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***Burmese Haze: US Policy and Myanmar's Opening—and Closing.* By Erin Murphy.**

New York City: Columbia University Press, 2022. 244 pp.

Burmese Haze is an important book on US-Myanmar relations, focusing on the understudied rapprochement years. The author initially covered Myanmar in her former capacity as a political analyst with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and subsequently as special assistant to the congressionally mandated Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma. In December 2012, Murphy left government to establish the consulting firm Inle Advisory Group to encourage responsible and transparent investment in Myanmar. Given this background, Murphy is able to provide a close-up account of US-Myanmar relations, including insightful details relating to key moments of what the Obama administration regarded as one of its major foreign policy success stories—the political opening of Myanmar under President U Thein Sein. More clearly than many, Murphy also recounts how US sanctions continued to affect American businesses in Myanmar until 2016. Notably, however, Murphy considers Myanmar merits attention “because its inherent struggles on race, ethnicity, and democracy mirror American, and now global, struggles” (p. 4).

The book consists of eight chapters and an epilogue. The first four effectively are scene setters. Respectively, these chapters focus on how Murphy came to analyse developments in Myanmar in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, provide an introduction to the country's ethnic conflicts and failure to achieve national reconciliation even by the end of Obama's second term, set out the country's relations with China, and discuss the 1990, 2010 and 2015 elections. Similar to Derek Mitchell, who served as special representative and policy coordinator for Burma from 2011 to 2012 and then as US ambassador to Myanmar, Murphy argues that US

Myanmar policy during the Obama presidency was not driven by concerns about China. Chapter 4 emphasizes US concerns about the credibility of the 2015 elections.

The main and arguably most captivating parts of the book are Chapters 5 and 6. The former covers aspects of the initial Burma policy review, which ran from February to September 2009. Its outcome was that the United States would pursue diplomatic engagement of Myanmar while maintaining the sanctions previously imposed. Any easing of existing sanctions was made conditional on the Myanmar government's "actions" relating to the release of political prisoners, the country's then peace process, and political and economic reforms. In this context, Murphy highlights the successful push in 2011 by Kurt Campbell, then assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, for a visit to Myanmar by Secretary Hillary Clinton to exercise leverage vis-à-vis the government of President U Thein Sein, Aung San Suu Kyi's 2012 visit to the United States, and President Obama's short trip to Yangon in November 2012. These important events are brought to life by the author's personal recollections as well as her interviews with key US officials involved.

Chapter 6 focuses on the removal of US sanctions during President Obama's second term. Recounting the controversy surrounding the lifting of restrictions, Murphy explains how by mid-2012 the decision was taken to allow US investments into all sectors of the Myanmar economy although reporting requirements were implemented to further only responsible investments. The chapter moreover outlines the taxing impact of the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) List for US businesses. Not surprisingly, Murphy supported the Obama administration's decision to terminate sanctions.

The book also devotes a chapter to the violence against the Rohingya and competing views in Washington about how to label and respond to developments in Rakhine State—covering both the Obama and Trump administrations. Notably, Murphy rejects the viewpoint that "if sanctions hadn't been lifted, Min Aung Hlaing, who was commander-in-chief of the

Myanmar armed forces since 2011 and currently also is the chairman of the State Administration Council, would have ordered his troops to spare the Rohingya because he feared being sanctioned” (p. 163).

The epilogue, which takes into account the February 2021 coup and the strong resistance it provoked across Myanmar, lays out Murphy’s views on what questions matter for the country’s future. Murphy thinks that there are lessons from the political opening a decade ago. Furthermore, she argues that US policymakers and human rights organizations should in future also re-engage the country’s ruling military. As she puts it, “we cannot ignore and isolate the country’s most outsized and powerful institution and hope it goes along with what we want” (p. 174). However, she is clear that “the best way the US government can lead in Myanmar is to be an example of democracy” (p. 178).

Burmese Haze is arguably not without shortcomings. The chapters vary in terms of depth and strengths. Also, despite a significant effort in terms of interviews undertaken for the book and giving voice to key policymakers, Murphy’s primary focus on the Obama years and especially the roles played by administration officials perhaps necessarily leads her to downplay the efforts of the wider group of individuals keen to shift US Myanmar policy before and after 2009. The author could perhaps also have drawn more extensively on academic literature, specifically on US Myanmar policy, to complement her analysis. Moreover, although the author suggests early on that geopolitical competition with China became much more of a factor for the Trump administration, this argument is not developed. One could also take issue with the point that US-Myanmar relations “are where they were” back in 2008, in part because of the significant deterioration of the situation in Myanmar after February 2021. That said, *Burmese Haze* is a quite insightful treatment of US-Myanmar relations and as yet the most comprehensive insider account specifically of the Obama administration’s Myanmar policy.

