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## **No Hope Without Change: Myanmar's Reforms and Lessons for North Korea**

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Rapid political change is reorienting Myanmar's economic and diplomatic relations.<sup>1</sup> Once labeled an "outpost of tyranny" by the United States, Myanmar has just hosted its first-ever visit by a sitting US president.<sup>2</sup> In a landmark speech at Yangon University on November 19, Barack Obama highlighted the potential broader significance of Myanmar's reforms:

[W]hat happens here is so important—not only to this region, but to the world...[Myanmar] has the potential to inspire so many people. This is a test of whether a country can transition to a better place...here in Rangoon, I want to send a message across Asia: we don't need to be defined by the prisons of the past. We need to look forward to the future. To the leadership of North Korea, I have offered a choice: let go of your nuclear weapons and choose the path of peace and progress. If you do, you will find an extended hand from the United States of America.<sup>3</sup>

President Obama's remarks are the crescendo to a chorus of voices over the past year urging Pyongyang to follow Naypyidaw's example. Speaking to a forum in Seoul in July, US Ambassador to South Korea Sung Kim argued:

Burma and North Korea had many things in common, many bad things in common. But Burmese leadership recently made a very important decision. They decided to undertake serious political and economic reforms to try to improve the lives of their people. The United States and other countries responded immediately to the positive decision. If North Korean leaders make the right decision, we will respond positively.<sup>4</sup>

During South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's historic visit to Myanmar in May 2012, Kim Tae-hyo, then a national security adviser to the president, said that South Korea "wants to tell North Korea that it must learn a lesson from Myanmar to cooperate with the international community and receive aid for development."<sup>5</sup> South Korean media often features official statements as well as commentary by analysts and advocates pointing to the Burmese example as a model for North Korea.<sup>6</sup>

Does Myanmar provide a viable model for North Korea to follow? This Issue Brief considers the recent political changes in Myanmar and compares its domestic political structures and foreign relations with North Korea's. North Korea's tighter domestic control, nuclear weapons program, and greater international isolation stand as formidable obstacles to reform. By contrast, Myanmar's organized political opposition, more creative approach to self-survival among ruling elites, and deeper engagement with regional neighbors have paved the way for its current transition. These distinctions suggest that the Burmese case does not represent a "model" for North Korea. Nevertheless, recent developments in Myanmar offer useful lessons for both Pyongyang and other governments reworking their policies toward North Korea. Moreover, the two cases exhibit notable interaction such that Naypyidaw's successes and failures in implementing reforms will likely have demonstration effects for Pyongyang.

### **Myanmar's Strategic Choice**

Over the past year and a half, the government of Myanmar under President Thein Sein has embarked upon a remarkable series of reforms. Once governed by the repressive fist of the military junta known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Myanmar is now in the midst of a transition to a democratic society. Media censorship has been relaxed, restrictions on strikes and public demonstrations have been lifted, and some prisoners of conscience have been released. Perhaps most visibly, the long-repressed opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) can now operate freely while its long-imprisoned leader, Nobel Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, is now a member of the country's Parliament and regularly consults with President Thein Sein. In return, the United States returned an ambassador to the country and, along with the European Union and Australia, relaxed many sanctions. Just before President Obama's visit, his administration announced the lifting of restrictions on Burmese imports that had been in effect since 2003. Combined with the United States' easing of sanctions on investment in Myanmar, the result has been a parade of business and diplomatic representatives to the country. Foreign investors, governments and international organizations are attracted by the tantalizing prospect that Myanmar, strategically located between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, could become Asia's newest economic success story.

All is not well, however. Myanmar continues to face criticism for the brutal treatment of its ethnic minority groups, including the Muslim Rohingya, who have been treated as *persona non grata* and driven into neighboring Bangladesh. An unknown number of individuals remain imprisoned for political offenses. Furthermore, under the new constitution, the military (Tatmadaw) is automatically guaranteed 25 percent of the seats in the 664-seat parliament. In contrast, the NLD currently occupies only 43 seats (though it won every seat it contested save two in the 2012 by-election), or a little under 6.5 percent. Still, most signs point to further movement toward democracy. Thein Sein has already announced that he will not seek another term in office due to health reasons.<sup>7</sup> Given the broad popular support for the NLD, resentment of the military, and Aung San Suu Kyi's status as a national hero, it seems reasonable to suppose that unless the reforms are rolled back, Suu Kyi will strengthen her role in the national leadership.

As Myanmar pursued its reforms, it not only moved away from “pariah state” characteristics it shared with North Korea—Naypyidaw has also actively distanced itself from its previous cooperation with Pyongyang. When President Lee visited Myanmar, he received assurances that the country would end its military trade with North Korea and fully implement UN sanctions. Before President Obama's visit, Naypyidaw promised to sign the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol, disclose its previous nuclear activities (involving suspected links to North Korea) and allow IAEA inspectors into the country. Clearly, there is interaction between the Burmese and North Korean cases, but to evaluate whether one can provide a model for the other calls for an assessment of the domestic and international political conditions leading up to the present divergence.

### **Varieties of Repression**

At the domestic level, Myanmar and North Korea bear many similarities. Until the 2011 inauguration of the Thein Sein government in Myanmar, both were secretive and repressive regimes that openly used targeted force against their own people. Both were notorious for human rights violations and subject to sanctions by the United States and the European Union as punishment. The rulers in both countries lived lavishly in contrast to the vast majority of their citizens, many who live in crushing poverty. Nevertheless, a closer look at the regimes reveals important differences in the degree of political repression.

With its secretive and brutal dictatorship, “military first” political doctrine, and relative isolation from the outside world, North Korea bears at least a passing resemblance to Myanmar under the rule of the SPDC. Political power in North Korea is formally concentrated in the hands of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). On the surface, this resembles the political system in neighboring China. But whereas the Chinese Communist Party exercises political control through an oligarchic coterie of technocratic leaders and an amalgamation of institutions,

political power in North Korea is monopolized by the inner circle surrounding the Supreme Leader—first Kim Il-sung, then his son Kim Jong-il, and now his grandson Kim Jong-un. This concentration of power is reinforced by the personality cult surrounding the Kim dynasty, the Supreme Leader’s direct control of the Korean People’s Army, and the fact that members of the inner circle are related to the Supreme Leader by family loyalties.

While there may be competing factions involved in bargaining between the Supreme Leader and other domestic political actors,<sup>8</sup> most veteran North Korea watchers argue that North Korean political elites have little or no incentive to see the current system collapse, as any downturn in the Kim dynasty’s fortunes would likely entail their own loss of power, privilege, or even their own lives at the hands of a vengeful populace.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, there are no other political parties, no competing centers of power, no credible insurgencies, and only the barest hints of a civil society (such as underground Christian churches), which are nonetheless vigorously repressed by North Korean authorities.

Myanmar, on the other hand, had several domestic political features that made reform more probable, though by no means assured. First, political authority was far more contested than in North Korea. Despite devastating losses during the Korean War, Kim Il-sung and his loyalists maintained and further consolidated authoritarian control in the 1960s. Even with similar instruments of military force and social repression, Burma/Myanmar never achieved this degree of national unity. Upon its independence from the British Empire in 1948, the new parliamentary democracy of Burma was almost immediately beset by a civil war pitting the central government against various ethnic groups seeking autonomy. Over the years, groups like the Karen National Union, the Kachin Independence Army, the Shan State Army, the Mong Tai Army and the United Wa State Army continuously challenged the power of the central government as they fought what has become the world’s longest civil war.<sup>10</sup> Weak democratic institutions, political factionalism, and the growing threat of ethnic minority and communist insurgents led Burma’s prime minister, U Nu, to voluntarily hand governing power to the military in 1958. Although the military “caretaker” government under General Ne Win returned national leadership to U Nu in 1960, it seized power again in a genuine coup in 1962, commencing five decades of de facto military rule. But even military rule was unable to fully unite and integrate the country, as indicated by continued fighting between ethnic minority insurgents and government forces to this day.

Second, the military regime was unable to fully suppress popular dissent. In 1974 and 1975, an overvalued currency and high prices for staple goods, including rice, led to widespread protests, but it was the pro-democracy movement of 1988—the so-called “8888 Uprising”—that demonstrated the regime’s utter lack of popular legitimacy and led to the establishment of a credible opposition in the form of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Faced with

massive protests, the military responded with unmitigated brutality, killing some 3,000 according to one common estimate, and establishing martial law under the State Law and Order Restoration Council (later renamed the State Peace and Development Council in 1997).<sup>11</sup> Even then, the government was unable to eradicate political opposition with anything approaching Kim Il-Sung's degree of completeness. In 1990, the military junta held elections for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, apparently expecting a rubber-stamp congress. To the junta's surprise, the NLD swept the election with 80 percent of the vote, despite Aung San Suu Kyi being under house arrest at the time. Clearly embarrassed by this failure to establish even a veneer of popular legitimacy, the junta ignored the results of the election and commenced another round of political repression.

Third, unlike in North Korea, there is a credible, charismatic and pragmatic figure to lead the Burmese political opposition. While the long years of imprisonment limited Aung San Suu Kyi's ability to directly influence Burmese politics, "The Lady" retained a hold on the Burmese popular imagination. Her popularity increased even further when she was awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize. All of this helped keep the Burmese pro-democracy movement in the international public consciousness and ensure that the cause of Burmese freedom became linked to Myanmar's foreign relations. Moreover, it is of signal importance that Suu Kyi is the daughter of Aung San, the beloved independence hero and Burmese founding father. Even the military proclaimed its deep respect for Aung San. For example, soon after Aung San's assassination in 1947 along with other leaders of the interim pro-independence government, the Burmese government inaugurated an annual Martyrs' Day to honor them. The military junta continued to uphold this tradition with high-ranking officials paying their respects at the Martyrs' Mausoleum, even as they refused to let protesting supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi do the same. Such was the power of nationalist symbols that the junta felt it had to maintain at least a pretense of respect for Suu Kyi's own father. This undoubtedly placed the junta in an awkward position. It was a significant symbol of solidarity with popular Burmese nationalism when in July 2012, the Thein Sein government allowed the general public to visit the Martyrs' Mausoleum on Martyrs' Day for the first time since the establishment of military rule fifty years ago. But equally significant is that Suu Kyi is not calling for the overthrow of the Thein Sein government; instead she is leading the opposition to cautiously work with the government during the present transition phase.

The contradictions inherent within the SPDC's nationalist narrative and the space for regime-opposition cooperation in Myanmar contrast with the ethnic nationalism, cult of personality and culture of control associated with the North Korean regime. The philosophy of *juche* or "self-reliance" relentlessly depicts North Korea as a paradise under threat by the treacherous Americans, the illegitimate South Koreans and the despised Japanese. Unlike in Myanmar, it is difficult to claim that the current repressive government in North Korea is a deviation from the founders' original vision; instead, the myth of the Kim regime was woven into the fabric of

North Korean society from the very beginning. While the relatively porous border with China means that more and more North Koreans have access to news and images about the outside world, a national vision to compete with *juche* would have to be constructed *ex nihilo*.

In sum, North Korean leaders' ability to establish and maintain an extreme concentration of political power in the hands of a small core of elites contrasts with the much more contested power structure in Burma/Myanmar. A popular opposition movement supported and protected by a beloved national icon, herself the daughter of one of Burma's founding fathers, helped to ensure that the military junta could not fully consolidate its rule without provoking a domestic and international backlash. While the junta could have eliminated Aung San Suu Kyi, doing so would have severely damaged its already-shaky foreign relations, turned Suu Kyi into a martyr, and possibly galvanized national resistance. Whether Suu Kyi lived or died at the hands of the junta, the NLD would continue to undermine its legitimacy. By contrast, North Korea harbors no such credible political opposition and no nationalist legacy to counter the regime's dominant narrative, making revolution or bottom-up reform extremely difficult.

### **Similar Geopolitics, Different International Links**

At a cursory glance, Myanmar and North Korea share much in terms of their geopolitics and foreign relations. Both are situated in strategic locations. Myanmar is the gateway from continental East Asia to the Indian Ocean and shares borders with China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, and Thailand. North Korea borders China, the Russian Far East, and South Korea, with Japan a short distance away, potentially making it a hub for regional trade. Both countries have historically enjoyed close relations with China, which plays a predominant role in each of their economies. Both countries have been subject to international sanctions for their violations of human rights. The Kim regime and the SPDC both feared external subversion—witness Pyongyang's restrictions on international NGOs despite its desperate food situation, as well as Naypyidaw's callous decision to bar foreign relief agencies following Cyclone Nargis in 2008. Both countries have porous borders across which smuggling and human trafficking takes place, but both populations are mostly cut off from the outside world. And prior to the Thein Sein reforms, both economies were largely isolated,<sup>12</sup> although the two regimes may have engaged in illicit arms trade with each other, highlighted by cases in 2009 and 2011 when North Korean vessels believed to be carrying missile parts were not allowed to reach Myanmar owing to US pressure.<sup>13</sup>

However, as with their domestic politics, a closer inspection of the two countries' international links reveals meaningful differences. While both states have porous borders, this is especially so for Myanmar, where border areas have served to conceal ethnic militias and extensive drug smuggling.<sup>14</sup> While there is limited (controlled and illegal) cross-border movement between



China and North Korea, the Demilitarized Zone and contested maritime spaces effectively prohibit movement from North Korea into South Korea or Japan. North Korea's antipathy toward the United States, South Korea and Japan after World War II and the Korean War has no analog in contemporary Burmese politics. And while both countries have suffered under self-imposed isolation, this was less so for Myanmar, which joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 and since deepened political, economic and social ties with its neighbors. Meanwhile, North Korea's participation in multilateral fora, from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to the Six-Party Talks, tends to be dominated by military confidence-building in general, and by denuclearization in particular.

ASEAN warrants special mention for its role in keeping Myanmar relatively enmeshed in international society. ASEAN's efforts to incorporate the Indochinese countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) were motivated in part by the prospect of future economic gains from regional integration and in part to stem the influence of an increasingly powerful China. Naypyidaw saw in ASEAN a chance at boosting international legitimacy. But Myanmar's high-profile human rights violations embarrassed ASEAN, strained the grouping's central norm of non-interference, and led neighboring governments to adopt a tougher line toward the military junta. Here, Aung San Suu Kyi's role as a widely recognized figurehead for the Burmese opposition was critical in motivating ASEAN to place pressure on the Burmese government. For example, ASEAN leaders openly called for Suu Kyi's release and issued strong diplomatic criticism of the Myanmar government's violent suppression of the 2007 "Saffron Revolution." While Western governments and NGOs labeled ASEAN's response as weak and ineffective, it is notable that despite their obsession with sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, ASEAN governments were able to agree that Myanmar's behavior was unacceptable.<sup>15</sup> Even though member states refrained from imposing sanctions on Myanmar, such a consensus on a member state's behavior toward its own citizens was unprecedented in the organization's history.

ASEAN's "stick" of criticism was important but so, too, was the "carrot" of legitimacy and the privilege of holding ASEAN's annually rotating chair. Myanmar skipped its first turn as chair in 2006 owing to pressure from ASEAN's more established member states which, in turn, were under pressure from the United States and other democratic countries. But in 2011, amidst the Thein Sein reforms, ASEAN agreed to grant Myanmar the chairmanship of the Association in 2014. Implicit in this decision was the condition that Myanmar not backslide on reforms or attract negative international attention. The decision is particularly significant since 2015 will mark the launch of the ASEAN Community, the establishment of a region-wide free trade zone, and the Association's evolution into a more formal institution for regional governance. As the host for all the major ASEAN meetings in 2014, including the multilateral ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, Myanmar will have the opportunity to showcase its progress to

world leaders. Successfully bearing this responsibility would grant Myanmar a significant boost in regional standing and likely attract further investment in its economy.

In contrast, North Korea has not experienced the socializing force of a regional institution. The Six-Party Talks have been stalled or recessed more than they have been in session, making the forum more of a bargaining mechanism than an institutional framework. Northeast Asia is famously lacking in regional architecture.<sup>16</sup> North Korea does have a close relationship with China, its main provider of economic aid and diplomatic support. But that relationship—owing to Beijing’s reluctance to exert pressure for fears of undermining regional “stability”—has been unsuccessful at effecting change in Pyongyang’s domestic policies and international behavior.<sup>17</sup> Kim Jong-il visited China seven times between 2000 and his death in 2011. On several of these trips, he had ample opportunity to witness the transformative effects of China’s economic reforms, especially in China’s northeastern provinces near the border with North Korea. In August 2012, Jang Song-taek, uncle and close adviser of Kim Jong-un, traveled to China and met with high-ranking officials. According to reports, China agreed to aid North Korea in the development of the Rason and Hwanggumpyong special economic zones, which allow free market enterprise but stagnated under poor infrastructure—a matter that China is expected to help resolve by providing roads and electricity.<sup>18</sup>

However, even economic improvements supported by China appear seriously impeded by periodic backsliding in North Korea and insufficient rule of law. Moreover, while Beijing may try to separate its political and economic interests in North Korea from international processes for dealing with North Korea’s nuclear program, the latter inevitably affects the former. Chinese policymakers may prioritize stability and influence over North Korean denuclearization, but Pyongyang’s military provocations and flouting of international commitments mean that China’s support for North Korea comes with costs and complications. For China, and even more so for South Korea, Japan, the US and international organizations, successfully engaging North Korea hinges on Pyongyang refraining from military provocations, including nuclear and missile tests.

Myanmar also has a complex relationship with China. Under the military junta, China became Myanmar’s largest arms supplier and closest military ally. China has also built a significant portion of Myanmar’s transportation and power infrastructure. Along with this, hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants—many illegal—are living and working in Myanmar. As restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly are relaxed, popular resentment of Chinese economic and political dominance is becoming an increasingly important consideration in Myanmar-China relations. This was demonstrated in the case of the Myitsone Dam. Construction on the hydroelectric dam was performed by a Chinese state-owned corporation, but local residents complained about the prospect of flooded communities and mass relocation, as well as



the revelation that 90 percent of the electricity generated by the dam would be sold to China.<sup>19</sup> In September 2011, Thein Sein's government abruptly suspended construction on the dam.

A similar controversy is brewing over the Monywa Copper Mine in central Myanmar. In 2010, the government signed a deal with a subsidiary of Norinco, a Chinese state-owned military conglomerate. The development of the mine and consequent plans to relocate residents from 26 villages have sparked large-scale protests involving as many as 10,000 people. Protestors have claimed that they are being inadequately compensated, that authorities have used strong-arm tactics, and that the Chinese and Burmese governments are conspiring to exploit natural resources without any input from local residents.<sup>20</sup>

Naypyidaw may not necessarily regard the increasing public resentment of Chinese economic dominance as entirely bad, especially since it is happening in the context of improved business relations with other countries. By improving relations with the United States, ASEAN, the EU, and other partners, Myanmar can also improve its bargaining position with China. Myanmar also seems interested in diversifying its military relationships, as illustrated by its recent admission as an observer to Cobra Gold, the annual US and Thai-led multilateral military exercises. While Myanmar's leaders know they cannot afford bad relations with China, diversifying geopolitical links would afford Naypyidaw greater diplomatic flexibility and independence.

North Korea's ability to diversify its diplomatic relations, however, is severely limited by its nuclear weapons program and the peculiar nature of the stalemated conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang's bellicose rhetoric toward South Korea, Japan, and the United States means that those governments will almost certainly regard North Korean domestic reforms with a great deal of skepticism so long as Pyongyang continues to produce, test, and potentially deploy nuclear weapons. The conundrum is that the Kim regime appears to regard nuclear weapons as a critical insurance policy for survival as a tool of domestic legitimacy, international blackmail, and grand equalizer against South Korea. Myanmar, on the other hand, not only lacked nuclear weapons, it also enjoyed friendlier relations with its neighbors. Thus, while Myanmar's international links increased the probability that political-economic reforms would enhance Naypyidaw's position, North Korea's geopolitical orientation likely makes domestic reforms appear inherently risky for the Kim regime.

### **Myanmar's Lessons for North Korea**

Comparison with the Burmese experience offers at least five lessons for the North Korean case. First, unlike in Myanmar, reform in North Korea will almost certainly have to begin with the top leadership. While the military junta in Myanmar and the Kim regime in North Korea were similar in their repression of political opponents, the extent of political repression is much

greater in North Korea. For all its brutality, the SPDC was never able to completely stamp out political opposition and ruled over a contested polity. This enabled ethnic insurgencies and the NLD to carve out a political space to challenge the SPDC's authority and demonstrate to the world its lack of domestic legitimacy. By contrast, there is no credible organized political opposition in North Korea, no insurgencies, and a virtually complete government monopoly on coercive force. Foreign and domestic detractors of the Kim regime alike have limited ability to impose costs on the North Korean government. UN sanctions have yet to reorder Pyongyang's policy preferences and North Korean exiles continue to fear retaliation against family members back home. Without organized opposition, reforms need to be in the interests of (at least some of) the ruling elite. Thus, incentivizing reform by targeting particular elites for persuasion should be a primary focus of international diplomacy toward North Korea.

Second, while North Korea has no unifying opposition figure, the democracy movement in Myanmar has a powerful symbol in the form of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has given the NLD a face and an inspiring story that has attracted both domestic and international support. As a result, the military junta could ill afford to eliminate her, not only because doing so would provoke a backlash but also because Suu Kyi's freedom could be a useful bargaining chip with foreign powers. Suu Kyi kept the NLD alive in the international consciousness and helped ensure that it could not be completely stamped out. North Korea lacks such a figurehead, leaving NGOs with the difficult task of putting a face on North Korea's victims of political oppression and the refugees who suffer human trafficking, economic exploitation and reprisals against family members. North Korean freedom needs a vocal champion, but it is unclear whether the next South Korean president will be able or willing to take on that role.

Third, Myanmar's military leadership acquiesced to reforms on the understanding that they would not be punished. At the international level, Myanmar's closest ties were with the ASEAN states, which emphasized non-interference in domestic affairs. This gave the military leaders in Myanmar some assurance they would retain their lives and treasure after transition from the junta regime. Indeed, key reformists such as Thein Sein and Lower House Speaker Shwe Mann were members of the old guard. At the domestic level, the power-sharing arrangement by which the military would continue to occupy seats in the Parliament also gave the generals confidence they would be safe from prosecution. While this arrangement undoubtedly (and justifiably) raises the hackles of human rights activists, a graceful political exit for the old guard in North Korea (or some channel through which they can be otherwise productive) may be a necessary condition for reformist leaders to take over and initiate a peaceful transition.

While some outside observers hope that Kim Jong-un will launch meaningful reforms, it remains too early to tell whether personnel changes since Kim Jong-il's death point in this direction or simply represent "housecleaning" to re-consolidate the regime's power. While reunification

remains an inspiring goal on both sides of the DMZ, North Korean elites have little reason to proceed with reforms that chart a course to absorption by the South; they need to see reform as personally beneficial. Compared to Myanmar, economic and political reform in North Korea is further complicated by how leaders in Pyongyang do not wish to declare ideological defeat to the capitalist, democratic South. However, Pyongyang may have a post-strategic decision advantage relative to Myanmar. If Pyongyang opted for reform and opening, it would have an immediate neighbor with much-needed capital and technology committed to the North's economic development. That commitment would be based on shared ethnicity, language, and culture. In contrast, Myanmar's ethnic cleavages and disputes may yet derail its transition process.

Fourth, foreign powers effectively employed both sticks and carrots with Myanmar. ASEAN in particular offered Myanmar prestige and a seat among Southeast Asia's leading countries, as well as opportunities to strengthen ties with the international community. Had ASEAN only threatened to punish Myanmar for its human rights violations without offering rewards for good behavior, it is unlikely that Naypyidaw would have continued to see the utility of membership. Meanwhile, the sanctions imposed by the United States, EU and others were useful as a bargaining chip to encourage better behavior. Importantly, these countries made good on their promise to remove sanctions, encouraging Myanmar to continue its reforms. Offering clear, credible rewards at certain steps of reform and disarmament—akin to the scheme for a gradual lifting of sanctions on North Korea suggested by the 1999 Perry Report—as well as clear punishments for backsliding would give Pyongyang incentive to cooperate.<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that North Korean elites claim to see a lesson in the Libyan case: that Muammar Gaddafi's decision to give up a weapons of mass destruction program ultimately made regime change easier.<sup>22</sup> Setting—and honoring—clear conditions for rewards and punishments over a long period of time would help build North Korean trust in the international community and counter perceptions that disarmament is a policy for regime change.

International coordination on North Korea and Myanmar remains vital to ensuring the success of reforms. But because of the domestic factors that make North Korea a tougher case for reform than Myanmar, a greater level of international coordination is likely required. Given the continuity of a second Obama administration, the onus will be on new governments in Beijing and Seoul to develop a coordinated, principled engagement of Pyongyang. That said, the United States should actively rebut voices framing its “pivot to Asia” in zero-sum terms vis-à-vis China. Beijing's cooperation is important for the success of reforms in Myanmar and North Korea, as both states share borders and high levels of economic interaction with China. Washington and Beijing would benefit from further quiet conversations over how to coordinate policy for North Korean contingencies, and if Myanmar participates in US military exercises, it would be helpful if China is welcomed as an observer. Soon after the South Korean election in December 2012, Pyongyang will likely test the new president in Seoul. North Korea may also look to take

advantage of the Obama “pivot” to Asia or “unclenched fist diplomacy” by making a calculated overture to Washington. The other five parties of the Six-Party Talks should endeavor to be on the same page when Pyongyang makes its next move.

Fifth, while the Burmese case does not represent a model for North Korea, Myanmar’s success going forward will have important demonstration effects. The upcoming elections in 2015 will be a major test of the resilience of Burmese reforms. If the old generals of the SPDC meet with broad persecution, if the economy falters, or if the country descends into ethnic and civil strife, Pyongyang would have another excuse to avoid reform. On the other hand, if Naypyidaw backslides on democratic reform and the international community fails to reapply sanctions, the North Korean regime may calculate that it can further avoid accountability for breaking its international commitments. Moreover, voices critical of President Obama’s visit as premature would be borne out, and a test of “unclenched-fist diplomacy” (high-level engagement rewarding changes short of regime change) would be labeled a failure.<sup>23</sup> Seeing precious political capital wasted, leaders of democracies may then be less willing to risk engagement with states like North Korea. Conversely, a successful transition could signal to the North Korean regime that reforms need not mean a death sentence. Aid to Myanmar from international financial institutions such as the World Bank, properly disbursed and managed, could indicate to North Korea what benefits await should it decide to abandon its isolationist posture. For all these reasons, those with an interest in peace on the Korean Peninsula—from Seoul to Beijing to Washington—should recognize their shared stake in Myanmar’s success and work hard to ensure that reforms come to fruition.

At the end of the day, though, meaningful reform in North Korea depends most on the North Korean leaders themselves. The international community can cajole and offer various incentives, including holding up Myanmar as a success story, but the decision and responsibility for reform ultimately rests with Pyongyang. Myanmar is charting a new course largely because its leaders came to a consensus that the country had no reasonable alternative to reform and opening. This provides the most poignant lesson of Myanmar’s transition: there is no hope for North Korea’s future without change to its current policies.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this Issue Brief, we use the official name of the country known as Burma or Myanmar depending on the time period. When referring to events before 1989, we use the name "Burma." From 1989 on, we refer to the country as "Myanmar," though we always use "Burmese" for the adjectival form.

<sup>2</sup> "President Barack Obama makes an unprecedented visit to a former pariah," *The Economist*, November 17, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21566656-president-barack-obama-makes-unprecedented-visit-former-pariah-goodbye-clenched-fist-hello>.

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, Remarks at the University of Yangon, November 19, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/19/remarks-president-obama-university-yangon>.

<sup>4</sup> "US Ambassador Urges NK to Learn from Myanmar," *Korea Times*, July 25, 2012. US National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon and US envoy on North Korean human rights, Robert King, have made similar remarks on different occasions.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Steven Borowiec, "South Korea to North Korea: Learn from Myanmar," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 17, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2012/0517/South-Korea-to-North-Korea-Learn-from-Myanmar>.

<sup>6</sup> Evan Ramstad, "Obama's North Korea Mention Gets Reaction — In Seoul Not Pyongyang," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/11/22/obamas-north-korea-mention-gets-reaction-in-seoul-not-pyongyang>.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Hunt, "Thein's One Term Pledge," *The Diplomat*, November 20, 2012, <http://thediplomat.com/asean-beat/2012/08/01/thein-sein-reconfirms-i-will-only-serve-one-term>.

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- <sup>8</sup> Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> Andrei Lankov, "Conditions Unripe for North Korean Revolt," *Asia Times*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MK17Dg01.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> Lotta Themmer and Peter Wallensteen, "Armed Conflict, 1946-2011," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 4 (2012): 565-575.
- <sup>11</sup> David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 79.
- <sup>12</sup> Myanmar's trade-to-GDP ratio, calculated as (total exports + total imports)/GDP (PPP), has been increasing, but remained extremely low in a comparative sense until recently. In 2011, 17.1% (cf. Indonesia: 32.7%; South Korea: 69.1%); in 2004, 5.2% (Indonesia: 13.9%; South Korea: 50.2%); in 1994, 4.5% (cf. Indonesia: 11.7%; South Korea: 39.1%). Data from *CIA World Factbook* (1995, 2005, 2012), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook>. On North Korea's economic isolation, see resources at <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/northkorea> and <http://www.piie.com/blogs/nk>.
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