributed by experts from Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

The reports underscore the changing circumstances inside and around Burma that could create a context for both risk and opportunity and result in consequences for the U.S. and the broader region, including:

- A serious decline in human rights in Burma since the most recent popular uprising in 2007;
- Growing strategic and economic interests in Burma among its neighbors, particularly China and India;
- Heightened regional security concerns related to Burma's murky relationship with North Korea, instability along its borders as a result of military efforts to rein in ethnic groups, the continuing export of disease and refugees, and the trafficking of drugs across its porous borders; and
- The 2010 elections in Burma and possible changes in Burma's government, including a new generation of military leaders.

“The new direction in U.S. policy will require greater cooperation with regional players in order to succeed, said Task Force Director **Suzanne DiMaggio**. “With elections expected to be held later this year, the first in Burma in 20 years, the U.S. should make collaboration with other key stakeholders, particularly Burma's Asian neighbors, ASEAN and the U.N., the centerpiece of its policy.”

The global launch of the U.S. Task Force report and the collection of reports from Asia will be held at events on March 31 at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., and at the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies in Manila, and on April 7 at the Asia Society in New York and at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations in New Delhi.

Full texts of the reports are available at: <http://www.AsiaSociety.org/BurmaMyanmarReport>.

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Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate in Economics; Thomas W. Lamont University Professor and Prof. of Economics and Philosophy, Harvard University

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Additional individuals from Burma participated anonymously

Partner Institutions in Asia

Macquarie University, Australia

Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations

Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Indonesia

Japan Institute of International Affairs

Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia

Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Philippines

Singapore Institute of International Affairs

Institute of Security and International Studies, Thailand

A review of Chinese policy was conducted by experts and scholars in China working in their individual capacities

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