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Regional Outlook

Civil-Military Relations in Burma:
Portents, Predictions and Possibilities

Andrew Selth

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'Civil-Military Relations in Burma: Portents, Predictions and Possibilities', Regional Outlook Paper No. 25, 2010

About the Author

Andrew Selth

Andrew Selth is a Research Fellow with the Griffith Asia Institute. He has been studying international security issues and Asian affairs for 35 years, as a professional diplomat, strategic intelligence analyst and research scholar. In 2007, he was awarded a PhD by Griffith University and a post-doctoral fellowship by the Australian Research Council. Dr Selth has published four books and more than 70 peer-reviewed research papers, book chapters and journal articles, most of them about Burma and related subjects.

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Executive Summary

Burma boasts the world's most durable military dictatorship, but civil-military relations in the country have never been static. Until 1988, a distinction seems to have been made between the military government, which was generally held in low esteem, and the armed forces as an institution, which was more widely respected. Over the past 20 years, however, popular attitudes toward both have deteriorated markedly. Among the civilian population, the standing of both the armed forces and the regime are now as low as they have ever been. This seems likely to remain the case for years to come.

Despite regime claims that it heralds a 'genuine multi-party discipline-flourishing democracy', the 2008 constitution does not alter the one-sided political relationship between the armed forces and the Burmese people. Nor does the constitution contain any formulae for the eventual transfer of power to a truly democratic government. Indeed, the planned 'election' of national and provincial assemblies in late 2010 is aimed primarily at disguising continued military rule. Even so, these new arrangements will significantly change the country's political landscape and could have a number of unexpected consequences.

After 2010, there will be many more centres of formal decision making in Burma. There will be more participants in the formal political process, representing a wider range of interests. Not all elected representatives are expected tamely to follow the government's lead on all major issues. Also, it is conceivable that, once the new system of government has firmly settled into place, and provided they feel confident of their position, the next generation of generals may gradually relax their grip on power. If this occurs, however, it is likely to be only at the margins. The armed forces will always be able to reassert their direct control of the country, if that is felt necessary.

Indeed, despite all the measures taken against it since 1988, the regime now seems stronger and more firmly entrenched in power than ever. The opposition movement, both within Burma and outside it, is weak and divided. The various armed insurgent groups are only capable of guerrilla operations around the country's periphery. The only credible threat to continued military rule is serious dissension within the armed forces, and a range of measures have been taken to make that unlikely. Surprises are always possible, but the current indications are that political change will come slowly to Burma.

There are strong arguments for foreign states and international organisations to be engaged in Burma, but their ability to influence internal developments remains very limited. Real and lasting political change can only come from within Burma, and from the Burmese themselves.

Author's Note

After the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. The new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations (UN) and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990.

In this paper the better-known names, for example 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar', 'Rangoon' instead of 'Yangon', and 'Irrawaddy' instead of 'Ayeyarwady', have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Police Force' and 'Myanmar Red Cross'.

The armed forces have ruled Burma since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct political power in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a United States (US)-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). It still rules by decree, but has announced a seven-step 'roadmap' to a 'discipline-flourishing democracy', the latest step of which was a constitutional referendum held in May 2008. National elections are due to be held in 2010.

After the UK sent military forces into the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its conquest of Burma in 1885, Rangoon became the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built town of Naypyidaw, 320 kilometres north of Rangoon, as the seat of Burma's government. When they appear in this paper, the terms 'Rangoon regime', or in some cases simply 'Rangoon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Burma's armed forces. In recent years this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Burma.

1. Predicting Burma's Future

and I saw people in the valley's circle,
silent, weeping, walking at a litany's pace
the way processions push along in our world.

And when my gaze moved down below their faces,
I saw all were incredibly distorted,
the chin was not above the chest, the neck

was twisted – their faces looked down on their backs;
they had to move ahead by moving backward,
for they never saw what was ahead of them.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321)
The Divine Comedy: Inferno
Canto XX, 10–15.

As David Steinberg has pointed out, in Dante's fourteenth century poem *The Divine Comedy*, soothsayers and fortune tellers were consigned to the second lowest circle of hell.¹ This is because, as Dante wrote, they 'never saw what was ahead of them' and thus were guilty of misleading their audiences. Yet, these poor souls deserve some sympathy. As strategic intelligence analysts well know, when they are asked to predict what might happen, or what a particular region might look like in 10 or 20 years time, making such forecasts is not an easy task. Indeed, one acknowledged expert in the field has suggested that 'three years is probably the limit for any hope of analytical fidelity'.²

Long range analyses are necessary and important, but history teaches that they are bound to get some things wrong – and that there will always be people happy to point out the fact. In Burma's case, making useful comments about the future is particularly difficult. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, there is very little reliable information about developments and trends in Burma on which to base firm assessments. Most published statistics are highly suspect and independent data collection is almost impossible.³ The general population is usually afraid to disclose any intelligence that might be deemed sensitive – a category that can cover almost anything in Burma – and the government is notoriously opaque. Official statements are helpful but can rarely be relied upon as accurate indicators, either of current developments or the regime's intentions. Indeed, some knowledgeable observers are convinced that not even the members of Burma's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) are aware of the true state of the country.⁴

Secondly, this information gap has been filled with rumours, gossip, unsubstantiated claims, speculative news reports, propaganda and possibly even disinformation. Over the past 20 years, more than a dozen publications and websites have been created specifically to carry news, commentary and images of Burma, but few of their reports can be independently verified. Some are well-sourced, accurate and balanced, but many are not. In the absence of collateral evidence, it is often hard to sort out which is which. Some questionable stories have been repeated so often that they have become accepted as established fact, even by respected academics.⁵ Sorting through all this chatter is difficult, but is critical for an understanding of what is really happening in and around Burma.⁶

Thirdly, Burma's most important policies appear to be formulated by a small group of senior military officers. Key decisions are probably made by regime leader Senior General

Than Shwe himself, and from all accounts reading his mind has proven difficult even for those in his immediate circle. Also, it is believed that Than Shwe is deeply superstitious and often seeks guidance from astrologers, numerologists and magicians.⁷ If so, this would add another degree of difficulty to attempts to foresee developments in Burma. As the Central Intelligence Agency's Herb Meyer once observed, determining how governments and national leaders think is one of the most essential tasks for an analyst, but it is also one of the toughest.⁸

Fourthly, despite being home to the world's oldest and most resilient military dictatorship, Burma has a well-deserved reputation for unpredictability.⁹ For example, not even the most experienced and well-informed Burma watchers foresaw the nationwide pro-democracy uprising of 1988, or its aftermath.¹⁰ In 2004, the arrest of Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, the country's third most senior official, and the purge of the powerful Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI), took everyone by surprise – including almost all Burmese. The dramatic and completely unexpected 'saffron revolution' of 2007 and the arrival of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 were further reminders of the hazards of making forecasts about developments in Burma.¹¹

Lastly, it has long been standard practice for activists, journalists and even academics to refer to various institutions and social groupings in Burma in simplistic, unitary terms. Often, such broad generalisations are necessary – and indeed they have been extensively employed in the discussion which follows. It always needs to be borne in mind, however, that such is the complexity and shifting nature of Burmese society these days that there is arguably no such thing as 'the government', 'the armed forces', 'the ethnic groups', 'the opposition movement' or even 'the *sangha*'.¹² These and other important entities consist of many diverse elements in a constant state of flux, both within themselves and in their relations with others.¹³ In Burma, for every rule there is always an exception.

Given all these problems, it would be rash to make any firm predictions about Burma's future. After providing some essential historical background, however, this paper offers some thoughts on the changing nature of civil-military relations in the country and their likely trajectory over the next 10 years. It also tries to isolate some key drivers and causal factors that currently affect civil-military relations and will have an influence on future trends. It then attempts to paint a broad picture of how all these issues might affect Burma's stability and political development between now and 2020. Finally, it offers a number of observations on the prospects for constructive influence in Burma by the US and other members of the international community.

2. The People and the Armed Forces

The armed forces are meant for this nation and this people, and it should be such a force having the honour and respect of the people. If instead the armed forces should come to be hated by the people, then the aims with which this army has been built up would have been in vain.

Aung San (1915–47)
Quoted by Aung San Suu Kyi
Rangoon, 26 August 1988

As a general rule, the profession of arms has not been highly regarded by Burma's predominantly Buddhist population. Yet, ironically, the armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) have played a critical role in Burma's modern history and will continue to do so.

After Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, the armed forces tended to be viewed in a favourable light, at least by the majority ethnic Burmans who dominate the country's heartland.¹⁴ This was largely because prominent military figures had played an important role in the anti-colonial struggle. Before his assassination in 1947, for example, revered national hero *Bogyoke* (General) Aung San had helped create, and for a period commanded Burma's fledgling armed forces. Later, and despite a number of debilitating mutinies, the small, poorly armed and inexperienced Tatmadaw helped protect the fragile new Union against repeated challenges from ethnic and ideological insurgent groups.

During the 1950s, the Tatmadaw increased its popular standing when it fought a tough campaign against remnants of China's *Kuomintang* army which, with foreign help, had established strongholds in northern Burma.¹⁵ Also, while not without their critics, the armed forces were considered to have done a reasonably good job of governing Burma during the so-called 'caretaker period', between 1958 and 1960.¹⁶ At least initially, the army's discipline and relative efficiency were welcomed by many. The fact that General Ne Win handed political power back to a democratically-elected civilian government also made a favourable impression, both at home and abroad.¹⁷ The Tatmadaw's prestige was enhanced by the fact that it constituted an important channel for social mobility.¹⁸

Following Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962, however, the military government's denial of basic human rights, socialist economic practices and erratic policies – exemplified by the sudden demonetisation of particular banknotes – won it few friends.¹⁹ As living conditions deteriorated, so did the reputation of the armed forces leadership. Periodic protests by students, workers and others against military rule and the government's economic mismanagement prompted tough counter-measures by the paramilitary police and army. At the same time, the Tatmadaw's ruthless counter-insurgency campaigns in the countryside – where it was seen by many communities virtually as an occupying army – alienated a large proportion of the country's ethnic minorities.

Even so, before 1988 most people in Burma seemed to draw a distinction between the inept and unpopular military government, and the armed forces as an institution, which was still widely respected. There was of course the constant risk of death or injury on operations, but the Tatmadaw was seen by many – again, mainly Burman Buddhists – as offering precious opportunities for social advancement, as well as various material benefits. Significantly, during this period the Tatmadaw was an all-volunteer force. Its budget was small and its equipment paltry, but it had the reputation of being reasonably professional, relatively free from corruption, and possessing a strong esprit de corps.

This is no longer the case. The regime's brutal response to the 1988 protests – in which three thousand or more unarmed protesters were killed by the security forces – began a process of public disillusionment with the Tatmadaw that has continued to the present day.²⁰ Widespread abuses of human rights, including the harsh treatment accorded to political prisoners and the extended house arrest of respected opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, has further eroded popular support. The regime's violence against the revered Buddhist *sangha* during the 2007 'saffron revolution', and its slowness to assist the many victims of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, hardened opinion not only against the Naypyidaw regime but the armed forces as a whole.²¹

Being an officer in the Tatmadaw still promises a career, an education, marketable skills, social status and access to services denied to the general population. The regime has little difficulty each year filling classes at the Defence Services Academy at Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly Maymyo). Yet, recruitment at lower levels is reportedly proving much more difficult, forcing the regime to rely increasingly on children and young men pressed into service.²² It has been difficult for veterans to resign or retire, and the desertion rate is apparently rising.²³ Also, according to anecdotal evidence, there are serious morale problems in the ranks.²⁴ Life for servicemen is hard and discipline is harsh. Corruption is rife and the gap in living standards between officers and their men is widening.

It has been estimated that the armed forces, together with their families and close supporters, now constitute a community of more than two million people, or about four per cent of the population.²⁵ Given that fact, and the Tatmadaw's almost total domination of Burmese society, any problems within the armed forces must have an impact upon the wider population.

Accurately measuring the popular mood in a country like Burma is very difficult. There are very few reliable, broad-based surveys of opinion. As far as can be judged, however, the standing of the armed forces is now as low as it has ever been. This situation is unlikely to change soon. The promulgation of the 2008 constitution prompted mixed reactions, but the most common response seems to have been increased cynicism towards the regime and rejection of its grandiose claims.²⁶ Predictably, calls by opposition and ethnic groups for the repeal and revision of the new constitution have fallen on deaf ears. This state of affairs is likely to persist after the 2010 elections which, on all the evidence available so far, promise to be neither free nor fair.²⁷

In these circumstances, the trajectory for future civil-military relations in Burma can only be further downwards – if they have not already reached the bottom of the scale. The new government will ostensibly be civilian in character, and at least some of its members will be genuine civilians – that is, people who are not former military officers. This would seem to imply a wish on the part of the Tatmadaw's senior hierarchy to win greater backing from the Burmese people. Yet the question needs to be asked: does the regime really want popular support, or is it simply going through the motions? It has already demonstrated that it can rule Burma without it.

3. The People and the Military Government

From birth, being taught that government was one of the five evils all must face and endure, people believed that it was important to avoid standing out and to have as little to do with the king's representatives as possible.

Josef Silverstein
'The Evolution and Salience of
Burma's National Political Culture'
in R.I. Rotberg (ed.),
Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future (1998)

Since 1962, the military government has launched several campaigns aimed at broadening its civilian support base and giving it the appearance of popular legitimacy.²⁸

During the 1970s, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) made the transition from a small 'cadre' organisation to a mass political party. It also dragooned the civilian population into a wide variety of 'People's' committees and associations. As the National Unity Party (NUP), the BSPP contested the 1990 general elections which – in what proved to be a massive miscalculation by the new military regime – were reasonably free and fair. In 1993, the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) created the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), a mass organisation which now claims a membership of over 24 million people.²⁹

In addition, over the past 50 years the regime has taken over or created a wide range of social and cultural groups, usually described as 'government organised non-government organisations' (GONGO). They now include bodies as varied as the Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association, the Myanmar Traditional Artists' Association, the Hiking and Mountaineering League, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Most GONGO members receive para-military training. A few, like the Myanmar Red Cross Society, are even included in the broad category of 'Defence Services'. As described by Gustaaf Houtman, these bodies 'head the front-line of the Myanmafication programme', designed to promote 'national unity' and to mobilise support for regime policies.³⁰

At the same time, the military government has made an effort to win at least passive acceptance from the civilian population. Successive rulers have implemented nation-wide propaganda campaigns, re-written Burmese history books and enforced attendance by key civilian groups – such as teachers and public servants – at special 'educational' courses. Often reflecting military indoctrination programs, these measures have emphasised national unity, social stability and political independence. They have stressed nationalist ideals and highlighted the need for the country to remain vigilant in the face of continuing threats, from both inside the country and abroad. A key theme has been the vital role played by the armed forces in Burma's affairs, both historically and now.³¹

The effectiveness of all these measures, however, is open to question. By 1972, the BSPP had 73,369 members, but more than half were serving or former military officers.³² In the 1990 elections, the NUP won only ten out of 492 seats, while the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won 392 seats. The USDA now claims almost half Burma's population as its membership, but few believe this reflects genuine support for the regime. As was the case with the BSPP, most members have been forced to join, have done so to avoid punishment, or hope to win certain benefits. The BSPP and USDA simply reflect 'the military's perception of the need to have an

effective, totally subservient means to mobilise the population for the leadership's perceived ends'.³³

There is thus some continuity between Burma's military governments before and after 1988, but there are also important differences. After the initial Revolutionary Council period, Ne Win created a highly bureaucratic socialist state that was controlled by the BSPP and the 'elected' *Pyitthu Hluttaw*. Technically at least, the armed forces played a subordinate role. The SLORC weakened the socialist model, abolished the parliament and restored the armed forces to the peak of the political structure. While there have been a range of subordinate councils, the SLORC, and after 1997 the SPDC, have governed Burma largely by executive fiat. Senior officers have concurrently held both military and civilian administrative positions.

Also, the Tatmadaw has been expanded and modernised. It is now probably twice the size it was 20 years ago. The army is still by far the dominant Service but the navy and air force are much larger.³⁴ The Tatmadaw is also much better armed and equipped.³⁵ Its reach extends across almost the entire country and its coercive power has greatly increased. At the same time, it has created a vast network of bases, defence facilities, commercial enterprises, teaching institutes, medical centres and research establishments, often mirroring and in most cases overshadowing similar structures in Burma's civil sector. The Tatmadaw has also built up a cadre of trained professionals, apparently to obviate the need to rely on civilian scientists, intellectuals, bureaucrats and managers.

Indeed, since 1988 the armed forces have become a virtual state within the state of Burma.³⁶ In a structure reminiscent of ancient Sparta, they are supported by a comprehensive, well-funded system that draws heavily on the country's labour and resources, but operates largely independently of it. Their members and close supporters (usually described as 'cronies') seem to consider themselves a privileged caste with special responsibilities – and thus special entitlements. Meanwhile, the wider population has been left to fend for itself, dependent on under-funded and over-stretched civilian institutions which struggle to meet the growing need for jobs, schools, hospitals and social support systems. Civil society in Burma is struggling to survive.³⁷

It has been claimed that the announcement in 2003 of a 'seven-point road map' to a 'discipline-flourishing genuine multi-party democracy' signalled an intention by the armed forces to relinquish its all-powerful position. The generals said the same about the 2008 constitutional referendum. Yet both these steps can be traced back to the regime's repudiation of the 1990 election result.³⁸ Neither heralded any weakening in its firm commitment to the Tatmadaw's complete domination of Burmese politics and society. These steps simply made more formal a long-standing intention to implement a series of measures which would disguise continuing military rule behind the façade of an 'elected' national parliament, the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* (PH), and a number of provincial parliaments.

According to the new constitution, the Tatmadaw will nominate and hold 25 per cent of the seats and positions in legislative and executive bodies at all administrative levels. It alone will be responsible for defence, home affairs, internal security and border administration, thus maintaining its monopoly over the state's coercive apparatus. The constitution also provides what Susanne Prager Nyein has called 'a two-step *coup d'état* clause'.³⁹ In the event of a threat to 'national solidarity', the integrity or territorial sovereignty of the Union – as defined by the government – the president can exercise full executive and legislative power in consultation with the National Defence and Security Council. Should a formal state of emergency be declared, these powers are transferred to the Commander in Chief of the Defence Services.⁴⁰

Proposed amendments to the constitution will require the approval of more than 75 per cent of PH members, before being submitted to a national referendum. Given the large military bloc in the parliament, this effectively rules out any changes not endorsed by

the government. In any case, thanks to highly prescriptive new electoral laws, many of the political parties represented in the PH and provincial assemblies will be endorsed by, if not the actual creatures of, the armed forces. A large number of 'elected' members are expected to be former military officers, or drawn from organisations like the USDA. All candidates will be vetted by the government before being permitted to stand for election.⁴¹ In all these ways, the regime has ensured that after 2010 real power in Burma will remain firmly in the hands of the armed forces.

The key question flowing from the transition to parliamentary government this year, therefore, is not whether the new system will perpetuate military rule – for that is clearly its intention. It is whether or not these political arrangements will, perhaps as an unintended consequence, gradually loosen the Tatmadaw's grip on the country, open more space for civil society to develop and permit the introduction of genuine political, economic and social reforms.

4. Important Drivers and Causal Factors

Despite the regime's tenacity, it has to be asked how the military has managed to stay in power for so many years. Many factors have combined to keep Burma under military rule, including fear, the difficulties of organising and sustaining an opposition movement, and successful propaganda by the regime, particularly with regard to the need for the military to hold the country together.

Christina Fink
Living Silence in Burma (2009)

Civil-military relations in Burma touch on almost every aspect of its development. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is worth briefly examining five factors which will have an important bearing on the country's future. They are the opposition movement, the economy, ethnic tensions, the military regime's 'mindset' or worldview, and the loyalty and cohesion of the Tatmadaw.

The Opposition Movement

Burma's opposition movement – broadly defined – seems to enjoy wide popular support, both within and outside the country. Its ability to capitalise on that support, however, and translate it into concrete political gains must be considered very doubtful.

Over the past 20 years, the opposition movement has been worn down by regime pressures. It is now weak and divided.⁴² There is broad agreement that the military government must be replaced by a more representative system but, beyond that, there are wide differences of view over the means to achieve that end, and what kind of system should replace it. Some groups favour a strong central administration, while others argue for a more devolved, federal system. Some of the ethnic minorities are calling for autonomy or even independent states. As always in Burma, debates over policies tend to become competitions between different factions and personalities. More than one exile group, for example, claims to be Burma's alternative government.⁴³

After 20 years in the wilderness, the NLD is a shadow of its former self. Even if it decides to contest the 2010 elections and tries to play an active role in the new parliament – which currently seems very unlikely – the NLD and other opposition political parties will still be hostage to the temper of the government. It is difficult to see them posing any threat to the continued dominance of the armed forces. As demonstrated by the 2007 civil unrest, the Buddhist sangha has the ability to tap into and mobilise widespread anti-government feelings, but the monks have been unable – and perhaps unwilling – to translate mass demonstrations into specific political programs.

Of all Burma's opposition leaders, Aung San Suu Kyi alone has the political status, national profile and personal charisma to provide a focus for coordinated action. Even if she was released from house arrest after the elections, however, her ability to play a significant political role will be heavily circumscribed. She is effectively barred from doing so, but it is highly unlikely that she would ever seek election to the new parliament, which the regime will insist is the only vehicle for legitimate political action.⁴⁴ In any case, she is not without her critics. Some ethnic leaders reportedly see her as a Burman centralist, who shares the regime's concerns about a federal style of government.⁴⁵ Many young

Burmese have reportedly lost patience with the 'active pacifism' of the NLD under her leadership, and are keen to pursue more confrontationalist policies.⁴⁶

Ever since 1988, there have been opposition groups convinced that the military government will never willingly surrender power to the people, and can only be toppled through armed struggle. Some of these groups are still active, but they face a range of serious problems. None are in a position to mount an effective challenge against the Naypyidaw regime, either alone or in concert with other armed groups. The few major ethnic nationality armies still in the field pose a greater security threat to the central government, but for many years they have been confined to low level guerrilla operations around Burma's periphery. Terrorist attacks inside Burma are not only ineffectual but alienate the very people their perpetrators claim to represent.

Exile and other activist groups outside Burma will continue to irritate the regime, and to publicise its many failings. Some have attracted substantial foreign support, but none have any real or sustained influence on political developments inside the country.⁴⁷

Burma's Economy

Burma is blessed with enormous natural wealth, and once had the potential to be one of the richest countries in Asia. It is now among the poorest, largely because of the misguided policies of successive military administrations. Ne Win's autarkic socialist system scored a few successes, but by any measure it was a manifest failure. By 1987, Burma had been reduced by the United Nations (UN) to Least Developed Country status. After 1988, the SLORC introduced some limited market-based reforms but balked at taking a number of crucial decisions – such as regularising the exchange rate for the Burmese kyat – which would have helped solve some pressing problems and could have led to increased national prosperity.

Over the past decade, the military government has benefited greatly from natural gas sales, and more large contracts are in the pipeline. However, this windfall has permitted it to avoid some hard decisions. Also, much of its increased revenue has been channelled into the Tatmadaw, used to fund costly prestige projects like building a new capital at Naypyidaw – and possibly even a nuclear reactor – or been salted away in offshore accounts.⁴⁸ The regime has made some improvements to the country's civil infrastructure, but generally speaking sectors which directly benefit the population, such as education, health and social welfare, have been starved of funds.⁴⁹ Under the SLORC and SPDC a small and wealthy elite has emerged, but most Burmese have suffered a substantial fall in their standard of living.

The regime has recently announced plans for the privatisation of many state-owned enterprises, a number of which have constituted a drain on the economy.⁵⁰ It has been suggested that this may lead to an expansion of economic activity and even greater flexibility in its management. This is possible, but the beneficiaries of these changes will almost certainly be former and serving military officers, and regime cronies. While competition between them will probably increase, few are likely to challenge the current system. In any case, the Tatmadaw will still dominate the economy, not just by setting national policy settings but also through control of its two powerful conglomerates, Myanmar Economic Holdings Corporation and Myanmar Economic Corporation.⁵¹

Even with increased humanitarian aid, recovery from Cyclone Nargis will be slow. There is also a looming rural crisis which will exacerbate problems in the cities caused by inflation, unemployment and reduced foreign remittances caused by the global financial crisis.⁵² The Obama Administration's new policy towards Burma does not envisage the early removal of economic sanctions, which will dissuade other countries from doing so. While demonstrably ineffective as a tool for political change, such measures have in various ways hindered economic development. Both directly and indirectly, they have also hurt many in the civilian population. All these factors, combined with widespread

corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency and restrictive government regulations, will continue to deter foreign investment.

Notwithstanding the maintenance of economic sanctions, if the regime made a number of key policy changes the chances are good that Burma would experience more sustained and balanced growth, and thus greater prosperity.⁵³ This would have a social and possibly even political impact. For example, there have already been a few indications that better economic management and improved local conditions could lead in turn to a greater, albeit grudging, acceptance of the military government.⁵⁴ Continued arbitrary and uninformed policy making, however, is bound to lead to higher costs of living and a wider gap between the rich and poor. Many Burmese are already suffering from poverty and malnutrition, so any developments along these lines would simply add to their current hardships.⁵⁵

Under such circumstances, renewed outbreaks of civil unrest seem inevitable.⁵⁶ It has become the pattern in Burma for demonstrations sparked by economic grievances quickly to take on an overt political hue, and then – often with the encouragement of dissident groups – to become protests specifically aimed at ending military rule.

Ethnic Tensions

There have always been ethnic tensions in modern Burma. Many have been caused by centre-periphery problems and what has been perceived as racial arrogance on the part of the majority Burmans. Ever since the 1962 coup, however, there has been a constant fear that the military regime wishes to assimilate the ethnic minorities into the dominant Burmese speaking, Burman Buddhist culture. Despite the lip service paid to the country's 135 'national races' – including in the new constitution – the regime's aggressive approach to nation-building, and the way in which the Burman-dominated Tatmadaw has conducted its counter-insurgency campaigns, have served to reinforce this view.⁵⁷ As long as this perception persists, then there will be continued ethnic tensions and armed conflict.

Although some 28 ethnic militias and 'ceasefire groups' participated in the regime's constitutional convention, the 2008 charter did not satisfy any of their core demands, which ranged from a federal union to autonomous ethnic states. After 2010, there will be 14 state and regional assemblies, and six self-administering districts, which may ease some pressures. However, the future of such an arrangement is open to question. The provincial assemblies will be dominated by members loyal to the central government. Also, as Martin Smith has pointed out, there is an inherent contradiction between a highly centralised unitary state under military dominance and the allowance of selected local rights of self-governance for certain ethnic groups in a system of "illiberal democracy".⁵⁸

Some ethnic groups will probably strike deals with the regime to protect their political and business interests. Others are likely to be less accommodating. Faced with demands to disarm or form state-controlled militias, for example, some of the ceasefire groups may choose to return to open conflict.⁵⁹ A few, such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), are still large and powerful enough to pose serious security problems for the regime.⁶⁰ As doubtless envisaged by the original architects of the ceasefires, however, over the past 20 years most armed groups have become weaker.⁶¹ Should they need to do so, many ethnic nationality armies would find it difficult to resist a forceful and sustained campaign by the much larger and better armed Tatmadaw that has developed since 1988.

Any resurgence in the decades-old civil war in Burma would make progress on the political, economic and social fronts even more problematical. The greater Naypyidaw's concerns about internal unrest, and the more uncertain it is of the country's future unity and stability, the more cautious it is likely to be in introducing major reforms. Similarly, ethnic community leaders prepared to negotiate with the regime would find it harder to

maintain their credibility with their constituents and make deals acceptable to them during a period of active counter-insurgency campaigning, with its inevitable increases in human rights abuses, displaced populations and refugee flows.⁶²

For all these reasons, resolution of Burma's long-running ethnic tensions would appear to be a long way off.

The Regime's 'Mindset'

Despite countless references in the press, on websites and in academic papers – including this one – to the 'armed forces', the Tatmadaw is not an homogenous organisation, all members of which think and behave alike – although it observes military discipline and usually speaks with one voice. Even so, there is an identifiable mindset which characterises the armed forces of Burma, governs its perceptions and influences its behaviour.⁶³ This is constantly reinforced through peer pressure, training courses and indoctrination programs. Unless this mindset is taken fully into account, no assessments of Burma will be complete, nor can any policies formulated on the basis of such assessments be considered realistic.

Perhaps the most obvious component of this mindset is the regime's intense nationalism. Burma's military leadership has long been highly suspicious of foreigners and foreign influences. It has also been very sensitive about any matters that relate to Burma's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Drawing on the historical record, but prompted also by a number of developments since 1988, the SPDC perceives Burma as facing a number of serious external threats. These range from foreign-supported activist groups and hostile neighbours, to a full scale invasion of the country by the US or UN.⁶⁴ These perceptions have had – and will continue to have – a strong influence on the regime's policies and behaviour.

The Tatmadaw leadership also seems genuinely convinced that, without a strong central government, the Union would fragment along ethnic, religious and political lines. To its mind, the resulting 'chaos' would mean not only the loss of essential unity and social stability, but would leave Burma vulnerable to external interference, if not domination by foreign powers. Only the armed forces, the regime claims, can provide the organised, disciplined authority – with a strong and consistent ideology – that the country needs to survive.⁶⁵ This belief contributes to an abiding sense of insecurity that is manifested in a suspicion of plurality, a distrust of civilians, social conservatism, and a desire for control over all aspects of Burmese life.

Perhaps most importantly, as far as the international community is concerned, ever since 1988 Burma's leaders have conflated the armed forces, the government and the state. The unity and integrity of the Tatmadaw, the survival of the military government and the security of the country are thus seen as indivisible. A perceived threat to one is considered a threat to all, arousing strong feelings among the leadership at all levels. Add to this a strong sense of personal survival, and the result seems to be a determination to do whatever is felt necessary for the protection of the status quo, regardless of the cost in terms of domestic or international opinion.

The Cohesion of the Armed Forces

Ever since 1988, there have been periodic reports of ructions within the armed forces. There have been claims, for example, of tensions between members of the three Services, between graduates of different training institutions, between officers at headquarters and those in the field, between the entourages of particular senior commanders, and between factions purportedly favouring 'hard' or 'soft' policies towards the opposition movement or the international community. Following each major bout of civil unrest, there has usually been a spate of stories in the news media and on activist websites about rumoured protests in the ranks and impending palace coups against the senior leadership.⁶⁶ These sorts of reports are always very difficult to verify.

Personal rivalries and policy disagreements are not unusual in any large and diverse military organisation. It is also to be expected that the Tatmadaw will experience internal stresses from time to time. However, at no stage do such problems seem to have reached the level of seriously threatening the loyalty and cohesion of the armed forces as a whole. The factors that have united Burma's ruling elite have proven greater than those which have divided them. This is likely to remain so. The dismissal of Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt exposed tensions within the military hierarchy, but the fact that such a powerful figure could be removed, along with most members of the DDSI, without any apparent loss of state control demonstrated the regime's strength and resilience, not its weakness.

The issue of a split is a serious one, however, for in the absence of any other credible threat the only development which could seriously challenge the government's continuing grip on power is a major breakdown in military discipline. The regime knows this, and is haunted by memories of mutinies in the 1940s and 1950s. Over the past 50 years, Burma's military leaders have taken a wide range of measures to prevent another serious dispute arising within the Tatmadaw. For example, there are various indoctrination programs, and an elaborate system of rewards and punishments, to maintain the loyalty of the officer corps. There is also a pervasive internal surveillance apparatus to help detect and forestall any signs of serious dissent.

This system would make it difficult for a group of disgruntled 'Young Turks' to develop, as is occasionally suggested by popular pundits. Should there be a strong concordance of opinion among junior officers that the generals were ruining the country, a number of structural constraints would make it difficult for them to communicate and organise a concerted demonstration of disapproval, without being discovered.⁶⁷ Also, as Kyaw Yin Hlaing has pointed out, given the way the Tatmadaw is organised, monitored and operated in Burma, there is little chance that a Gorbachev-like figure will emerge, prepared to turn his back on the system which had nurtured and rewarded him.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Tatmadaw has been remarkably successful in regenerating itself over the years, largely by convincing the officer corps to maintain its support for the current system.

In any case, it is well understood within the Tatmadaw that, should the armed forces ever lose control of the country, all its members would potentially be exposed to retribution from the civilian population or international community. In fact, the 2008 constitution specifically states that no one can be held responsible under a penal law for any excesses committed prior to its approval.⁶⁹ Despite this clause, and occasional references to general amnesties, there have been enough public references to international commissions of enquiry and war crimes trials to make most Burmese officers realise that they if they do not hang together, they may end up hanging separately.⁷⁰ This fear encourages an added level of cohesion and loyalty, if not to particular personalities or policies, then at least to the idea of continued military rule.

5. Political Development and Stability after 2010

May we be spared the misfortunes that arise from a changing of kings.

Burmese proverb

If all goes according to plan, elections for both national and provincial assemblies will be held in Burma some time later this year – on 10 October 2010 (10–10–10) if the astrologists are to be believed.⁷¹ As noted above, the creation of an elaborate, multi-layered parliamentary system is aimed at consolidating and perpetuating military rule. However, as Ne Win found after he introduced a new constitution in 1974, such moves can have unintended consequences.

The post-2010 scenario favoured by most activists, commentators and academics is that, once its sham elections are held, and its faux parliamentary structure is in place, the armed forces leadership will continue to pursue its 'ongoing militarisation of civilian space', leading to a 'widening of the gulf between the military state and society [and] between military elite and civilians'.⁷² The controlled engagement of selected civilians in the new government structure will reduce social pressures while 'confirming the current power position of the military in state and society'.⁷³ At the same time, the regime will try to eliminate – or at least neutralise – all alternative sources of power and influence, including opposition political movements and ethnic minority organisations.

Based on the regime's behaviour to date, the clear aims of the 2008 constitution and the restrictive new electoral laws, such an outcome is quite possible – even likely. Yet, in a number of ways, the implementation of the new constitution will significantly alter Burma's political dynamic. In particular, the change from direct to indirect rule will mark an important shift in the way the Tatmadaw approaches the business of government. Some allowance must be made, therefore, for the possibility that not everything will proceed quite as the regime – and the opposition movement – envisages. As Morten Pedersen has observed, 'the Burmese generals would not be the first to underestimate the processes set in train by what began as closely managed reforms from above'.⁷⁴

After 2010, there will be many more centres of formal decision-making. In addition to the PH in Naypyidaw, there will be seven regional assemblies, seven state assemblies, plus five self-administered ethnically-designated zones and one self-administered ethnically designated division.⁷⁵ Yet, the relationships between all these entities are unclear. While reputedly one of the world's longest written constitutions, Burma's new charter is either incomplete or ambiguous on many matters. Naypyidaw will always be able to exercise its over-riding authority, but practical arrangements for interaction between the assemblies and the boundaries of their respective areas of responsibility are still to be worked out. Similarly, it is not clear how the provincial assemblies and ethnic zones will co-exist with the 13 Regional Military Commanders, who retain considerable independence and power.

Also, with the election of the bicameral PH, 14 provincial assemblies and six ethnic ruling councils, there will be many more participants in the formal political process, representing a much wider range of interests. The behaviour and voting patterns of the nominated military officers will presumably be along lines laid down by the government, but there will be others in the assemblies who could act more independently. Some USDA officials and former military officers, for example, may not be quite as pliant as everyone now imagines they will be. Also, there are bound to be some civilians, including

representatives of various ethnic communities, who will make a real effort to represent the interests of their constituents.

At the same time, the Tatmadaw itself will be going through a number of major changes. It is believed that Senior General Than Shwe is unwell and preparing to retire, possibly to become the President, or perhaps an advisor to the new government.⁷⁶ Over the next five years, several more senior generals will pass from the scene – although most will have no doubt ensured that they and their interests will be protected by protégés still in uniform. It has been suggested that thousands of other senior officers will be obliged to retire over the next six months. This is reportedly to make way for the next generation of aspiring generals – and through promotions to bind them closer to the regime – but also to provide a cadre of loyal ‘civilian’ candidates for the new national and regional assemblies.⁷⁷

In such a fluid environment, one cannot rule out a gradual diffusion of power between members of the armed forces and civilians, and between the central government and provincial assemblies. For example, while powerless at first, certain ceremonial and administrative positions may slowly accrete some real influence. To have any credibility the regional assemblies will need to be seen to exercise a degree of sovereign authority, even if it is only over parochial issues. Some analysts have suggested that such trends could slowly open up political space that will permit the evolution of a more effective and democratic government. Others have raised the possibility that there will develop greater scope for debate and compromise, and even some independent decision making.⁷⁸

There is unlikely to be much movement in that direction while Than Shwe, Maung Aye and their ilk remain influential – whether or not these older generals remain in uniform, retire or assume new civilian positions. They are too hard line and set in their ways to allow any weakening of the current controls. It is conceivable, however, that after they pass from the scene a new generation of younger leaders may gradually relax their grip. They are still unlikely to permit a truly representative civilian government to emerge but they may allow the assemblies more latitude. They may also be persuaded to introduce a number of economic reforms and to tolerate the gradual development of civil society. If any of this occurs, however, it will be a very slow process, and carefully monitored.

A few commentators have claimed that all these proposed and possible changes to Burma’s current system have caused widespread unease within the armed forces, including a fear that, for the first time since 1962, they will fall under civilian control.⁷⁹ If these reports are true, then they betray a misunderstanding of the new constitutional arrangements. Some feelings of uncertainty are to be expected during any period of transition, but there is no chance that the senior military leadership would knowingly allow control of the armed forces, or the government, to slip from its grasp. In the event of any perceived challenges to these institutions, or to Burma’s unity, stability and independence, the Tatmadaw would swiftly reassert its domination of Burmese society.

On current indications, the chances of there being such challenges are strong. The new constitution, the forthcoming elections and the subsequent creation of national and provincial assemblies all serve the regime’s purposes, but meet few of the population’s demands for fundamental reforms. Continuing economic hardships and human rights abuses will fuel existing political grievances and increase the potential for renewed civil unrest in Burma’s heartland. As seen in 2007, even the involvement of the sangha will not prevent the use of lethal force to quell any serious unrest. Unresolved ethnic problems and pressure on ceasefire groups to surrender their autonomy will add to tensions around the country’s periphery and, in some cases, make a return to open civil war a possibility.

Under such circumstances, the desire by members of the international community to play a role in Burma might increase, but the scope for them to do so will probably become even more limited than at present.

6. Prospects for International Influence

For some 20 years now, Western nations have been circling the walls of Myanmar (formerly Burma) blowing their trumpets. Regrettably, the walls have yet to crumble.

Morton Abramowitz and Jonathan Kolieb
A New Strategy on Myanmar (2008)

Ever since 1988, different states and international organisations have tried to influence the situation in Burma. Some, like the US and European Union members, have employed strong rhetoric, economic sanctions and other punitive measures, largely in an effort to precipitate regime change. Others, notably the ASEAN countries, have tried 'constructive engagement', in the hope that this would eventually lead to an amelioration of political and other conditions in Burma.⁸⁰ A third category of countries has seen strategic and economic benefits in getting close to the military government. From this favoured position, China at least has sought to persuade the generals to modify their policies – albeit mostly on issues which touch on Beijing's own interests.⁸¹

While the relative merits of these different approaches have been endlessly debated, it is self evident that none of the measures adopted since 1988 have been successful in removing the military regime, or persuading it to abandon any of its core positions. It has refused to transfer power to a democratically elected civilian government, or even to engage in a substantive dialogue with the opposition movement and ethnic communities. Indeed, as noted above, the regime is taking steps to ensure that real power remains in the hands of the Tatmadaw, at least for the foreseeable future. Nor has the regime improved its human rights record, released its political prisoners (including Aung San Suu Kyi) or introduced much needed economic reforms, as has repeatedly been demanded.

There are still some politicians and activists who remain convinced that harsher rhetoric and tougher punitive measures will eventually bring down Burma's military regime, or at least persuade it to mend its ways.⁸² After 20 years of resisting external pressures, however, Naypyidaw does not seem to fear criticism or the threat of increased sanctions. The global response to the 2007 civil unrest was unprecedented, but it also reminded the generals that the international community cannot agree on an approach to Burma, and has few policy options left. Some new initiatives being mooted, such as an international arms embargo, may be symbolically important but they are unlikely to have any real effect on the current balance of power in Burma.⁸³ This is well known to the regime.

Indeed, it can be argued that over the past 20 years the military regime has become even more obdurate and determined to resist external pressures. Given its mindset, this is hardly surprising. What is surprising is that so many members of the international community do not appear to have given greater thought to the impact of their policies in Burma, before implementing them. There have been many reasons why governments and international organisations have chosen to adopt the approaches they have, ranging from high principle to blatant self-interest. In some countries, domestic factors appear to be as important as broader concerns. Yet any policies that do not fully take into account the regime's worldview and its likely reactions are always going to be doomed to failure.

In any case, Burma occupies a critical geostrategic position and is rich in natural resources, including natural gas. The regime knows that it is unlikely to be abandoned by

Burma's security conscious and energy hungry neighbours, one of which is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The chances of Burma being expelled from ASEAN are equally remote.⁸⁴ Even if either event were to occur, the generals seem quite prepared to see Burma return to its pre-1988 isolation and poverty, if that was the price of remaining masters of the country's – and their own – destiny.

It is gradually becoming more widely accepted that there are few practical ways to influence a government that is convinced of its self-appointed role in national affairs, does not seem to care for the welfare of its own people, does not observe international norms and is protected by powerful friends. If this is the case, then the international community faces a seemingly intractable problem over Burma, one that argues for a fundamental re-evaluation of approaches being taken towards the regime. In considering fresh policy options, the logical place for any government to start would be a rigorously objective, value free assessment of the issues currently facing Burma. Bearing in mind the problems inherent in such an exercise, as outlined at the beginning of this paper, such a review would lend itself to five broad conclusions.

Firstly, the Tatmadaw is not going to simply give up government and return to the barracks. Despite the hopes of some pro-democracy campaigners, both in Burma and abroad, this was never on the cards. Nor, despite some sensationalist reports in the news media and on activist websites, are Burma's armed forces likely to implode, leaving the field free for the opposition movement to take over. Indeed, the harsh reality is that despite all the pressures it has faced over the past 20 years, from internal opposition forces and hard line foreign states, the regime has become progressively stronger. It still faces some serious problems but, considered against several criteria, the military government is now better off and more firmly entrenched in power than at any time since the abortive 1988 pro-democracy uprising – possibly even the 1962 coup.

Secondly, as long as the armed forces remain cohesive and loyal, and are prepared to use lethal force to retain power, then it is difficult to see how this state of affairs can be changed. There are currently no groups inside Burma – armed or otherwise – that have the strength or organisation to pose a real threat to the regime. Nor are there any groups outside Burma that are able to mount such a challenge. Gone are the days when some exiles saw themselves returning at the head of a conquering army.⁸⁵ Despite occasional rhetorical flourishes by foreign politicians – and the lurking fears of the regime – no country is going to launch an invasion against Burma to restore democracy. The military government could be in power, in one guise or another, for many years to come.

Thirdly, even if circumstances changed dramatically and a transition to a democratic government was possible, Burma's armed forces would still have to play a major role in the process – even if it was only a passive one. They are simply too large, too powerful and too deeply embedded in Burmese society, to leave out of such a process. They also command expertise and resources that would be sorely needed. This has been accepted by Aung San Suu Kyi, but remains a point of contention with some activists. Also, a successful transfer of power is less likely if the armed forces fear that they will face war crimes trials or other forms of retribution for their past transgressions. For many Burmese and foreign Burma watchers, however, the idea of an amnesty is hard to accept.⁸⁶

Fourthly, the ability of external actors to influence events in Burma is very limited. Foreign countries and international organisations can try to encourage – even facilitate, in some cases – dialogue and reconciliation between the armed forces, the opposition movement and the ethnic communities. Ultimately, however, political change in Burma can only be decided by the Burmese themselves, and within the country. Attempts by outsiders to force the issue can easily prove counter-productive. As noted above, the regime is intensely suspicious of any foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs. Also, close identification with particular opposition figures or groups can undercut their credibility as independent actors and expose them to charges of being a 'foreign stooge'.⁸⁷

Fifthly, while engaging with the Burmese government may be politically difficult – for some, even morally repugnant – there are compelling arguments to do so. Burma's geographical position between the nuclear armed giants of China and India, its shadowy relationship with pariah states like North Korea, and its influence on Asia's broader strategic environment, all mean that Burma is too important to be ignored. Also, it is a key factor in international programs to combat transnational problems such as narcotics trafficking, people smuggling, money laundering and the spread of communicable diseases.⁸⁸ Some analysts have suggested that Burma is also a factor in global efforts to stem religious extremism, the spread of ballistic missiles and even nuclear proliferation.⁸⁹

All these concerns are in addition to the pressing needs of the Burmese people themselves – both inside Burma and outside its borders. Although there are around 50 non-government organisations still operating in Burma, the regime has made the delivery of humanitarian aid very difficult. It imposes onerous conditions on providers, restricts access to those in greatest need (including the ethnic communities around the country's periphery) and siphons off foreign aid for its own benefit.⁹⁰ Formal contacts with the regime can be seen as granting it a legitimacy it does not deserve. Yet these may be the costs that the international community has to pay to help alleviate the suffering of the Burmese people. It is a price most of them would probably count as cheap, if it meant a significant improvement in their health, education and basic living conditions.⁹¹

As the US Secretary of State emphasised in 2009, following the announcement of the Obama Administration's new Burma policy, there are no quick or easy solutions to Burma's many problems.⁹² Achieving meaningful change will take time. The military government will make its own decisions, based on its own assessments, in its own time. A few friendly countries, like China, may be able to exercise some influence in Naypyidaw, but that should not be over-estimated. Countries like the US, which has a long record of hostility towards the military government, has imposed wide-ranging economic sanctions against it, funded groups dedicated to its overthrow, and openly supported opposition figures like Aung San Suu Kyi, start from a very difficult position in seeking to establish a productive working relationship with the generals.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the US at present is to formulate an effective engagement policy that remains focused on democratic reforms, but is also sustainable and convincing to a regime that has long perceived such concerns as a means to remove it from power. Clearly, much work lies ahead in crafting inducements that will lead to real change in Burma. The regime has expressed an interest in developing closer ties with the US, however, and presumably recognises that it will have to give up something in return. Yet it will remain highly distrustful of the US's intentions, and cautious about making any concessions that cannot be rescinded if circumstances change. This will inevitably prompt charges from hard line activists that the US is being manipulated, if not treated with contempt.

This process might be made easier if there was closer agreement among countries and international institutions on ways to respond to the many challenges posed by Burma. The 2007 unrest demonstrated that there were widely shared concerns about some developments in the country, even if there was no agreement on ways to tackle them. The US's closer embrace of ASEAN as a partner in its efforts to encourage reforms in Burma is a positive step.⁹³ ASEAN's policy of 'constructive engagement' has made few substantive gains but, by coordinating their Burma policies, the US and regional countries may be able to make greater progress. An expanded dialogue on Burma with China, India, Japan and other key players would also be beneficial over the longer term. Even so, the scope for international influence in Burma will remain limited.

As Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell has said, engagement with Burma will be a long, slow, and step-by-step process, requiring consistency and patience.⁹⁴

7. Conclusion

The surprise to me is not that there have been and will continue to be surprises, but that we are surprised that there are surprises. We don't, won't, and can't know everything.

Donald Rumsfeld
Report to the US Senate
7 October 1998

Most analysts studying Burma have found that it is difficult to look ahead without looking back. For, in many respects, Burma's modern history has helped shape the present and set in place structures and perceptions that will influence the future. Also, Burma's generals have long (albeit quite selective) memories and often invoke the past in justifying their policies, and their actions. This has contributed to a certain consistency in official thinking on a range of key issues. In other ways too, Burma seems to have changed little over the past 50 years. Even among experienced Burma-watchers, this apparent lack of movement has encouraged linear thinking and reduced the time spent by analysts in considering possible shifts in policy or direction.

The chances of civil-military relations in Burma changing dramatically over the next five years are slight, and they are not much better for the period 2015–20. Yet, unexpected events can occur and changes of policy can take place. Burma's armed forces are not, and never have been, the monolithic, uniformly incompetent and brutal military machine that is so often portrayed in newspapers and on activist websites. Nor, despite the common caricature, are its members all ignorant peasants concerned only with power and privileges. Analysts underestimate them at their peril. Also, since 1962, as the Tatmadaw has grown and developed, it has changed character. As it has done so, its relationship with the civilian population has become more complex. There is no reason why both will not continue to evolve.

The 2010 elections are not aimed at altering the fundamental relationship between the armed forces and the general population, nor does the new parliamentary structure contain within it any formula for the eventual transfer of power to a truly democratic administration. However, the decision to change the way Burma is governed may have unintended consequences. Nothing much is likely to happen while the current batch of military leaders remain influential, but the next generation may prove more flexible. They will want to see the armed forces remain the real arbiters of power in Burma, but in certain circumstances they may be prepared to let civil society develop, introduce some economic reforms and possibly even tolerate a measure of political plurality.

The scope for other countries and international organisations to influence this process is very limited. Even a new generation of generals is likely to be imbued with the same strong nationalistic mindset as its predecessors, and will be sensitive to any perceived foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs. The international community can assist by encouraging dialogue and reconciliation, and by making clear the kind of behaviour that the civilised world now expects of modern and responsible governments. It can also take practical steps to alleviate the suffering of the Burmese people, and to help them prepare for better times, for example through technical, educational and other capacity building programs. Care will need to be taken not to make the situation in Burma worse by ill-considered or poorly executed policies.

Real and lasting political change, however, can only come from the Burmese themselves, and from within Burma. All the current signs are that this will be a long and difficult process.

Notes

- 1 D.I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2001), p. xxv.
- 2 M.M. Lowenthal, 'The intelligence time event horizon', *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, vol. 22, no. 3, p. 381.
- 3 Andrew Selth, 'Modern Burma studies: a survey of the field', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2 (March 2010), pp. 401–40.
- 4 See, for example, D.I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What everyone needs to know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.
- 5 See, for example, Andrew Selth, 'Burma, China and the myth of military bases', *Asian Security*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2007), pp. 279–307.
- 6 One view of this problem can be found in Mac McClelland, *For Us Surrender is Out of the Question: A story from Burma's never-ending war* (Berkeley: Soft Skull, 2010), pp. 319–24.
- 7 Andrew Selth, 'Burma's "superstitious" leaders', *The Interpreter*, 22 October 2009, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/10/22/Burmas-superstitious-leaders.aspx>>.
- 8 Herb Meyer, former Special Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence, speaking in *Spies R Us: A history of the CIA*, Programme 1: 'The focus of evil', BBC Radio 4, 6 February 2003, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/cia_transcript1.pdf>.
- 9 Between 1962 and 1974, there were 64 military takeovers around the world, most of them entailing the overthrow of civilian governments. Only two of these military governments remain today: Libya, where Colonel Gaddafi seized power in 1969, and Burma, where the armed forces have been in power under various guises since 1962. See Bertil Lintner, 'A history of modern Burma and fiery dragons', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 April 2009, <<http://www.feer.com/reviews/2009/april51/a-history-of-modern-burma-and-fiery-dragons>>.
- 10 See, for example, R.H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (London: Hurst and Co., 1987).
- 11 One of the most comprehensive accounts of this period was *Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 popular protests in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, December 2007). See also *Burma/Myanmar: after the crackdown*, Asia Report No. 144 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 31 January 2008).
- 12 The *sangha* is the Buddhist order of monks. The number constantly fluctuates, but at any one time there are probably between 400,000 and 500,000 monks and novices in Burma. See M.P. Callahan, 'Myanmar's perpetual junta', *New Left Review*, vol. 60 (November–December 2009), p. 52.
- 13 This problem is well illustrated in M.P. Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, occupation and coexistence*, Policy Studies 31 (Washington, DC: East-West Centre, 2007).
- 14 Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, but about two thirds of the population claims to be ethnic Burman. Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma*, Policy Studies No. 36 (Washington, DC: East-West Centre, 2007), p. 8.
- 15 Christina Fink, *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving under military rule* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2009), pp. 153–70.
- 16 M.W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 133. See also M.P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and state building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 194–5.
- 17 L.W. Pye, 'The army in Burmese politics', in J.J. Johnson (ed.), *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 231–51. The caretaker government described its achievements in *Is Trust Vindicated? A chronicle of the various accomplishments of the Government headed by General Ne Win during the period of tenure from November, 1958 to February 6, 1960* (Rangoon: Director of Information, 1960).
- 18 Moshe Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernisation: Civil-military relations in Thailand and Burma* (London: Sage, 1976) p. 157.

- 19 For details of the disastrous demonetisation measures of 1964, 1985 and 1987, see Sean Turnell, *Fiery Dragons: Banks, moneylenders and microfinance in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009), pp. 237–40 and pp. 252–4.
- 20 The uprising is described from two different perspectives in Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (London: White Lotus, 1990); and Dr Maung Maung, *The 1988 uprising in Burma*, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph No. 49 (New Haven: Yale University, 1999).
- 21 Interviews, Rangoon, February 2008 and January 2009.
- 22 *Sold to be Soldiers: The recruitment and use of child soldiers in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2007). See also Fink, *Living Silence in Burma*, pp. 154–7.
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- 30 Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, Monograph No. 33 (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999), pp. 113–20.
- 31 At the heart of the regime's efforts to reinvent national identity, by rewriting Burmese history to promote the Tatmadaw, is the Committee for the Compilation of Authentic Data of Myanmar History. See Callahan, *Making Enemies*, pp. 214–17.
- 32 Martin Smith, 'Army politics as a historical legacy: the experience of Burma', in Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (eds), *Political Armies: The Military and Nation Building in the Age of Democracy* (London: Zed, 2002), p. 279.
- 33 D.I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), p. 100.
- 34 The actual size of the Tatmadaw has always been a mystery but, after expanding to about 400,000 in the late 1990s, it has probably declined to around 350,000. Selth, 'Known knowns and known unknowns', pp. 272–95.
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- 37 The regime tolerated the activities of many non-government organisations and community-based groups in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, but the atmosphere was still very constrained. See Kevin Hewison and Susanne Prager Nyein, 'Civil society and political oppositions in Burma', in Li Chenyang and Wilhelm Hofmeister (eds), *Myanmar: Prospect for Change* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2010), pp. 13–34.
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- 39 Susanne Prager Nyein, 'Expanding military, shrinking citizenry and the new constitution in Burma', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 39, no. 4 (November 2009), p. 639.
- 40 *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (Yangon: Ministry of Information, 2008), pp. 165–72. Importantly, the President (who appoints the Commander-in-Chief), the Vice Presidents and the National Defence and Security Council all remain in place to decide when it is safe to restore the elected government.
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- 43 Wai Moe, 'Burmese dissidents in exile challenge junta's UN seat', *The Irrawaddy*, 10 September 2008, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=14223>.
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- 45 Zaw Oo and Win Min, *Assessing Burma's Ceasefire Accords*, Policy Studies 39 (East-West Centre, Washington, DC, 2007), p. 47. See also *Myanmar Background: Ethnic Minority Politics* (International Crisis Group, Brussels, May 2003), p. 13.
- 46 Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for 14 of the past 20 years and thus unable to exercise effective leadership of the NLD. This has been left in the hands of a small group of elderly Executive Committee members, who have been reluctant to adopt any new policies without consulting her.
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- 48 Sean Turnell, 'Burma's insatiable state', *Asian Survey*, vol. 48, no. 6 (November–December 2008), pp. 958–76. See also Sean Turnell, 'Burma isn't broke', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 August 2009, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204313604574329181770155154.html>>.
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- 53 A number of these issues were alluded to during a press conference given by noted Burmese economist U Myint in Rangoon on 9 January 2010. See Htet Aung, 'A game of cat and mouse', *The Irrawaddy*, vol. 18, no. 2 (February 2010), <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17697>.
- 54 For evidence that such movement might be possible, see Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *Behind the Teak Curtain: Authoritarianism, Agricultural Policies and Political Legitimacy in Rural Burma/Myanmar* (London: Kegan Paul, 2004), pp. 212–26.

- 55 These issues are examined in *Current realities and future possibilities in Burma/Myanmar: options for US policy*, Asia Society Task Force Report (New York: The Asia Society, March 2010).
- 56 See also Wai Moe, 'Burma very high risk: the economist', *The Irrawaddy*, 30 December 2009, <http://www.irrawaddy.org:80/article.php?art_id=17509>.
- 57 See, for example, *Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics*.
- 58 Smith, quoting Tin Maung Maung Than, *State of Strife*, p. 51.
- 59 'Regime may outlaw UWSA', *The Irrawaddy*, 5 March 2010, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17967>.
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- 62 See, for example, Ashley South, 'Succession strategy', *The World Today*, vol. 66, no. 5 (May 2010), pp. 27–9, <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/files/16401_wt100527.pdf>.
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- 64 Andrew Selth, *Burma and the threat of invasion: Regime fantasy or strategic reality?*, Regional Outlook No. 17 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2008)
- 65 Some social scientists have acknowledged the weight of such claims. See, for example, Morris Janowitz, *The Military in the Political Development of New Nations: An Essay in Comparative Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); and S.E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). Also relevant is Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
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- 70 See, for example, Andrew Marshall, 'Putting Burma's junta on trial', *Time*, 7 August 2009, <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1915174,00.html>>; and Lawi Weng, 'Junta should go before ICC, Nobel Laureates tell Ban', *The Irrawaddy*, 6 March 2010, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=17969>
- 71 Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, *Burma Bulletin*, Bangkok, January 2010, p. 3, <<http://www.altsean.org/Docs/PDF%20Format/Burma%20Bulletin/January%202010%20Burma%20Bulletin.pdf>>.
- 72 Nyein, 'Expanding military, shrinking citizenry and the new constitution in Burma', p. 647. See also Htet Aung, 'Burma's new constitution privileges soldiers above civilians', *The Irrawaddy*, 7 September 2009, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=16727>.
- 73 Nyein, 'Expanding military, shrinking citizenry and the new constitution in Burma', p. 647.
- 74 Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma*, p. 237.
- 75 These will be designated the Naga, Danu, Pa-O, Palaung, Kokang and Wa self-administered zones. Naypyidaw itself will constitute a Union territory. For a detailed

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 - 78 See, for example, Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma*, p. 237; Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Setting the rules for survival', pp. 287–90; and *Myanmar: toward the elections*, Asia Report No. 174 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 2009). See also Graham Reilly, 'Ray of hope in Burma's sham election', *The Age*, 18 March 2010, <<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/ray-of-hope-in-burmas-sham-election-20100317-qfj1.html>>.
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 - 85 'Spring postponed', *The Economist*, 10 April 2008, <http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=11011992>.
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- 92 'Clinton says no new conditions for Myanmar', *CBS News*, 11 November 2009, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/11/11/world/main5611639.shtml>>.
- 93 In 2009, Washington signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a step the Bush Administration refused to take, largely because of Burma's ASEAN membership.
- 94 'US policy towards Burma', Testimony of Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State, before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, DC, 30 September 2009, <<http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2009/CampbellTestimony090930p.pdf>>. See also Aye Chan Naing, 'Kurt Campbell: "no change in Burma"', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 8 March 2010, <<http://www.dvb.no/interview/kurt-campbell-no-change-in-burma/>>.