

WHAT MYANMAR MEANS FOR THE U.S.-JAPAN ALLIANCE

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The historic political and economic transition under way in Myanmar is a strategic opportunity for the United States and Japan. The allies can take advantage of solid bilateral relations to go beyond ad hoc policy coordination and develop a Myanmar-focused strategy for greater long-term impact and collective benefit. To succeed, Washington and Tokyo will have to make Myanmar a higher-level alliance issue and reconcile different priorities and domestic policy making environments to pursue shared objectives.

Key Themes

- The United States takes a democracy-first approach to Myanmar while Japan prioritizes trade and economic relations.
- The results of Myanmar's ongoing transition have so far been mixed. Washington is concerned about stalled liberalization efforts and human rights abuses in particular.
- U.S. President Barack Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe committed in April 2014 to support Myanmar's reform and reconciliation efforts. Their agreement has created alliance cooperation momentum that can be better harnessed.
- Japan's strong ties with Myanmar's government can be a valuable asset for U.S. policymakers seeking leverage to complement their civil society connections and agenda-setting power.
- With a national election planned for 2015, Myanmar is at a critical juncture. A more coordinated U.S. and Japanese approach can have a positive impact in the near term.
- Longer term, success in Myanmar could strengthen the economy and governance in Southeast Asia. Failure could undermine regional stability and weaken U.S. and Japanese influence.

Recommendations for the U.S. and Japanese Governments

Convene a special bilateral Development Dialogue meeting dedicated to Myanmar. The allies should comprehensively review their Myanmar policies and programs. Interagency participation should be wider than usual, and the allies should outline a coordinated alliance strategy targeting issues of reconciliation, economic liberalization, and good governance.

Adopt a longer time horizon for evaluating reform in Myanmar. Progress will take time, although that should not become an excuse to pursue short-term mercantilist aims that undermine reform.

Consider lifting sanctions to make it easier for U.S. and Japanese firms to enter the Myanmar market. This would enhance capacity building and transparency in Myanmar, particularly in the finance sector.

Make the most of both allies' strengths. The allies could, for instance, adopt a burden-sharing approach in which Japan engages on issues too politically sensitive for the U.S. government. A complementary approach (that is, hardware-software collaboration) is also feasible for aid projects.

Expand legislative dialogue between the United States and Japan on Myanmar issues. For a coordinated approach to work, lawmakers from both countries must be convinced that their goals for Myanmar can be better served by working together.

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