

Viewing cable 07BEIJING1448, DAS JOHN DISCUSSES BURMA, SOUTHEAST ASIA WITH AFM

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SUBJECT: DAS JOHN DISCUSSES BURMA, SOUTHEAST ASIA WITH AFM

CUI TIANKAI AND DG HU ZHENGYUE

REF: BEIJING 1269

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission David S. Sedney. Reasons 1.4 (b /d).

Summary

1. (S) If the United States wants to make a difference on Burma, it should engage directly with General Than Shwe, Assistant Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai told EAP DAS Eric John on March 5. In a separate meeting, MFA Director General for Asian Affairs Hu Zhengyue stressed that State Councilor Tang "really worked on" the Burmese during his recent visit to Burma, delivering the message that Burma needs to respond to the concerns of the international community. DAS John underlined that the United States is worried that Burma is headed at high speed in the wrong direction. If it adopts a constitution excluding certain parties from the political process, the United States and China could be locked into a cycle of confrontation over Burma at the United Nations. DAS

John and AFM Cui also discussed the United States' and China's overlapping interests in Southeast Asia. With DG Hu, DAS John emphasized the importance of Indonesia and discussed instability in East Timor, positive progress in the Philippines and the situation in post-coup Thailand. EAP DAS Thomas Christensen joined DAS John at the meetings. End Summary.

Burma: United States-China Cooperation Vital

12. (S) DAS John told AFM Cui that while the United States and China agree that Burma is a problem, we differ on what venue and tools we should use to resolve it. We want to find a creative way forward that produces tangible results. The United States and China concur on the message we need to send Burma's generals; that is, that they should accept UN engagement, release political prisoners, permit NGOs to operate in-country and settle differences peacefully with ethnic minorities. To advance the process, the United States would like to work in parallel with China.

13. (S) AFM Cui responded that if the United States wants to make a difference on Burma, it should engage directly with General Than Shwe. For China, the situation in Burma is a question of national security. China and Burma share a long border and considerable historical and cultural ties. In this context, China is very concerned about the potential for unrest or political change in Burma. Over the past half-century, Beijing and Rangoon have enjoyed good relations and China has never interfered in its neighbor's internal affairs. The Government can solve its own problems, AFM Cui judged. Nonetheless, China is aware that fighting between Government forces and ethnic minorities has been a constant over the years. While the Government has reached a settlement with 17 of the 18 ethnic groups, it should continue to work toward national reconciliation. Many of the minorities live in border areas, AFM Cui observed, adding that such conflicts risk harming China's own security.

AFM Cui: Why China Vetoed

14. (S) AFM Cui contended that China is doing its part on Burma. He related that during State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan's February 25-27 visit to the country (reftel), Tang met with Than Shwe and other top generals. Tang conveyed a "very clear" message to the leadership, specifically that 1) it should speed up the political reform and reconciliation process and 2) it should respond more constructively to the concerns of the international community. At the same time, China is encouraging ASEAN to exert positive pressure and to continue to cooperate with the United States and China to bring about "the kinds of changes in Burma we all want to see." The Burmese people are known for their patience, AFM Cui maintained, so we must take a long-term approach. Applying too much pressure on the leadership will likely produce more resistance to outside appeals. However we proceed, our main objective should be to maintain stability.

Governance in Burma may be bad, but a situation where there is no governance would be much worse, AFM Cui said.

15. (S) Such concerns about stability prompted China to veto the UN Security Council resolution on Burma in January, AFM Cui remarked. China believes passing the resolution would

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have been counterproductive, although "we understand the United States' interests" in the matter. Despite the veto at the UN, China wants to enhance its cooperation and coordination with the United States on Burma issues. Confrontation between Washington and Beijing serves no one's interests. As part of this, China favors the idea of the United States opening some form of communication with General Than Shwe. "We will see what we can do," AFM Cui said, adding that such a dialogue could help the United States and China avoid future disputes at the UN. In China's view, international mechanisms other than the Security Council are the proper venues for dealing with problems Burma faces regarding human rights, drugs and other issues.

ASEAN's Role on Burma

16. (S) AFM Cui said ASEAN is growing "frustrated" with Burma. After Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid's poor treatment during his 2006 visit to the country, ASEAN lost its appetite to pursue new efforts. Nonetheless, China continues to encourage ASEAN to do more and to coordinate its efforts with those of China and the United States. Meanwhile, China hopes UN SYG Ban Ki-moon will name a new Special Envoy.

17. (S) DAS John underscored the importance of ASEAN's reaching out to the Burmese regime, especially as a way to counter the generals' paranoid belief that the United States' is actively seeking to overthrow the regime. While agreeing that taking a long-term view of Burma issues is useful, DAS John emphasized that lack of good governance has been a persistent problem for the country. In this context, he cautioned that the Burmese leadership's adoption of a new constitution that serves to lock out certain parties from political participation would be a step backward and could harm United States-China cooperation. DAS Christensen reaffirmed these views, adding that Burma's making the wrong decision on the constitution could result in antagonism between the United States and China in the Security Council. He stressed that the United States wants cooperation with China on Burma.

18. (S) AFM Cui expressed confidence that positive change will come to Burma, but it will take time. He predicted that the change would be in line with the overall trend in Southeast Asia, that is, that a number of nations in the region have moved away from military rule toward a more open system, including Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Indonesia's President Yudhonoyo is no longer a general, AFM Cui stressed. Thailand's current military leadership will not remain in power over the long haul. While there are persistent rumors about military coups in the Philippines, they rarely happen.

¶9. (S) AFM Cui acknowledged that the United States and China should "take action before things get worse." China's role as facilitator of the Six-Party Talks on North Korea could serve as a model for bringing about an exchange between the United States and Burma. As for next steps, AFM Cui and DAS John agreed that Embassy Beijing and MFA Asia Division officials would remain in contact on the matter.

DG Hu: Burma Likely Open to Dialogue

¶10. (S) In an earlier meeting with MFA DG for Asian Affairs Hu Zhengyue, DAS John stressed our concerns over Burma's National Convention process producing a constitution that excludes groups from participating in the country's political life. Such a step could hamper the ability of the United States and China to cooperate and could cause quarrels between us over Burma at the United Nations. Noting that China has been in contact with the Burma's SPDC leadership, DAS John asked DG Hu for his views on how to stop Burma from moving at high speed in the wrong direction.

¶11. (S) DG Hu said that in his personal view, a United States-Burma dialogue would be productive and that Burma would likely be open to conducting such a dialogue, with Chinese facilitation. There are misunderstandings between the United States and Burmese sides, DG Hu said, adding that opening the door to direct communication is the best way to achieve positive results. DAS John noted that the United States has an Embassy in Rangoon but that the Burmese to date have appeared uninterested in talking with us. Washington,

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however, remains committed to finding a diplomatic solution to the problems in Burma. DG Hu promised to look into the matter and respond soon.

DG Hu on State Councilor Tang's Burma Visit

¶12. (S) DG Hu also outlined the highlights of State Councilor Tang's recent visit to Burma, relating that Tang delivered a strong, clear message to General Than and Burma's other leaders. The main meeting lasted nearly three hours. "We worked on them this time," said DG Hu, who accompanied Tang on the trip. According to DG Hu, Tang urged Burma to take actions to address international concerns. The generals said they would welcome a visit from any new UN Special Envoy and that they are open to communication with National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, which they have initiated via written correspondence. DG Hu related that

Burma's leaders said National Conventions will convene during the coming year and a new constitution will be completed by the end of 2007. The generals are considering establishment of political parties, eventually allowing these groups to fully enter the political arena. They envision transferring power to "a government that represents the will of the people of Burma at an appropriate time," DG Hu quoted the generals as saying.

¶13. (S) The generals currently have three priorities, DG Hu continued, 1) domestic stability, particularly with regard to ending armed ethnic opposition, 2) economic growth, which DG Hu described as "okay" but not great in Burma, and 3) education and training. On economic growth, Burma is paying close attention to China's experience and wants to enhance exchanges in this realm.

Mutual Interests in Southeast Asia

¶14. (S) On regional issues, in his meeting ith AFM Cui, DAS John stressed that Washington and Beijing should capitalize on their mutual interest in promoting stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia to dispel the perception that the two are competing in a zero-sum game. The United States hopes that China's expanding trade relations in the region will complement our long-standing efforts to promote democracy and development. AFM Cui said Beijing's interest in Southeast Asia is not a threat, but a logical result of geography, including China's 2,500 mile land border with Southeast Asian nations and sharing of the South China Sea. Besides being China's neighbor, Southeast Asia is also home to millions of "overseas Chinese." (Note: Beijing defines any person of Chinese ancestry, regardless of citizenship, as "overseas Chinese." End note.) The United States and China must discourage the Cold War mentality that cooperating with one of us is an inherent rejection of the other, AFM Cui said. Starting with peace efforts in Cambodia and continuing through extensive cooperation in the Asian Regional Forum (ARF) and responding to the Asian Financial Crisis, the United States and China have demonstrated the benefits of working together.

¶15. (S) With DG Hu, DAS John noted that this year marks the 30th anniversary of United States-ASEAN relations, which we look forward to commemorating with a presidential summit in the second half of the year. Remarking that China celebrated 15 years of relations with ASEAN at 2006 summit, DG Hu stressed the importance of the United States and China supporting one another in maintaining a strong relationship with ASEAN. The United States and China should seek joint regional projects to demonstrate to ASEAN nations that they need not choose between the two. DG Hu suggested that our ambassadors in the region find joint opportunities to highlight our engagement with ASEAN.

Indonesia

¶16. (S) The United States and China must work together to promote democratization, economic growth and counter-terrorism in Indonesia, DAS John stressed to DG Hu. While President Susilo Yudhoyono has taken positive steps, we must encourage further transparency, accountability and military reform. Beijing should join Washington in pressing for better governance and accountability in the military, the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI). Transparency in the TNI would reinforce and encourage transparency in Indonesia's

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government and public affairs in general, essential to attracting much-needed foreign investment. We must also press for reforms in labor and investment laws, as well as judicious enforcement of those laws, DAS John urged DG Hu.

¶17. (S) Accepting that China can influence "the general direction" of development in Indonesia, DG Hu cautioned that Beijing must be sensitive to the political reality of a significant ethnic Chinese population in Indonesia. Beijing was "not impressed" with the presidents who led Indonesia the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, but has been pleased with President Yudhoyono's progress since taking power in 2004, DG Hu said. Jakarta faces the challenge of decreasing the influence of the military and promoting democracy, while simultaneously responding to growing ethnic and religious tension. Beijing seeks to promote secular Islam in Indonesia by encouraging interaction with China's 20 million Muslims. In recent years, the United States and China have coordinated in providing assistance to Indonesia following natural disasters. Beijing sees such cooperation as a model for further such regional cooperation, DG Hu said.

Desperately Seeking Stability in East Timor

¶18. (S) Beijing looks forward to cooperating with Washington to promote stability in East Timor, DG Hu said, noting that he would instruct China's Ambassador to call on the new United States Ambassador when he arrives in Dili. Beijing's primary concerns in East Timor are alleviating poverty and avoiding a power struggle among large countries for influence there. DAS John stressed Washington's desire for East Timor's government to succeed and highlighted our cooperation with Portugal and Australia towards achieving this goal. Hu and John agreed that the United States and PRC embassies in Dili should enhance their coordination.

Progress in the Philippines, but More Needed

¶19. (S) Seeing poverty as the key challenge facing the Philippines, China has invested in its agricultural development and transportation infrastructure, DG Hu underlined. Beijing recognizes corruption as the second significant problem facing the Philippines, but believes it

"cannot do much about that," DG Hu said. Beijing sees President Gloria Arroyo as a good leader because she has shown that "she is in control." DAS John agreed President Arroyo has stabilized Philippine leadership and enacted strong fiscal and economic policy, but stressed that Beijing and Washington must encourage Manila to continue working hard to promote transparency and good governance. John also outlined the extremely successful approach to counterterrorism the GRP has taken in Mindanao, with the support of the United States. DG Hu assessed that, while "working from different directions," United States and Chinese efforts in the Philippines are complementary.

Reinforcing Democracy in Post-Coup Thailand

¶20. (S) Thailand has a long history of peaceful democracy, which is in China's interest to support, DG Hu said. While not an ideal turn of events, the September 2006 coup emanated from "very specific circumstances" and did not involve violence, DG Hu said. Noting that he had just returned from Thailand, DG Hu quipped that, even with the coup, Thailand is still more democratic than Singapore, highlighting his belief that the coup was an aberration in Thai politics rather than a signal of long-term change. Still, given the recent resignation of former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Pridiyathorn Thewakun and the reality that King Phumiphon Adunyadet will not live forever, Beijing is closely monitoring the political situation in Bangkok. China has invited Thai Prime Minister Surayut Chulanon to visit China in late May and hopes to use the visit as an opportunity to demonstrate Beijing's support for a stable, peaceful transition of power in Thailand, DG Hu said.

¶21. (U) DAS John cleared this cable.
RANDT

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