

The Best Myanmar Can Hope for From Trump Is Benign Neglect

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Donald Trump's election to the White House has set alarm bells ringing around the world, but what if any effect will it have on Myanmar? The simple answer is that his "America First" foreign and national security policy will definitely affect Myanmar adversely, but we do not know to what extent yet.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a meeting with House Republicans at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Washington, D.C. on November 13, 2024. / AFP

Myanmar has very little trade with America, so it may be lucky enough to be neglected by Trump. But his presidency is likely to have a negative effect on resettlement, migrants already in America, humanitarian aid, and climate change—all of which affect Myanmar or its diaspora.

There will be less or even no resettlement of Myanmar refugees. The Temporary Protection Status (TPS) program is likely to be cut. Migrants from Haiti—who Trump singled out for derision on the campaign trail by claiming they were eating people's pets—arrived in the U.S. under the TPD program, and Vice President-elect J.D. Vance has already promised to cut it. There are 2,000 Myanmar migrants in the U.S. under TPS.

The refugee program, which brings a lot more Myanmar refugees into America, will probably also be cut. About 91,000 refugees live in nine camps on the Thai-Myanmar border, and over 60,000 of them hope to be resettled in the U.S. Some have been waiting for decades and have recently been registered for resettlement, which now is very unlikely to happen. Others who fled the coup in February 2021 have registered to go to the U.S., and some have been waiting for nearly four years. Many have had their final medical checks and are waiting to be called to leave.

I am afraid that their dreams will be dashed too, which is going to take a severe toll on their mental health. Indeed, some have been suffering from depression for a while, and there have been suicide attempts. We can expect more. As one senior UN official said, "Resettlement is screwed. It will grind to a halt."

Even Myanmar refugees already resettled in the U.S. are not safe. Donald Trump has now chosen [Stephen Miller, the biggest enemy of refugees and migrants](#), as a White House assistant officer. News on Nov. 18 was that Trump plans to call a state of emergency for the military to be involved in the mass deportation of migrants. It is easy to violate visas by overstaying even for just one day, and with that a migrant becomes illegal. Most Burmese migrants work in large factories that can easily be raided by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Their deportation would of course have a knock-on effect on remittances, which support families in Myanmar but also help fund the revolution.

Humanitarian aid has never been a Trump priority. The Department of Defense's gain is likely to be humanitarian aid's loss, meaning very little or no overseas aid and support for local governance. As Republicans now control both the Senate and the House of Representatives, they could speed up implementation and funding of the Burma Act (US\$121 million allocated for fiscal year 2024). But the State Department and USAID are responsible for funding the Burma Act, and their status in a Trump presidency is uncertain. There is even talk that he may scrap USAID, the largest donor to Myanmar, altogether.

With the UN predicting that 13.3 million people or 24 percent of Myanmar's population will face high levels of food insecurity and 2 million at risk of starvation in Arakan within months, this would be a disaster.

Myanmar is also one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change—it is at risk of several natural hazards, including extreme temperatures, drought, cyclones, flooding and storm surges, and heavy rainfall. This may get worse, especially with the cash-strapped junta exploiting natural resources as fast as it can. But Trump does not believe in climate change and will probably withdraw from the Paris Agreement on reducing emissions and expand the fossil fuel industry.

Politically, Trump is likely to continue Biden's policy of supporting ASEAN, so in theory there may be few immediate changes. However, Trump's confrontational foreign economic policies could have a ripple effect on Myanmar. Cross-border aid requires the cooperation of countries neighboring Myanmar, which may become more difficult if they are in a tariff war with America.

Economic conflict with China is likely, and that may involve Myanmar. Trump has [threatened to impose 60 percent tariffs on Chinese imports](#) and 10-20 percent on goods imported from elsewhere. Also, the U.S. has the ability to block China from the Malacca Straits, making a planned rail link between Ruili to Kyaukphyu and the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and deep-water port all the more important for China.

Kachin is the largest rare-earth source in the world, supplying 50 percent of its needs, and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) has recently captured the mines. Those who want rare earths now have to deal with the KIA. Elon Musk needs rare earth for Tesla, and he will be part of Trump's government.

A proposed China-Myanmar joint security organization may also get Trump's attention. Any Chinese troops stationed in Myanmar and working with the junta to protect Chinese assets, such as the gas pipeline and the planned Belt and Road railway line from Kunming to Kyaukpyu, may be too much for him.

Chinese security forces could be stationed not just in the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone, but seemingly anywhere in the country where Chinese projects are located. In addition, China may put its military on the Coco Islands, which are in the Bay of Bengal and just 55 km from India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. This could destabilize the whole region and push America to become more involved to protect its own interests.

Bangladesh wants to fast-track Rohingya resettlement, and interim leader Mohammed Yunus has called on the international community to support third-country resettlement of the over 1 million Rohingya refugees in camps in Cox's Bazar. Bangladesh has also tied permission for cross-border aid to Rakhine State to a resettlement plan. This is even more unlikely under Trump's "America First" banner.

Trump is erratic and unpredictable, so hopefully many of these scenarios will not come to

fruition—but don't hold your breath.

Other countries will need to step up to fill the likely gap. This will involve resettling more refugees. The Middle East has certainly not been pulling its weight on this. Neighboring countries could monitor and control the inevitable increase in refugees from Myanmar by, for example, giving them a two-year stay/work permit, based on which they could also levy tax.

There will have to be a dramatic increase in humanitarian funding and a lot of cross-border aid going through a few INGOs and a lot of Civil Society Organizations rather than the UN, which does not have the access and is not cost-effective.

Countries need to recognize and support the National Union Government (NUG). South Korea is a good recent example, allowing the NUG Office in South Korea to work with the immigration department on extending passports. Reportedly, Myanmar passport holders can now get a stamp from the NUG Office, which then gives them two years' extension of their stay permit in South Korea. This could be replicated in other countries such as India, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

Trump will be a disaster for America and the world, including the people of Myanmar, who are already suffering disproportionately. It is up to other countries to mitigate this as much as possible, and for the Burmese to be even more united in facing the hard times to come. The people of Myanmar will win and things will eventually get better—but not in the short term.

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P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. November 21, 2024:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/the-best-myanmar-can-hope-for-from-trump-is-benign-neglect.html>
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