

BOOK REVIEWS

Burmese Haze: US Policy and Myanmar’s Opening-and Closing.
By Erin Murphy. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association for Asian
Studies, 2022. E-version: 215pp.

Myanmar has always been something of an anomaly in US foreign policy. On the one hand, its remote geographic location has led Washington policymakers to place values over geostrategic interests—in contrast, for instance, to its pragmatic embrace of autocrats in the Middle East. On the other hand, successive US administrations have oscillated between policies aimed at regime change to an approach focused on engagement, with hopes of encouraging democratic reforms. The February 2021 military coup, which fundamentally ruptured Myanmar’s nascent political transition (underway since 2010), has once again provoked international condemnation and reignited old debates in Washington over how to influence events within Myanmar from afar.

As Erin Murphy’s new book illustrates, the United States has a mixed record regarding engagement with Myanmar. Its ability to shape events is limited compared to neighbouring China, India, or Thailand, and many Americans will undoubtedly question whether Myanmar holds any strategic significance for the United States in the first place. Rather than dismiss these realities—largely dictated by geography, limited cultural interaction and historical convergence—Murphy constructs a compelling case that Myanmar still matters to the United States *despite* the challenges of distance and cultural differences, and that Washington should care about the country’s future.

Murphy is well-placed to explain Myanmar's myriad complexities. She had an inside view of Myanmar's pivotal transition between 2010 and 2021, and a central role in Washington's policy debate concerning the country. Murphy joined the Central Intelligence Agency after completing her master's degree in 2007, and later served as special assistant to the Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Myanmar in the US Department of State. After 15 years in government, she founded her own Myanmar-focused consulting firm, Inle Advisory Group. Murphy clearly cares a great deal about Myanmar and the people she came to know over her years of involvement there. Murphy puts forward a cogent argument for why the reader should also take note of the country's trajectory, drawing new parallels between Myanmar's quest for a unified federal democracy and America's ongoing struggle with issues of race, ethnicity and religion (p. 4).

Among the book's numerous strengths, historians and US policy experts will appreciate Murphy's meticulous reconstruction of the lively debates within the US government surrounding key policy decisions. In fact, many details are almost certainly not available in previous accounts. For instance, Murphy recounts the efforts of David Pressman within the National Security Council to initiate a Commission of Inquiry (COI) into the Myanmar military's war crimes prior to the 2010 transition to parliamentary democracy (pp. 66–67). Following closely on the heels of Senator Jim Webb's controversial 2009 trip to Myanmar, where he met with then-dictator Than Shwe, the debate over whether to launch a COI to hold the military junta accountable for its grave human rights abuses hinged on competing impulses, which reverberate in US Myanmar policy today.

If one of the book's distinguishing qualities is its insider perspectives on US foreign policy, one weakness is Murphy's occasional glossing over small but crucial nuances in Myanmar's political context. On the 2021 coup, Murphy states: "Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing used the processes outlined in the constitution to wrest control from the civilian government" (p. 11). However, by detaining Myanmar's elected leaders, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, Min Aung Hlaing overrode the 2008 Constitution, which has very specific requirements for the declaration of a state of emergency.

Elsewhere, the author fundamentally misreads Aung San Suu Kyi's character and outlook. Murphy writes of Suu Kyi: "She could be cryptic. She's never been one to declare anything black or white" (p. 129). However, she simultaneously writes off Aung San Suu Kyi's defence of the military's crimes against the Rohingya Muslim minority group in 2016–17 as pure political pragmatism, stemming from a clear-eyed recognition that she needed the military on her side in order to achieve genuine democratic reforms (p. 157). In doing so, Aung San Suu Kyi was unequivocal in her denunciation of charges brought by The Gambia to the International Court of Justice and refusal to acknowledge the plight of the Rohingya or atrocities committed by the military—hardly cryptic.

While Murphy presents a comprehensive account of US sanctions policy, she is unable to say whether economic sanctions are effective *prima facie*, raising significant tensions in her analysis. At times Murphy suggests sanctions effectively advanced the 2011–12 political reforms (p. 129). However, this account overlooks the fact that core elements of those reforms were embedded within the 2008 Constitution and would not have happened without the previous junta chief Than Shwe's blessing. At other times, Murphy acknowledges the limited impact of sanctions, which bar targeted individuals from accessing the international financial system (p. 156), but as she admits, the bulk of the military's profits from illicit trade in gems and other natural resources across the border to China evade Western sanctions (p. 164).

Some of Murphy's recommendations to US policymakers are stronger than others. For example, the author is bullish on working with Myanmar's military regarding a long-term solution to the country's political crisis (pp. 174–75), while floating a potential visit by the US Navy's Seventh Fleet or even Rambo to Myanmar's border to demonstrate Washington's resolve (p. 175). However, such a move would only confirm the military's paranoia of foreign invasion and reinforce its bunker mentality, reducing US influence and chances for compromise. Nevertheless, many of the book's recommendations are timely and sensible, including reforming the tedious Request for Proposal process to streamline international donor assistance to local non-governmental organizations, and expanding funding for educational programmes like the Obama-era Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) (p. 176).

All in all, Murphy's book offers a thorough view of US Myanmar policy over the past 15 years and gives Myanmar scholars much to scrutinise. It is not a comprehensive account or the final word, but serves as a timely contribution to active debates surrounding the efficacy of sanctions and the ability of the international community to facilitate a diplomatic solution to Myanmar's seemingly intractable conflicts.

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