Crisis in Burma

A Lack of “International Voluntarism”

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On September 24, 2007, the conflict in Burma, also known as Myanmar, between the public and the military junta, officially known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), reached a serious point. The military junta, which represented the Burmese government, had raised the price of oil through its monopoly, which subsequently elevated food prices. In response, the public, including 1000 monks, protested against the tyrannical rule of the junta. The junta reacted by killing thousands of people and arresting democratic leaders such as U Gambira, the leader of the protesting monks. Amidst this turmoil, many foreign countries intervened to try to find a solution. Keck and Sikkink suggest that these are voluntary and angel states coming to the aid of others. On the other hand, Kaufmann and Pape argue that these are states masking their acts as aid while looking for gains for themselves. They add that these political gains are made at the costly price of economic loss. By examining how the United States has been involved in the crisis in Burma, Kaufmann and Pape's view on these states appears to be more correct than that of Keck and Sikkink, who believe in the existence of voluntary states.

The theories and their difference

Before showing which theory is more applicable to reality, it is necessary to understand clearly each point of view. Keck and Sikkink claim that states that have intervened in the crisis in Burma are inspired by “an international voluntarism” in transnational networks (Keck and Sikkink, 6). These units are defined as “activists – people who care enough” that “they are prepared to incur significant costs and act to achieve their goals” (Keck and Sikkink, 14). These individuals are described as those willing to do things for others even though there might not be profits or gains from participation in an act. Keck and Sikkink cite Great Britain's effort from 1807 to 1860 in suppressing the Atlantic slave trade. They point to the “most current and careful historical research” which argues that “the impetus behind abolition was primarily religious and humanitarian” (Keck and Sikkink, 42). They emphasize Great Britain's genuine will to help others.

On the other hand, Kaufmann and

Pape insist that societies do not have “the level of commitment to an other—regarding universalist ethic that would be needed” to “accept high costs for a moral effort designed to benefit foreigners” (Kaufmann and Pape, 632). They argue that such an attitude is “virtually never available”. They also refer to Great Britain's anti-slavery policy. They reason that Britain abolished its slave trade because the British elite wanted to satisfy the majority of the British citizenry who were religious, against slavery, and believed that “their own society [was] corrupt and in need of reform” (Kaufmann and Pape, 663). They include the costs that the government of Great Britain incurred by enacting its policy: they lost 5000 British lives in slave trade suppression efforts, faced conflicts with the US and France for intervention in their domestic politics, and amounted economic losses with the end of slavery.

The main difference between the two explanations is that while the former embraces the idea of “an international voluntarism,” the

latter refuses to accept it, stating that group interests direct governmental intervention policies (Keck and Sikkink, 6). The interest at stake, in the case of Britain's anti-slavery position, was obtaining more votes for the leading party in government. But to confirm the **validity of this comparison, one needs to** apply these theories to other case studies. We can find such a comparison in Burma's recent rebellion against its military junta and the U.S participation in the **political turmoil**.

Burma's political turmoil and the US involvement

Burma is suffering from its worst unrest since a 1988 peaceful demonstration by civilians against the junta that brought about 3000 deaths. Eversince, Burma "has sunk further into poverty and repression and become a symbol for the outside world of the harsh military subjugation of a people." (Mydans, *New York Times*, September 27, 2007). In addition, the military junta has detained the pro-democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, a pro-democracy leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) **against the junta, which** has finally pushed the monks and students out into the streets out of despair and anger. This has caused international institutions such as United States Campaign for Burma and The Freedom for Campaign to reach out to other countries such as the United States for help and intervention in Burma's affairs. Thus, many countries have responded to heed this call and have been aiding the NLD.

In addition, the United States has sought to punish the junta government for its tyrannical rule through economic sanctions. On October 19, 2007, President George Bush "announced tighter US sanctions on Myanmar's military rulers" ("Bush slaps new sanctions on Myanmar." *AFP Google Online News* (Oct. 19, 2007). He sought to pressure the tyrannical rulers to loosen their tight grip over the country. Laura Bush has also announced her support for boycotts of precious stones that come from Burma, such as jewels and gems ("Laura

Bush wants Burma jewel boycott." *ABC News on the web* (Nov. 17, 2007). Last but not least, Burmese activists have also found support in the US Congress. Dr. Khin Zaw Win is a political activist who **has spent 10 years since 1994** peacefully criticizing the Burma. **In his lecture** "On Ending Myanmar's Sisyphean Ordeal" at Cornell University on November 2, 2007, he revealed how he had discovered during his trips to the Congress two bills that asked for "the sanction against buying precious stones" by American businesses. Through economic sanctions, the United States wants to pressure the Burmese government into submission.

The United States has also been politically active in helping the civilians of Burma. It has granted one million dollars to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to work on Burma's HIV/Aids crisis through non-governmental organizations. It has also signed the United States-Association of Southeast Nations (US-ASEAN) Joint Declaration to Combat International Terrorism, which includes "cooperation with the US to improve intelligence, information sharing, suppression of terrorist financing, and border and immigration control" (Clark 133). Sometimes, the United States went out of its way to show its support. After meeting with Daw Suu Kyi and General Khin Nyunt, then-Secretary of SPDC, the U.S Congressman Tony Hall asked for the "immediate granting of humanitarian aid with no political strings attached" (Seekins, 21). Thus, through economic and political activities, the U.S government has tried to help the civilians of Burma.

As a result of **getting involved with the crisis in Burma, the United States is facing** economic losses. American businesses are pulling out of Burma and ending deals involving materials such as precious stones and natural resources because of economic sanctions that the federal and state governments imposed on Burma. For example, the state of Massachusetts penalized U.S companies "by forbidding states from doing business with [SPDC]" (Seekins, 22).

Thus, a parallel can be drawn with the United States to Great Britain in facing the same kind of losses when it tried to end slave trade.

Economic and Political Benefits for the United States and its significance

Research shows a correlation between those ethical acts and tangible economic benefits for the United States government. Despite the fact that the economic sanctions were designed to punish the SPDC, Dr. Khin revealed how in the two bills he saw in Congress, “none of these mentioned oil [and] gas.” He adds that **75 percent of foreign businesses are there for oil and gas** and “cannot understand why they stop the businesses of garment and precious stones whilst leaving that of oil and gas alive,” a clear double standard of the American government implementing these economic sanctions. Whilst the government disallows independent and individual businesses from participating, it allows companies that have relations with people within the government to stay there: Khin says such corporations “never will leave the country.” He referred to the Chevron Corporation, explaining that since Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, owns a significant proportion of the company, Chevron will remain in Burma while other companies will not. Therefore, despite the sanctions, key interests for the actors involved provide loopholes for individuals and companies to benefit from economic involvement in Burma.

The US can find political benefits in the region as well. Burma has a strong political attraction due to its geographical location next to a resurgent China. Burma fears “a possibility of China one day invading [it]” and thus, has formed close ties with them. (Holmes, 240). Many states, including the United States, are afraid of this relationship **because it has the potential to lead to an increasing sphere of influence for China. Thus, many states try to “woo Burma away from its strong relationship with China and into a more non-aligned position within the region”** (Clark, 130). The

United States is intent on preventing the Chinese government from finding another ally in the Asia-Pacific region and thus wants to distort the China-Burma relationship to gain a political dominance for itself in that specific area. However, both China and India refused to comply with the economic sanctions that the United States had imposed and for which it had asked other nations to support (“India, China, Russia jointly oppose sanctions on Myanmar.” *Indo-Burma News on the web* (Oct 25, 2007). China’s “joint” refusal with India is a sign of its determination to support a political ally and perhaps, a sign of frustration against the United States’ efforts to gain more influence in the region.

These economic and political benefits for the US can be understood in terms of the political alliances that Great Britain won for its abolition of slavery in Pape’s model. Abolition deprived Great Britain of further economic profits. But because so many British civilians wanted to see such humanitarian acts by its government, the British elite carried out the legislation in order to appease them. In a similar fashion, although American economic sanctions have ended economic benefits from precious stones and garments, individuals in the government are receiving personal benefits by allowing companies which they hold an interest in to stay and effectively monopolize the highly lucrative oil and gas trade. Also, through the use of sanctions, the United States is attempting to maintain its position in a part of the world where its influence is losing ground to emerging regional powers such as China and India. In other words, these altruistic acts are not as voluntary or ethical as they appear. The United States, as a key actor, would not give up the gains it could achieve from its interactions with Myanmar without a justified compensation of some sort.

One note that needs to be made between Kaufmann and Pape’s model and mine is that the former believes the decision to take actions are **derived from both the state and public levels**. The British government

ended slavery and gained political popularity from the religious public who believed slavery to be immoral. In other words, the end of slave trade ensued in two levels of benefit at both the state and the public level. On the other hand, in the case of the United States' involvement in Burma, it is clear that it is only at the interest of the state's political and economic profits that the United States participated in Burma. The public did not make any profits. However, this fact only reinforces the idea that states will only be enforced into taking action to satiate one's self-interest. Whether the public is interested or not, a state will take acts veiled in those of voluntarism if there are profits to be made by participating.

Conclusion

American involvement in the fight for democracy in Burma weakens Keck and Sikkink's belief in "international voluntarism" and questions the existence of voluntary and altruistic acts of states – countries willing

to provide such kinds of services to others without looking for anything in return. The activities of the United States government in Burma confirm Kaufmann and Pape's theory that states will not act unless they can benefit from participation. In this case, the benefits of American involvement were continued influence in that strategic part of the Asia-Pacific region and economic gains from the monopoly of the oil and gas industries in Burma for individuals in the United States.

Kaufmann and Pape's theory is made concrete by the two factors: the actions of United States relative to this conflict and the political and economical profits it gains. These facts confirm their theory that states are self-interested and will not act for another motivated by humanitarianism. Perhaps what is most important is that states that participate in such international acts should be cautious to not let their strategic goals and economic motives override the needs of those of who really need the aid.

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