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## Myanmar's Neighbors Hold the Key

By Stanley A. Weiss

YANGON, Myanmar – In this reclusive, war-ravaged nation that Kipling once said is "quite unlike any land you know," one fact is quite clear — Western efforts to bring Burma's brutal military dictatorship to its knees have failed.

Despite a decade of American and European trade sanctions, Burma (which the junta renamed Myanmar) reported record-high foreign investment last year of \$6 billion, mostly from a single hydropower project backed by Thailand, now the largest investor.

And despite a parade of foreign envoys preaching "constructive engagement," the military that has ruled for 45 years remains defiant. Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel peace laureate and democracy activist, has now spent 11 of the past 17 years under house arrest.

What's the secret to the generals' staying power?

Thank the neighbors. The junta has deftly played them off one another, notably China and India, as they compete for regional influence and natural resources, including Myanmar's natural gas reserves, the world's 10th largest.

Like the strategic Burma Road of World War II, Myanmar remains a critical link in China's security thinking. In addition to billion-dollar bilateral trade deals and major Chinese weapons sales to the junta, a new trans-Myanmar pipeline will carry Middle East oil from the Bay of Bengal to China's southern Yunnan province.

Not to be outflanked, India has made Myanmar a lynchpin of its "Look East" foreign policy and has dampened its support for Burmese democracy activists. In return, New Delhi has won the junta's military cooperation against long-running insurgencies in India's northeast border states and its blessing for a new gas pipeline to India.

Myanmar's generals have become masters at turning energy deals into protection money.

In September, Russia — also a major arms supplier to the regime — voted against formally putting Myanmar on the UN Security Council agenda. The very same day, Russia's state-owned Zarubezhneft oil company was awarded Moscow's first contract to explore Myanmar's offshore oil and gas reserves.

In January, China and Russia vetoed a U.S.-backed Security Council resolution condemning the junta. Days later, Myanmar awarded major contracts to China's National Petroleum Corp. Indonesia, the self-styled leader of Southeast

Asia with growing military ties of its own with Myanmar, abstained.

So how to avoid the carrot of Chinese, Indian and Russian trade canceling out the stick of U.S. and European sanctions? Consider a key ingredient of the six-party talks on North Korea that produced last month's tentative agreement — a united international front that coordinates both sticks and carrots.

To be sure, Burma doesn't present the same galvanizing threat as North Korean nuclear weapons. But Myanmar's neighbors — especially China, India and Thailand — increasingly worry about Myanmar's destabilizing exports: HIV/AIDS, huge quantities of heroin and opium and refugees from the junta's latest onslaught against ethnic rebels.

New Delhi has an interest in showing that its ties with Myanmar can promote reform instead of simply tarnishing India's image as the world's largest democracy. And Beijing surely wants to avoid yet another case of disenchanting Asians targeting Chinese minorities. Meanwhile, Myanmar's fear of Chinese domination gives New Delhi some leverage.

Tying future Chinese, Indian and Thai trade to economic and political liberalization could be the one stick to which the junta might respond.

Simultaneously, just as the Bush administration showed new flexibility toward Pyongyang — lifting financial sanctions and offering economic assistance — Washington could offer Myanmar specific incentives, such as the gradual easing of sanctions, if the junta met certain benchmarks, such as releasing political prisoners like Suu Kyi and undertaking certain reforms.

Of course, there's no guarantee that the junta would ever relinquish its rule. But "there are examples of the regime responding to specific incentives and disincentives," says Thant Myint-U, author of a new history of Burma, "The River of Lost Footsteps."

After years of Asian and Russian trade negating Western sanctions, it's time to try something else.

"The younger generation of upcoming generals needs to know what they can gain by being more open, with the world laying out specific incentives and disincentives," said Myint-U. "No one has attempted that, so it's worth a try."

*The author is founder and chairman of Business Executives for National Security, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington, DC. This is a personal comment.*