



Myanmar's military mindset: An exploratory survey

Andrew Selth

MYANMAR'S MILITARY MINDSET: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY

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'Myanmar's military mindset: An exploratory survey'

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There are many strategies for influencing other actors in the international arena ... Each strategy is much more likely to be effective, and all diplomacy is better served, if informed by a sound model of the adversary's behavioural style and patterns of action. A correct image of other leaders requires understanding of their personal and political development and early life experiences that shaped their self-image, values and motivations. Special attention is needed to grasp the effects of mentors and role models. Personality analysis must be integrated with how a leader and leadership group have been shaped by historical events and memories and specific cultural influences in their political socialisation.

Jerrold M. Post
Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World
(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANU	Australian National University
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BSI	Bureau of Special Investigation
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CRS	Congressional Research Service
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
DSA	Defence Services Academy
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisations
GAD	General Administration Department
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IIFMM	Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar
KMT	<i>Kuomintang</i> (National People's Party)
MEC	Myanmar Economic Corporation
MEHL	Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd
MIS	Military Intelligence Service
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MPF	Myanmar Police Force
NDC	National Defence College
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
NUP	National Unity Party
OCMI	Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence
OCMSA	Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs
OR	Other Ranks
OTC	Officer Training Course
OTS	Defence Services (Army) Officer Training School
OWI	Office of War Information
PDF	People's Defence Force
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SAC	State Administration Council
SB	Special Branch
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
US	United States (of America)
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

GLOSSARY

<i>Bo Gyoke</i>	Major General
<i>Bo Gyoke Hmu Gyi</i>	Senior General
<i>Bo Gyoke Kyee</i>	General
<i>Bo Hmu Gyi</i>	Colonel
<i>Bo Hmu Gyoke</i>	Brigadier General
<i>Du Bo</i>	Second Lieutenant
<i>Du Bo Gyoke Hmu Gyi</i>	Vice Senior General
<i>karma</i>	spiritual doctrine of cause and effect
<i>longyi</i>	traditional sarong-like garment
<i>Ma Ba Tha</i>	Committee to Protect Race and Religion
<i>modus operandi</i>	way of doing things
<i>noms-de guerre</i>	war names
<i>persona non grata</i>	person not welcome
<i>pongyi</i>	Buddhist monk
<i>Pyidaungsu Hluttaw</i>	Assembly of the Union
<i>Pyidawtha</i>	happy (and prosperous) land
<i>sangha</i>	Buddhist “monkhood”
<i>saya</i>	teacher or elder
<i>Sayadaw</i>	Buddhist abbot or senior monk
<i>status quo ante</i>	previously existing state of affairs
<i>tapyit</i>	pupil or acolyte
<i>Tatmadaw</i>	armed forces
<i>terra incognita</i>	unknown or unexplored territory
<i>Teza</i>	Officer Training Course
<i>yadaya</i>	magical rituals to prevent, neutralise or delay misfortune

NAMES, TITLES AND TERMS

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country'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 Myanmar 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", or *Pyidaungsu Myanmar Naing-Ngan*, which had long been the vernacular version (in the literary register, at least). In the formal declaration of the country's independence, for example, it was called the Union of Burma in the English version of the key document and the Union of Myanmar (or "Myanma") in the Burmese version. In 2011, after formal promulgation of the 2008 national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the "Republic of the Union of Myanmar".

Also, in July 1989 a number of other place names were changed by the then military government to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Burmese language. For example, Arakan State became Rakhine State and Tenasserim Division became Tanintharyi Division (later Tanintharyi Region). The Mergui Archipelago became the Myeik Archipelago, the Irrawaddy River became the Ayeyarwady River and the Salween River became the Thanlwin River. The city of Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein became Mawlamyine, Akyab became Sittwe and Maymyo became Pyin Oo Lwin. The ethno-linguistic groups formerly known as the Burmans and the Karen are now called the Bamar and the Kayin.¹ The people of Kayah State are widely known as Karenni, the state's name until it was changed by the Burmese government in 1952.²

The new names were accepted by most countries, the United Nations (UN) and other major international organisations. A few governments, activist groups and news media outlets, however, still cling to "Burma" as the name of the country, apparently as a protest against the former military regime's refusal to put the question of a change to the people of Myanmar.³ The old name was also believed to be the preference of then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who

was held under house arrest by the military regime for periods totaling almost 15 years.⁴ Questioned about the official name of the country soon after her party took office in 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi stated her continuing preference for the colonial-era term "Burma" but said that both names were now acceptable.⁵

After the UK dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then called) in December 1885, Yangon (then known as Rangoon) was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in November 2005 the ruling military council formally designated the newly-built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 327 kilometres (203 miles) north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government.⁶ The terms "Rangoon regime", "Yangon regime", or in some cases simply "Rangoon" or "Yangon", have often been used by authors and commentators as shorthand terms for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1974, 1988 and 1997. The various governments installed after 2005 were sometimes referred to as the "Naypyidaw regime", or "Naypyidaw", to reflect the administrative change that took place that year. The day after the 1 February 2021 military coup, the armed forces created a new State Administration Council (SAC), based in Naypyidaw. On 1 August, the junta declared that the SAC had become a "Caretaker Government".⁷

Another common term is *Tatmadaw*. It is usually translated as "royal force", but the honorific "daw" no longer refers to the monarchy. Since 1948, the name has been the vernacular term for Myanmar's tri-service (army, navy and air force) armed forces. In recent years, it has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. Sometimes, the Tatmadaw is referred to simply as "the army", reflecting that service arm's overwhelming size and influence, compared with the other two. While the term "Defence Services" usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer collectively to the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force (MPF), the "people's militia" and sundry other state-endorsed paramilitary forces. The

country's three main intelligence agencies are thus also included. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category. As the 2008 constitution decrees that "all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services", the formal title of the Tatmadaw's most senior officer is Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services.⁸

Over the years, some components of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus have changed their formal titles several times. The military intelligence organization, for example, has periodically been renamed, usually to coincide with structural changes in the armed forces. These adjustments have not always been known to, or recognized by, foreign observers. Also, Burmese language titles have been translated into English in different ways. The use of popular names has added another complication. For example, ever since 1948 the Tatmadaw's intelligence arm has been widely known as the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), or simply the "MI" ("em-eye"). Similarly, the Police Force's Special Intelligence Department (or, strictly translated, the "Information Police"), has long been known as Special Branch, or "SB". All this has meant that in the literature some agencies have been called by several different names, and not always accurately.⁹

These organisations give rise to a number of other descriptors that need to be explained. The collective terms "security forces" and "security apparatus" include the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force and the country's three main intelligence agencies, namely the Tatmadaw's Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA), the MPF's Special Branch and the Ministry of Home Affairs' Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI). Together, all these organisations constitute the state's "coercive apparatus". Under various military governments, that term has sometimes included other bodies, like the MPF's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and the General Administration Department (GAD). Both have been used to help monitor the civilian population and enforce compliance with various laws and regulations.¹⁰ The Tatmadaw's "senior officer corps" is taken to include those commissioned officers, from all three services (army, navy and air force), who are at one star rank (ie army and air force Brigadier General and navy Commodore, NATO Code OF-6) or above. The "officer corps" includes all commissioned officers in the armed forces, from Second Lieutenant and Sub-Lieutenant (NATO Code OF-1) up to Senior General (NATO Code OF-10).¹¹

All Burmese personal names are particular. Most people do not have surnames or forenames.¹² Names may be one to four syllables long, and are usually chosen depending on the day of the week that a child is born (which is why many people in Myanmar share the same names). Also, among the majority Bamar ethnic group names are usually preceded by an honorific, such as "U", meaning "uncle", or "Daw", meaning "aunt". "U" can also form a part of a man's name, as in U Tin U. The titles "Maung", "Ko" ("brother") and "Ma" ("sister"), usually given to young men and women, are also found in personal names, as in Maung Maung Aye, Ko Ko Gyi and Ma Ma Lay. "Maung" is sometimes adopted by respected figures as a gesture of modesty, as in the name of the author and scholar Maung Htin Aung. To all such rules, however, there are exceptions. Some of Myanmar's ethnic minorities, like the Kachin, have family or clan names, which are placed before their given names, as in cases like Maran Brang Seng, where "Maran" is the name of a clan.¹³ Most ethnic minorities, like the Shan, Kachin, Karen and Chin, have their own systems of honorifics.

In Myanmar, names can be changed relatively easily, often without seeking official permission or registration. This situation is further complicated by the frequent use of nicknames and other sobriquets as identifiers, such as "Myanaung" (the town) U Tin, "Tekkatho" (university) Phone Naing, or "Guardian" (the magazine) Sein Win. Pen-names, *noms-de guerre* and pseudonyms also have a long history in Myanmar.¹⁴ For example, the birth name of General Ne Win, who effectively ruled the country from 1962 to 1988, was Shu Maung. "Ne Win", which means "bright sun" in Burmese, was a nom de guerre he adopted in 1941, and retained after the war.¹⁵ Some Myanmar citizens were given or have adopted Western names, including those who attended Christian missionary schools in their youth. Others use only one part of their name for convenience, for example when travelling abroad or dealing with foreigners. It is not uncommon for an obituary to list more than one name by which the deceased was known.

In this research paper, the country has been called "Myanmar", which has been its formal name since 1989. The old name "Burma" has been used, however, when it appears in direct quotations or citations. Myanmar's population and national language are both called "Burmese" ("Myanmar" has no adjective). The dominant ethnic group, once called "Burmans", is here described as "Bamar", in keeping with modern practice.

INTRODUCTION

[The] reader should be warned that if he [or she] tends to get upset, agitated, and disgusted by attempts to relate political developments to personality structure and childhood experiences, then maybe it would be the better part of wisdom for him [or her] to pass up reading this report.

Lucian W Pye
The Spirit of Burmese Politics
(Cambridge: Centre for International Studies, MIT, 1959)

Between 1988, when a pro-democracy uprising in Myanmar was crushed by the country's security forces, and the installation of a quasi-civilian government in 2011, there was a lively and sometimes acrimonious public debate between those officials, academics and activists who favoured international sanctions against the military regime, and those who believed that external pressures of that kind were largely counter-productive.¹⁶ Despite their radically different approaches, the stated aim of both sides was to bring the generals to the negotiating table, or at least to persuade them to reconsider their brutal, narrow and unproductive policies. The same debate, accompanied by the same strong emotions, has arisen since the military coup of 1 February 2021. Those advocating tough measures are bitterly opposed to the more measured approach of the "ASEAN family", among others, who favour "consensus" and a dialogue with the State Administration Council (SAC), now known as the "Caretaker Government", in Naypyidaw.¹⁷ For all the ink spilt on this subject over the years, however, neither side has put forward a very persuasive case although, in arguing for their respective positions, both have stated that they are supported by historical precedents. For example, despite the lack of hard evidence, both sides claim that their policies eventually led to the 2011 transfer of power.¹⁸

One key point on which there is agreement, both in the past as more recently, is the central role of Myanmar's armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*). Despite the current public focus on the pro-democracy movement and its struggles against the new junta, most observers recognise that progress towards a freer, fairer, stable and more prosperous society

in Myanmar ultimately depends on the degree to which the most senior members of the *Tatmadaw* can be persuaded to change their attitudes to critical questions of governance, human rights, societal development and international relations. For, like it or not, the military leadership is the essential arbiter of Myanmar's future. The armed forces have long been, and remain, the most powerful institution in Myanmar. As Robert Taylor once wrote, "only the army can end its own role in Myanmar's politics", and in February 2021 the generals showed that they were determined to retain effective control over national life, regardless of the cost, human and otherwise.¹⁹ Of course, other factors need to be taken into account, but it is now largely up to them whether the country steps back from the abyss, or becomes an isolated, bitterly divided and broken-backed authoritarian state, populated by "legions of dirt-poor, uneducated, ill-fed and sickly people".²⁰

In this regard, most objective observers accept that fundamental changes to Myanmar must come from within Myanmar in accordance with, and taking full account of, the country's complex internal dynamics. That is not to dismiss a role for foreign governments and international organisations, but history has shown that the ability of external actors to influence domestic developments (short of military intervention, which has always been highly unlikely), is very limited.²¹ There are several causes for this, but one persistent problem has been the refusal of Myanmar's military leadership to observe, and to act in accordance with, internationally accepted and formally mandated norms of behaviour. As former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans has written, the generals "make and play by their own rules".²²

For reasons that are not always clear, they have been remarkably resistant to approaches from foreign governments and international organisations. The usual diplomatic carrots and sticks appear to have no appreciable effect, except perhaps to make the generals even more determined to make up their own minds and decide Myanmar's fate according to their own lights.

This raises many questions. For example, how do foreign governments, international organisations and other external actors treat with Myanmar's new military regime? Is there a distinctive Burmese character or identifiable strategic culture that needs to be recognised? Are there clues in Myanmar's history that can throw light on the generals' behaviour? What specific factors need to be taken into account by foreign interlocutors to win a seat at the negotiating table, if not gain the ear of the Tatmadaw's Commander-in-Chief? How can outsiders identify the pressure points within Myanmar's opaque military system, choose the most appropriate policy levers, and then apply them in a focussed and discriminating way? How do those outside the country, concerned about internal developments and their external implications, persuade the Tatmadaw's leadership to adopt different policies and practices? How do they engage with the new Caretaker Government in critical areas, such as the provision of humanitarian assistance to the general population?²³ How might such aid be delivered?

There are no simple or easy answers to these questions. However, an obvious first step would be to try and understand the mindset of the military leadership, to learn how the generals view themselves, the Tatmadaw's national role and the country, and how they perceive Myanmar's place in the world. The many failed attempts since 1988, to persuade successive military regimes to take greater account of the international community's concerns,

would seem to demand a better informed and more nuanced approach. This is most certainly not to argue that the international community should overlook the appalling behaviour displayed by the SAC and previous military regimes, nor its impact on the civilian population, in whole or in part.²⁴ However, a greater effort to appreciate the generals' worldview and the Tatmadaw's strategic concerns would seem to be a sensible starting point in trying to ameliorate the current crisis. Even then, there can be no guarantee of success. History has made that clear. Through a better understanding of what makes the generals "tick", however, and a greater awareness of the intangible factors that seem to influence political and military life in Myanmar, there is at least the potential for more productive discussions and more beneficial outcomes than those seen to date.

To explore these ideas, and inspired by the work of CIA profiler Jerrold Post, this survey has been structured as follows.²⁵ First, to set the scene and emphasise the difficulties of studying the Tatmadaw, both inside and outside Myanmar, there is a summary of the research environment. There are then two chapters that look briefly at the sometimes heated public debates that have taken place over Myanmar's supposed "national character" and its perceived "strategic culture". These chapters provide a broad framework for the more detailed discussion that follows, looking at the many diverse factors that appear to make up the mental landscape of the Tatmadaw's senior officer corps. This chapter is divided into sections on personal issues, institutional considerations and national concerns, the better to understand the different levels at which Myanmar's military leaders seem to perceive and manage important questions relating to themselves, the armed forces and the country. After that, a chapter draws together all these matters and makes a number of observations regarding possible future contacts with the junta. The paper ends with a few broad conclusions.



Chapter One

THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Put simply, Burma [Myanmar] is an enigma, and the scholars who study this country and its traditions face great challenges.

RA Morse and HL Loerke (eds)
Glimpses of the White Elephant: International Perspectives on the Study of Burma
(Washington DC: The Wilson Centre, 1987)

As the former CIA official Herb Meyer once observed, figuring out how national leaders think and what drives their decisions is one of the most essential tasks faced by strategic intelligence analysts and policy advisors. It is also one of the most difficult.²⁶ In this regard, investigating the formative influences, life experiences, core beliefs, cognitive processes and unconscious biases of the Tatmadaw's senior officer corps is a daunting task. Over the years, many have tried but few have managed to satisfy the requirements of either scholarship or policy advice.²⁷ There are many reasons for this, but one of the most basic is the difficulty of conducting in-depth research about the Tatmadaw, either inside the country or outside it. It has long been the most powerful institution in Myanmar, directing the country's national affairs for more than half a century, but even now it remains little known and poorly understood.²⁸

Governments in Myanmar have always been suspicious of foreign researchers, particularly if they wished to study subjects relating to national security, a term accorded a wide meaning. As a result, opportunities for field research have been limited. Before 1988, most observers were forced to rely heavily on gossip and rumours, often resulting in inaccurate and confusing reports.²⁹ It was possible to gain a sense of the popular mood, but such impressions could rarely be supported by hard data. The views of some sectors of the population, notably military personnel, were a closed book. Civil servants lived in fear of saying the wrong thing. The public statements of national figures were useful, but were invariably coloured by their political positions and personal circumstances. After the National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power in 2016, opinion polls could be held, and some gave useful snapshots of selected issues.³⁰ Also, in the more open atmosphere that then prevailed, officials, businessmen and others were happier to be interviewed. However, without a large sample it was difficult to tell how representative their views were. Servicemen and women were still forbidden to speak to foreign researchers, although a number were able to share confidences with trusted

contacts, usually in the context of consultancies and training courses. In the wake of the 2021 coup the attitudes and aspirations of most Burmese seem reasonably clear but, as always in Myanmar, there are many different voices clamouring to be heard.³¹

Documentary sources offer another avenue for research but, once again, there are traps for the unwary. It is possible to piece together a picture of Myanmar's security apparatus by sedulously sifting through the open source literature, but considerable care needs to be taken in drawing any firm conclusions.³² For example, relatively few foreign scholars or journalists can speak or read Burmese, making it difficult for them to collect and assess primary source material. Restrictions are gradually being eased, but for many years access to the national archives was rarely granted, even for vetted foreign academics and Burmese researchers considered politically reliable.³³ The files on subjects deemed sensitive, including those relating to past coups and military operations, are still withheld from release.³⁴ Official publications need to be treated with caution but can still be useful. The government's propaganda is often crude, but occasionally quite revealing.³⁵ Under the NLD government, independent newspapers and magazines flourished, and they often reported on security matters, but these too need to be approached carefully. Apart from the usual problems of personal and political biases, reporting standards were not always very high and some reports were quite misleading.³⁶

There have been other problems. The Tatmadaw has always been a very secretive organisation, with sensitive information kept within special security compartments. Harsh penalties have been imposed on any of its members who leaked confidential documents or divulged classified information. Some have even been condemned to death.³⁷ Also, public statements and official statistics, on subjects like counter-insurgency operations and annual defence expenditures, cannot be taken at face value.³⁸ Reports about a military government's internal

deliberations, factional fights within the senior officer corps or the private thinking of particular generals, while occasionally well-sourced, can rarely be verified.³⁹ Descriptions of “hard-liners” and “soft-liners” can be misleading. Without supporting evidence, such stories must be considered anecdotal and, as the saying goes, the plural of anecdote is not data. Often, such reports prove to be inaccurate or unrepresentative of the wider organisation. The Yangon and Naypyidaw rumour mills, on which foreign observers (including resident Defence Attaches) seem to base many of their assessments, are notorious for their unreliability.

In these circumstances, it is little wonder that, despite the flood of articles, research papers and books about Myanmar published since the 1988 uprising, there have been few comprehensive and well-researched works (in English) about the armed forces.⁴⁰ That said, there have been a few developments over the past decade that have benefited researchers interested in Myanmar’s security. Before the 2021 coup, for example, the Myanmar Police Force (MPF) was relatively open to foreign observers, as Aung San Suu Kyi’s quasi-civilian government tried to “civilianise” the country’s security.⁴¹ The armed forces also encouraged wider contacts, as it pursued military-military relations with other countries. This initiative was largely in response to Commander-in-Chief Senior General (*Bo Gyoke Hmu Gyi*) Min Aung Hlaing’s stated wish for the Tatmadaw to become more professional, more capable and more respected, or what President Thein Sein described in 2011 as “a world class Tatmadaw”.⁴² However, these contacts were all carefully managed and smacked more of defence diplomacy than a serious attempt to share information and views.⁴³ Occasional glimpses behind the scenes, for example in connection to arms sales or technology transfers, have rarely, if ever, given observers the full picture.

There are three specific sources of information about the Tatmadaw and its members which also deserve to be mentioned. The first is deserters. To date, most have been low-ranked soldiers and relatively junior officers, but they can offer insights into the daily lives of service personnel and confirm stories heard elsewhere about such subjects as training regimes, indoctrination programs and codes of conduct.⁴⁴ The second source is defectors.⁴⁵ They tend to be better educated and higher in rank than deserters, and thus in a better position to provide information about the organisation of the Tatmadaw, its policies and,

occasionally, its secret programs and foreign ties.⁴⁶ Both deserters and defectors need to justify their past military service, however, and in doing so often cater to the expectations of those offering them refuge. Their comments thus need to be taken with a pinch of salt.⁴⁷ However, even after allowances are made for self-serving testimony, they can be quite useful. The third source of information is the memoirs of former military personnel. In recent years, several books have been published in Myanmar by retired Tatmadaw officers, giving accounts of their lives in uniform. Most have been self-serving, and cautiously worded to avoid revealing anything considered sensitive, but some of these works offer interesting facts and new perspectives.⁴⁸

As a result of all these problems, critical aspects of the Tatmadaw, including its strategic planning processes, orders of battle, manpower levels, annual budgets and combat capabilities, have remained largely unknown.⁴⁹ Even foreign agencies with access to privileged information have described Myanmar’s armed forces as an intelligence “black hole”.⁵⁰

Ironically, the lack of hard data about the Tatmadaw seems at times to be in inverse proportion to the number of journalists and popular pundits who feel qualified to write about it, and to make bold pronouncements about its leadership, internal politics and operations. Much of this product is based on anecdotes, rumours and speculation. It should therefore be treated carefully. Also, for obvious reasons, Myanmar’s security forces arouse strong feelings on the part of some commentators, leading at times to biased, emotive or misleading reports. Particularly since the 1 February 2021 coup, there has been a flood of tendentious reporting on the armed forces that is notable more for its tone of moral outrage and strident policy prescriptions than for disinterested, evidence-based analysis. That said, over the years some useful contributions have been added to the public record by well-informed and objective observers. By drawing on their research, it is possible to make some general observations about the Tatmadaw and its relations with other parts of the state’s coercive apparatus. Albeit based on incomplete data and informed guesswork, they can throw some light on the way that members of the armed forces think, and may help outsiders to understand their policies and conduct.

In this regard, the Rohingya crisis of 2016–2017 and the 2021 coup have aroused greater interest in the Tatmadaw on the part of the international

community.⁵¹ In recent years, unprecedented resources have been devoted to investigating the Tatmadaw's structure, command and control systems, economic interests and *modus operandi*.⁵² There have also been attempts to catalogue its weapons holdings and trace their origins.⁵³ A greater effort is being made by the UN and independent groups to calculate casualty figures.⁵⁴ To a lesser extent, this heightened interest in the Tatmadaw has also prompted a closer look at its personnel, and the compilation of data on members of the military hierarchy.⁵⁵ The latter efforts have resulted in some useful portraits of key individuals.⁵⁶ For example, a "preliminary survey" titled "Min Aung Hlaing and his Generals", and released by Singapore's ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in July 2021, was:

... grounded in a belief that understanding as thoroughly as possible both the composition of the regime and the shared experiences of its leading members is crucial to thinking about its internal dynamics.⁵⁷

The survey was very helpful in drawing together personal details scattered across many open sources. However, it was still difficult to compile base-line biographical data on the military members of the SAC, despite their prominence and seniority.⁵⁸

Myanmar society has long been marked by dominant personalities. It relies on personal contacts and clientelism to facilitate exchanges of all kinds. However, as the authors of the recent ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute study found, there is surprisingly little information publicly available about the individual officers who exercise such a profound influence on the country.⁵⁹ The armed forces routinely announce promotions and postings, and senior officers are often mentioned in state-run news media outlets. Also, highly-ranked officials are usually named in the course of performing various public duties, such as opening bridges and dams, making donations to pagodas and receiving foreign dignitaries. By monitoring such sources, it is possible for Myanmar-watchers to map the broad career paths of many senior officers. However, material of a personal nature is rarely divulged. (One notable exception is the biographical material provided for military delegates to the national parliament).⁶⁰ This makes it very difficult to

gain insights into the private lives of key personnel. For example, the ancestry and personal interests of officers' spouses and adult children can give important clues to their political attitudes, financial interests and intramural allegiances. Some of these details can be gleaned from gossip and anecdotal sources but, once again, they cannot be relied upon.

Even if the research environment in Myanmar was more congenial, and there was more reliable information available, foreign observers would still attempt to analyse the mindset of the military hierarchy at their peril. The analysis of individual personalities and group dynamics are inexact sciences known for their inconclusive academic debates. Attempts to relate culture to national politics have also been controversial.⁶¹ Some studies that specifically look at modern Myanmar have not been very helpful. A recent psychological profile of the SAC, for example, seems to be based mainly on personal impressions and unconfirmed reports in the news media. It offers little that is new beyond passing references to the junta's "social dominance orientation".⁶² Many of its observations are banal, for example that the military regime is characterised by "outbursts of extreme brutality" and needs to be replaced with a leadership able to exhibit "socialised power".⁶³ The relative passivity of the Burmese people in the face of decades of repression was said to be due to the "prevailing belief system", namely Buddhism.⁶⁴ Such simplistic explanations fail to take into account many important factors.

Despite all these problems and potential pitfalls, it is important that an attempt is made to identify the ideological foundations of the armed forces and to investigate the formative influences and life experiences that have helped shape the thinking of Myanmar's military leaders. For, as the US diplomat Donald Jameson wrote two decades ago, they have "a unique, highly idiosyncratic perspective on the world and their place in it".⁶⁵ This worldview translates into official policies with real consequences. Also, as foreign governments know from bitter experience, any approaches made to the government of Myanmar that are ignorant of the country's history and fail to take into account the Tatmadaw's peculiar mindset, are bound to fail.



Chapter Two

MYANMAR'S “NATIONAL CHARACTER”

One level is characterised by gentleness, religiosity and a compelling need to elucidate the qualities of virtue. The other is characterised by violence, malicious scheming and devious thinking.

Lucian W Pye
Politics, Personality and Nation Building: Burma's Search for Identity
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969)

Before any attempt is made to examine the mindset of the Tatmadaw's leaders, a word needs to be said about the country's so-called "national character" or "identity". This is not the place for a discussion of the long-running debate surrounding this controversial topic, but it needs to be acknowledged that the current crop of generals, including those now holding positions in the Caretaker Government, have not developed their thinking in a vacuum. They have grown up within a social and cultural milieu that arguably affects the way that they now look at themselves, the armed forces and the outside world. After all, they were Burmese well before they became military officers and probably share certain conceptions with their compatriots in different occupations. The training and indoctrination they received after joining the armed forces has doubtless modified their attitudes and worldview but, even if only at a subliminal level, the socialisation process they experienced before they enlisted must still exercise an influence upon them. Just how it might do so is explored in a later chapter, but it might be helpful first to make some remarks about the broader subject and provide some context.

Ever since Westerners first made contact with Myanmar (then known as Burma) in the 15th century, they have attempted to describe the nature of its people. These views have ranged between extremes, reflecting contemporary mores, prevailing beliefs and personal experiences. A study made in 1943, based on the English language literature then available, stated that "all writers on Burma make judgements on the Burmese character", but noted that they were varied and often contradictory.⁶⁶ To illustrate his point, the author of the study offered a sample of the epithets that had been applied to the Burmese people over the centuries. These included: "clean and fastidious", "intensely individualistic", "hot tempered", "cowardly", "brave", "treacherous and unreliable", "charming and kindly", "excessively credulous", "fickle", "light-hearted and buoyant", "vain and pompous", "temperate", "abstemious", "delightful manners and unfailing courtesy", "cruel and vindictive", "deadly when he's aroused" and "the most attractive people in the

whole British Empire".⁶⁷ Given the enormous range of opinions expressed by observers and commentators even up to that point, it is difficult to see how anyone could claim that there was such a thing as a Burmese "national character".⁶⁸

During the Second World War, however, a picture of Myanmar's "personality" was required for planning purposes. In 1943 Geoffrey Gorer, working in the US Office of War Information (OWI), used Freudian psychoanalytic techniques to ascribe perceived Burmese characteristics to social and cultural patterns. He felt that the secret to understanding the inner nature of a population was through its child-rearing practices, in particular traumatic experiences of infant toilet training, or "training in the control of the sphincters".⁶⁹ After 1945, there was a growth in such intellectual exercises, as more resources were devoted to area studies, the better to determine strategies during the Cold War. Mainly in the US, scholars used personality profiles to try and explain the political behaviour of complex societies.⁷⁰ Inevitably, this trend provoked both friendly and hostile reactions, often derived from the Eurocentric nature of the works produced.⁷¹ However, as the works of Myanmar-watchers like Melford Spiro and Lucian Pye demonstrated, for a period such ideas enjoyed some currency.⁷² These and other scholars attempted to identify and analyse the cultural norms and personal beliefs that lay behind political developments in Myanmar.⁷³ They also drew a number of broad conclusions about the country's supposed "national character" and "identity".

To modern audiences, the results of these studies can be quite shocking. For example, Gorer's 1943 report for the OWI concluded that the "fundamental Burmese character was founded on the factual and psychological dominance of women".⁷⁴ Burmese men were considered weak and unreliable. It was also claimed that they took pleasure in cruelty and enjoyed "the ecstasy of violence".⁷⁵ In 1948, a prominent US anthropologist supported Gorer's claim that "the Burmese are relatively touchy, proud, theatrical,

and violent”.⁷⁶ He felt that “In public station they are irresponsible and capricious”.⁷⁷ For his part, Melford Spiro wrote that the insurgencies, communal violence, crime and political factionalism seen in Myanmar during the 1960s and 1970s were “symptomatic of a disposition to hostility that is found in the Burmese male personality”.⁷⁸ Lucian Pye too supported the contention that “the emotional instabilities of the early socialisation process leave Burmese males insecure and anxious to attract attention to themselves, but fearful of any serious tests of efficacy”.⁷⁹ In an academic article published in 1971, the American sociologist Hazel Hitson cited all these authorities, stating that “It is generally agreed by most trained observers that the Burmese world view has a markedly paranoid structuring”.⁸⁰

Most post-war studies of Myanmar’s national character concentrated on the “democratic era” which followed Myanmar’s independence from the UK in 1948 and preceded General (Bo Gyoke) Ne Win’s coup d’état in 1962. Since then, few serious students of the country have attempted such exercises. There have been several reasons for this.

One reason was because Ne Win adopted policies of economic autarky and strict neutrality in foreign affairs, and placed severe restrictions on all external contacts. Between 1962 and 1988, fieldwork by foreign scholars was almost impossible. The number of professional Myanmar-watchers dwindled to a mere handful as the country became *terra incognita*.⁸¹ As a result, there was little rigorous debate about issues like Myanmar’s “national character” and “identity”. Both the country and its paramount leader tended to be described simply as “brutal and xenophobic”.⁸² After 1988, one notable exception to this rule was Gustaaf Houtman’s *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, which focused on the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and its treatment of the opposition movement which arose after the abortive pro-democracy uprising that year. Houtman’s rather idiosyncratic study suggested that the generals’ worldview was largely a product of the country’s Buddhist culture.⁸³ Another exception was Mikael Gravers’ short study *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*.⁸⁴ It examined the historical processes that, in his view, led nationalism in Myanmar to “take a paranoid and xenophobic turn”.⁸⁵

The notion of studying “culture at a distance”, as championed by US anthropologists during and after the Second World War, now carries much less weight than it used to. Some allowance must be made for the

fact that, during the war, time was short, fieldwork was not possible and other sources were severely limited. However, notable members of this circle, including the author of the OWI’s wartime study of Burma’s “personality”, have since been widely discredited. Freudian principles no longer command the authority they once did. Also, since 1988 there has been a much greater reliance on personal interviews, first hand observations and careful analysis. As Chit Hlaing wrote in 2008, this approach has produced some excellent studies of Burmese life.⁸⁶ Notable examples include Christina Fink’s *Living Silence in Burma*, which was based on nearly 200 interviews, and Matthew Mullen’s *Pathways That Changed Myanmar*, which was based on over 500 ethnographic interviews, conducted all across the country.⁸⁷ Houtman and Gravers both spent some time studying in and around Myanmar. Even so, as Morten Pedersen wrote in 2008, culture as a factor in the armed forces’ long domination of Myanmar has received “little systematic attention”.⁸⁸

This lacuna in Myanmar studies was in part because cultural and sociological explanations for political behaviour tended to be treated with scepticism by more traditional scholars, whose formal academic training, in disciplines like political science, made them uncomfortable with generalisations about the character of an entire country or its people. While not slow to engage in abstract theorising themselves, these scholars demanded more precise arguments based on empirical evidence. They were suspicious of broad conclusions based on what were seen as subjective, even intuitive, judgements drawn from a relatively narrow research base.⁸⁹ As Mary Callahan has written:

Generalisations about national character, culture and personality are based on contacts with a handful of Burmese who communicate in a Western language and whose representativeness of cultural traits surely have to be suspect.⁹⁰

This scepticism was encouraged by calls for foreign anthropologists to become actively “engaged” in the personal lives and political problems of their subjects.⁹¹ As a result, broad characterisations of the Burmese were dismissed as “speculative and imaginative at best”, and lacking any real utility to those trying to understand the nature of political dynamics in modern Myanmar.⁹² The notion that a state is purely “a function of and determined by cultural and social forces” was rejected in favour of more prosaic explanations such as, in Robert Taylor’s seminal study *The State in Myanmar*, the country’s long tradition of state dominance and autocratic rule.⁹³

Another reason for the dearth of cultural and sociological explanations for political behaviour in Myanmar is the much greater acknowledgement these days of the richness and changing nature of all large social groups, not to mention their resistance to simplistic and misleading labels imposed on them by outsiders.⁹⁴

In considering this issue, Myanmar poses particularly difficult challenges. For, as David Steinberg has recently pointed out, it is not, and never has been, a “nation” in the strict sense of the word.⁹⁵ Rather, it is an extraordinarily diverse collection of social and ethnic groups, many with special characteristics and strong partisan tendencies, captured within borders drawn largely by colonial map-makers during the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁹⁶ For example:

1. Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with eight recognised national races and at least 135 distinct ethno-linguistic groups.⁹⁷ One survey has claimed that there are in fact 242 different spoken languages or, by ethnographical analysis, 172 different “tribes”.⁹⁸ Within these divisions, the classification of which is still the subject of some debate, a great many Burmese acknowledge mixed ancestry.
2. There is the NLD, other civilian political parties and their supporters which, according to the results of a relatively free and fair election held in November 2020, account for a majority of the population (which currently stands at about 55 million).⁹⁹
3. Approximately 70 percent of the population live in rural districts. The large majority are engaged in artisan or agricultural pursuits of different kinds.¹⁰⁰
4. Urban dwellers make up a minority of the population, but there are 5.5 million people living in Yangon, 1.5 million in Mandalay and about 650,000 who live in the new capital of Naypyidaw.¹⁰¹
5. The approximately 350,000 strong armed forces, their immediate families, relatives and close supporters, together with service veterans, constitute a virtual “state” within the state of Myanmar, in all probably numbering four million or more people.¹⁰²
6. There are some 85,000 male and female members of the Myanmar Police Force who, on paper at least, subscribe to a different ethos (“community policing”) and professional culture than the armed forces.¹⁰³

7. There are half a dozen or so religious communities in Myanmar, broadly aligned with different ethnic groups.¹⁰⁴ Some are relatively small.
8. In 2020, approximately 25 percent of the Myanmar population was living below the recognised poverty line. This number is expected to grow to about 50 percent by 2022 as a result of the country’s collapse, following the February 2021 coup.¹⁰⁵

All these groups are themselves divided, adding to what the Burmese author Khin Myo Chit has called the country’s “colour and infinite variety”.¹⁰⁶ Even if specifically “native” characteristics could be isolated from all the foreign influences that have affected Burmese customs and practices over the centuries, it would still be difficult to identify the unique and enduring traits that might collectively be called a “national character”.¹⁰⁷

For all these reasons, scholars are now reluctant to take a collection of specific traditions and attributes, and make them the basis of broad statements about Myanmar’s personality. Most accept that it is dangerous to make sweeping generalisations about the sociology and cultural patterns of large and diverse groups of people. It is easy to fall prey to prejudices and superficial impressions, even to slip into caricature. For example, after a tourist boom began in 2011, following the suspension of most economic sanctions, references to Myanmar’s “character” and “identity” once again became fashionable.¹⁰⁸ They were usually found in simplistic and highly subjective lists of perceived “qualities” and “values” that were peddled by the travel industry, populist authors and journalists.¹⁰⁹ Specific customs and ceremonies, usually as they were observed by the dominant Bamar ethnic group, were reified and presented as cultural markers typical of Burmese society as a whole. These lists were usually included in guides to public behaviour and etiquette to be observed by foreigners visiting Myanmar.¹¹⁰ To that extent, they did little harm, but they reinforced stereotypes that were neither accurate nor representative of the country.¹¹¹

At the same time that Western scholars were questioning notions of national character and identity, or at least were looking more critically at the use of such labels to describe entire populations, these concepts were being embraced in the writings and statements of Burmese officials and authors. For example, in his 1954 development manifesto *Pyidawtha: The New Burma*, Prime Minister U Nu referred to Myanmar’s “national character” as if it was an established and well-known phenomenon.¹¹²

In 1958, the author Mi Mi Khaing wrote “that there should be a Burmese national character is not very remarkable”.¹¹³ She put this down to the country’s diverse geography and unique cultural traditions, which together had “produced their own inimitable synthesis of human characteristics”.¹¹⁴ Writing in 1983, the US-based Burmese scholar Maung Maung Gyi stated that authoritarianism was an important part of Myanmar’s national character, as it was always “lying dormant in the minds of the majority of the Burmese public”. He felt, for example, that:

General Ne Win’s authoritarian political style merely cashed in on this vast store of built-in attitudes and values of the Burmese society that are supportive of his rule pattern.¹¹⁵

Other Burmese seemed to share this belief in the distinctiveness of the country and its people, albeit taking the Bamar ethnic majority as its standard. Indeed, over the years successive military governments have attempted to exploit this belief in “built-in attitudes and values” to gain political advantage, both at home and abroad. History was viewed less as a record of events and “more a creation shaped for specific ends, which are usually to foster the sense of Burman uniqueness”.¹¹⁶

After 1988, the SLORC decreed that the “preservation and safeguarding of the cultural heritage and national character” was one of its four main social objectives.¹¹⁷ The idea of a distinctive Burmese culture and the country’s unique geopolitical circumstances was used by the regime, and its nominal successor the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), to justify a range of policies aimed at encouraging “national unity”, a term loaded with a complex mix of expectations and implicit behavioural patterns. “Myanmafication”, as Gustaaf Houtman has called it, was a multi-layered policy pursued by the generals to reinvent the concept of a unified Myanmar under Bamar Buddhist control, and without reference to Aung San Suu Kyi’s father, independence hero Aung San.¹¹⁸ It also served a wider purpose, which was to engineer Burmese society in such a way as to encourage acceptance of a “national culture”, reflecting the values and priorities of the armed forces.¹¹⁹ As expounded in 2000 by General (Bo Gyo Kyee) Khin Nyunt, then Secretary One of the SPDC:

It is evident right up to this day that the national essence, namely traditional culture and customs, own beliefs and national norms that spring from teachings of Theravada Buddhism, and national cultural and fine and performing arts that bring

out these national norms and thoughts, has been growing all along in the long history of the Union of Myanmar and Myanmar nationality for thousands of years, as distinct specific national characteristics of Myanmar nationality. In truth, only when we could preserve the national character born of national culture would we be able to keep national outlook and spirit always alive and promote national integrity grandly amidst the community of world nations.¹²⁰

As then opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi observed, the concept was “a bizarre graft of carefully selected historical incidents and distorted social values intended to justify the policies and actions of those in power”.¹²¹

Culture has long been used as a means to promote nationalism in Myanmar, and nationalism has long been used to deny, deflect or ignore criticism from foreigners and foreign institutions. This can be seen under all governments. For example, on the first anniversary of her quasi-civilian administration, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi ignored her own repeated calls for foreign intervention into Myanmar’s internal affairs when she was a political prisoner, stating:

[We] highly appreciate and value the support, assistance and understanding we have received from our friends from around the world. Yet we must be the master of our own destiny. No one understands our country’s situation and our needs better than we.¹²²

In making such remarks, and repeating them on other occasions, including at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, when defending the Tatmadaw’s genocidal operations against the Rohingyas, Aung San Suu Kyi was reflecting a sentiment shared by many other members of the population, including the country’s military leadership.¹²³

In claiming a special status for the country and its government, and denying foreigners the ability to understand their complexities, Aung San Suu Kyi was echoing the claims of national distinctiveness and cultural exceptionalism that had been made by generations of Burmese leaders before her. Yet, as David Steinberg has written, the people of Myanmar “do not share a sense of a united Myanmar identity despite decades of effort by military and civilian governments alike to cultivate one”.¹²⁴ Once again, claims to speak on behalf of everyone in Myanmar, and sweeping generalisations about what they believe, need to be treated with caution.



Chapter Three

MYANMAR'S “STRATEGIC CULTURE”

Take a glance at our geographic position.... We are hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cactus. We cannot move an inch.

Prime Minister U Nu
"Korea", 5 September 1950
From Peace to Stability
(Rangoon: Ministry of Information,
Government of Burma, 1951)

Another issue is relevant to this survey and deserves at least a brief mention. This is the emergence some years ago of the concept of "strategic cultures" in the scholarly discourse on international relations.

As noted above, during the Cold War "culture", broadly defined, played an important role in area studies, at least until notions of social uniformity and behavioural predictability fell out of favour. Since the 1990s, however, it has been revived as a specific factor in international relations. There have been several attempts to ascribe certain national characteristics to the strategic perceptions and security policies of particular governments and armed forces. As described by Ken Booth and Russell Troad:

Strategic culture is a contested but essential concept. It is contested because, so far, it has largely been asserted rather than demonstrated. It is essential because to deny its existence is to claim that the diversity of attitudes and behaviours with regard to threat and the use of force is entirely the result of material and structural factors unrelated to societal or cultural variables.¹²⁵

Those scholars believing in the validity of this concept claim that historical, geographical, cultural, societal and political influences all help shape the strategic postures of particular countries in defined ways. Such a concept may have its critics, but at least it is founded on empirical evidence as found in the examination of past and present behaviour, rather than selected personal impressions or questionable psychological theories based on perceived infantile trauma.

For example, in his chapter on Myanmar in Booth and Troad's 1999 edited collection of essays on this subject, the scholar Tin Maung Maung Than wrote that:

Myanmars have always asserted with pride that there is a distinctive Myanmar way of accomplishing whatever tasks are at hand. Whether it is nation-building, economic development or managing conflicts, it seems that characteristic elements of "Myanmar-ness"

have been incorporated in such endeavours. As such, it may be conjectured that strategic attitudes and behaviour would also be influenced by socio-cultural pre-dispositions embedded in this notion of Myanmar-ness.¹²⁶

Tin Maung Maung Than does not uncritically accept such claims but he makes a convincing case that "the interplay of social, cultural, religious and military tradition has produced a milieu exhibiting both 'rational' as well as 'cultural' dispositions".¹²⁷ As a result, he writes, Myanmar's ruling elites "seem to have their own way of conceptualising and defining state security and have developed a certain style of pursuing their security interests".¹²⁸

Strategic analysts and academic observers seeking to describe the key components of Myanmar's perceived strategic culture have usually highlighted the deep attachment of successive governments to the country's independence, self-reliance and non-alignment.¹²⁹ This attitude seem to spring from a pervasive sense of vulnerability in the face of larger and more powerful countries, including two of Myanmar's immediate neighbours.¹³⁰ This has encouraged the development of armies, rather than maritime forces. These feelings of insecurity and uncertainty also derive from the country's turbulent history and from the many complex internal challenges that have been faced by national administrations since 1948. The latter include armed struggles against a myriad of ethnic, religious, criminal and ideological groups, other forms of social unrest and persistent economic problems. Following Gustaaf Houtman, a few analysts have also noted Myanmar's traditional attachment to the Buddhist philosophy of the "middle way", which argues for detachment and the avoidance of extremes.¹³¹ This is seen to have influenced Myanmar's choice of a neutral foreign policy. However, few writings on this subject have delved into the psychology of the country's leaders and their personal and professional interests, which must in turn influence their outlook and policies.¹³²

If this more comprehensive approach is accepted as valid, then it can be argued that Myanmar's military leadership shares certain attitudes, perspectives

and predispositions, at least when it comes to security matters. These can be summarised as a deep commitment to Myanmar's independence and sovereignty, and a determination to decide the country's future. As then General (*Bo Gyoke Kyee*) Maung Aye put it in 1995:

Seen from our perspective, security entails non-interference in internal affairs and freedom from external pressures. Security is synonymous with the basic right to choose freely one's own political, economic and social systems and determine one's future at one's pace and in accordance with cherished values and ideals.¹³³

Similar views were expressed by the U Nu administration before 1962 and the military-backed Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government that ruled Myanmar between 1974 and 1988. They have probably also been held by large parts of the Burmese population, possibly even the majority. However, in Myanmar it has long been the generals that make the key decisions on such matters and implement the policies that result. Even under the NLD government, the management of security, broadly defined, remained firmly in the hands of the armed forces.¹³⁴

The Tatmadaw enjoys a unique position. It is not only the most powerful political institution in Myanmar but, particularly after 1988, it became increasingly self-contained and self-reliant. Even after the advent of a quasi-civilian government in 2011, the 2008 constitution granted the armed forces considerable institutional autonomy, including the freedom to conduct military operations without government oversight. The Tatmadaw has nurtured its own professional culture and managed its own economic base, separate from the official Defence budget. Despite the growth of the economy and relaxation of social constraints since 2011, its personnel have become increasingly isolated from the rest of the population.¹³⁵ They have their own mass media outlets, banks, educational institutions, hospitals, insurance companies, recreational facilities, social structures and support mechanisms.¹³⁶ Military personnel, their families and close supporters, plus retired veterans, amount to about 2.5 percent of the population, constituting a privileged caste within Myanmar society. This caste enjoys a number of defining characteristics that permit it to be viewed separately from the rest of the population. Indeed, the Tatmadaw has long been so far removed from mainstream Burmese society that, as Martin Smith noted 20 years ago, it is virtually a "state within a state".¹³⁷

The makeup of the Tatmadaw has changed over the years. As the only means of social mobility after the 1962 coup, it attracted recruits from all walks of life.¹³⁸ Also, advancement was to a large extent based on merit, allowing even members of ethnic minorities and non-Buddhists to rise through the ranks.¹³⁹ The Tatmadaw greatly expanded under the SLORC but, even after a massive recruitment drive, it increasingly took on the appearance of an exclusively Bamar Buddhist force, in both composition and outlook.¹⁴⁰ After 2011, the Tatmadaw was reduced in size and further modernised, to make it more like a "standard army".¹⁴¹ There were token efforts to recruit women and members of the ethnic minorities, to make it more representative of the entire country. As Myanmar's economy began to grow, however, and there were alternative avenues for employment and social advancement, it became more difficult to fill the ranks. Even so, the continued dominance of the armed forces in national life, and the opportunities that they were seen to offer young men and women meant that, despite the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD, there was no shortage of officer candidates.¹⁴² Many came from military families, the similarities in their backgrounds reportedly encouraging the development of a common outlook, including acceptance of the Tatmadaw's values.¹⁴³

That is not to say, however, that the Tatmadaw is now, or has ever been, a homogenous organisation that thinks and behaves as one. Care must be taken not to fall into the same trap as those writers who refer collectively to "the Burmese" and make sweeping generalisations about their "national character".

Ever since the Tatmadaw's creation in 1948, there have been reports that it has been wracked by internal disputes of various kinds. Some have been more serious than others. For example:

1. The Myanmar Army has always been the largest and most powerful of the three services. The Myanmar Air Force and Myanmar Navy have never enjoyed the same status, influence or access to resources. From time to time this has caused jealousies and friction.
2. Particularly in the early days, there were ideological differences between capitalists, socialists and communists in the armed forces, and tensions between elements favouring a strong unitary state and those who sought a looser, federal system. Even now, there appear to be different views in the Tatmadaw on what is the most suitable style of government for Myanmar.

3. Rivalries have also arisen between graduates of the prestigious Defence Services Academy (DSA) at Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly Maymyo), the Defence Services (Army) Officer Training School (OTS) at Bahtoo and the Officer Training Course (OTC), known as *Teza*. Those from the latter two have often felt resentful when passed over for promotion.¹⁴⁴
4. Over the years, factions and cliques have formed within the officer corps, based on different backgrounds, different experiences or different interests. For example, under the SLORC and SPDC there was a bitter rivalry between the so-called “combat faction” led by Vice Senior General (*Du Bo Gyoke Hmu Gyi*) Maung Aye and the “intelligence faction” led by General Khin Nyunt. This rivalry came to a head in 2004 when Khin Nyunt was arrested and almost the entire Intelligence Corps was disbanded.¹⁴⁵
5. There have also been reports from time to time of centre-periphery tensions, notably disputes between the Tatmadaw’s powerful field commanders, responsible for the Regional Military Commands, and staff officers based at Defence Headquarters in Yangon, later Naypyidaw.¹⁴⁶
6. There have been signs over the years that differences have arisen over policy questions such as the treatment of key dissidents (notably Aung San Suu Kyi), management of the economy and relations with foreign countries (like China). In describing such debates, some observers have referred to “hard-liners” and “soft-liners”, but these terms are always relative and can be misleading.¹⁴⁷
7. Powerful individuals in the armed forces have long gathered around themselves acolytes and groups of supporters, often in exclusive patron-client (*saya-tapyit*) relationships that permit the exercise of influence outside the formal chain of command.
8. Given the emphatic results of the 1990, 2015 and 2020 general elections, it would appear that a sizeable proportion of the armed forces has voted for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, rather than for openly pro-military parties, like the National Unity Party (NUP) and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).
9. Inevitably, within such a large and hierarchical organisation, there is competition for promotions, postings and other forms of personal advancement.
10. On at least three occasions during Myanmar’s modern history, individuals or elements within the armed forces have taken such exception to its policies or practices that they have contemplated a coup, or an attempt to assassinate the Tatmadaw’s most senior leadership.¹⁴⁸

At one level, none of these internal tensions are particularly surprising. Indeed, attempted coups and assassination plots aside, it can be argued that many armed forces harbour such divisions, to a greater or lesser extent. However, in Myanmar’s case they affect the cohesion and loyalty of the Tatmadaw, and the decisions of its leadership, both of which have profound implications for the entire country.

All that said, these and other differences are muted by the rigid training regime, comprehensive indoctrination program and strict disciplinary code experienced by all members of the Tatmadaw. This is particularly the case with regard to the officer corps, where a reputation for political reliability has always been essential for advancement, if not survival. There have been numerous cases where, according to reasonably reliable reports, personal loyalty and a willingness to obey orders have been rewarded before raw talent.¹⁴⁹ Also, many officers have shared experiences, such as fighting in the vicious campaigns against communist guerrillas and ethnic insurgents in Myanmar’s rugged border areas. These are important in the development of personal bonds and shared professional attitudes.¹⁵⁰ It is safe to assume that, by the time they reach star rank (Brigadier General (*Bo Hmu Gyoke*) and above), most officers would have become acculturated and share much the same views on broad issues like Myanmar’s security and the Tatmadaw’s place in Burmese society. To that extent, a common outlook on many issues seems a reasonable assumption, and the concept of a recognisable “strategic culture” becomes easier to accept.

With all these considerations in mind, it is worth surveying the main factors that seem to contribute to the way in which Myanmar’s generals view the world. To make this formidable task a little easier, the survey will start at the individual level and work outwards, through the institutional level to the national (and international) level. These boundaries are not always clearly delineated, and there is often some overlap between each category. Such a survey also reveals a number of internal contradictions, but that too seems to be characteristic of the “mindset” of the Burmese armed forces leadership.



Chapter Four

THE TATMADAW'S MENTAL LANDSCAPE

Brian: You're all individuals.

Crowd (in unison): Yes, we're all individuals.

Brian: You're all different.

Crowd (in unison): Yes, we're all different.

Monty Python's Life of Brian
(London: Handmade Films, 1979)

It is very difficult to identify and assess in a rigorous, scientific manner the many, varied and often subtle influences on the thinking of Myanmar's senior military personnel. Not only is research difficult, and reliable data scarce, but even well-established academic disciplines like psychology, anthropology and sociology have struggled to explain the workings of the human mind and the complex relationship between individual thinking and group dynamics. Trying to apply such approaches to political behaviour adds another layer of difficulty.¹⁵¹ This problem is compounded in Myanmar's case by the country's extraordinary social and ethnic diversity which, as noted in an earlier chapter, introduces additional complications.¹⁵² Also, notwithstanding the fact that all senior members of the Tatmadaw are currently ethnic Bamar, have grown up and been educated in Myanmar, imbibed Burmese Buddhist culture to a greater or lesser extent, and been moulded by their long service in the armed forces, they are all individuals. This makes generalisations about their formative experiences, personal perspectives, cognitive processes and unconscious biases very risky, not to mention an open invitation to the inevitable critics, who understandably view such intellectual exercises with scepticism.

All that said, there is some value in trying to identify the most important factors that appear to influence the thinking and behaviour of the Tatmadaw's senior officer corps, both individually and as a leadership group. For heuristic purposes, these factors can be divided into those predominantly found at the personal or individual level, those found at the Tatmadaw or institutional level and those found at the state or national (and international) level. Inevitably, there is some overlap between these categories, which are in any case rather arbitrary. The focus of the chapter is on commissioned officers, ie Second Lieutenant (*Du Bo*) and above, but it also touches on the position of the other ranks (OR).¹⁵³ This is in part to explain certain characteristics common to all members of the Tatmadaw, but also to illustrate the extraordinary reach that the organisation has into the private lives of its personnel.

THE PERSONAL LEVEL

The noted American Myanmar-watcher Melford Spiro believed that there was a universal human nature, expressed mainly through the structure and functioning of human personality.¹⁵⁴ It transcended race, ethnicity and nationality. If this is true, then it seems reasonably safe to say that Myanmar's military officers broadly share the same kinds of strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes as comparable people in other societies and in other countries. In the purely Burmese context, however, their characters, personal feelings and beliefs can be manifested in particular ways, leading to specific outcomes, some with significant implications for the Tatmadaw, Burmese society and the country. Albeit imperfectly, and usually subjectively, foreign observers wishing to understand the thinking behind the policies and practices of Myanmar's armed forces thus need to try to take them into account.

Patriotism

Service personnel in Myanmar have been taught since primary school that, between 1826 and 1948, proud, united and independent Myanmar was subject to political domination, economic exploitation and racial discrimination by the British.¹⁵⁵ This was made possible by the UK's military and technological superiority, and its employment of thousands of foreigners and local collaborators, mainly Indians and members of the ethnic minorities. In this narrative, Myanmar's independence hero, Aung San, is revered largely because he and his comrades dared to take up arms against the British.¹⁵⁶ These sentiments did not die when he was assassinated in 1947. Since the 1962 coup, successive military governments have been quick to accuse their foreign critics of neo-colonialism, and of trying to patronise Myanmar.¹⁵⁷ As former Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Than Shwe said in 2001:

Some big neo-colonialist countries, who want to dominate and manipulate Myanmar, are trying to destroy the spirit of national solidarity in order to weaken the country and put it under their influence ... taking advantage of their superiority in science and technology, these big nations are trying to dominate the developing nations politically, economically, socially, and culturally.¹⁵⁸

Even now, colonialism is blamed for many of Myanmar's problems, including the country's bitter ethnic divisions and religious tensions. For example, the current Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has described the security forces' brutal pogroms against the Muslim Rohingyas in 2016 and 2017 as "unfinished business" left over from the Second World War.¹⁵⁹

Tatmadaw officers have also grown up learning about the bitter political divisions, economic hardships, criminal activities and rural insurgencies that plagued independent Myanmar's early years. They have had drummed into them that it was only through the efforts of the country's fledgling armed forces that the Union survived. These themes are endlessly revisited, for example in the mass media and the enormous Defence Services Museum in Naypyidaw whose grandiose displays "speak of sacrifice, bravery, nationhood and struggle".¹⁶⁰ The spectres of internal division and external threat are still used to arouse patriotic feelings. For example, the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the uprisings of the Arab Spring in the 2010s are held up as examples of what Myanmar too could suffer. With these and other crises in mind, most Tatmadaw officers seem to have "an abiding sense of the wrongs perpetrated against Burma and the myth of an almost superhuman dedication necessary to preserve the nation against overwhelming odds".¹⁶¹ For members of the Tatmadaw, the three "national causes" of unity, stability and sovereignty are not empty propaganda slogans. They are real goals that must, for the country's sake, be placed above any personal feelings.¹⁶²

Deference and loyalty

Despite outward appearances, Myanmar society is quite status-conscious. In various ways, but mainly through behaviour and language, deference is paid to those senior in rank, age and experience.¹⁶³ Also, some occupations are accorded greater respect than others, such as Buddhist monks (*pongyis*),

teachers and doctors. Members of the armed forces used to be widely respected, but attitudes changed markedly after the 1988 uprising.¹⁶⁴ This tradition influences the behaviour of people in Myanmar in a range of ways. Naturally, in the armed forces the military hierarchy commands respect. There are strong sanctions against anyone who does not acknowledge the organisation's formal rank structure and follows orders without question. As one officer has remarked, "When the order comes from above, whether you agree or not, you must do it".¹⁶⁵ The status and privileges that go with certain positions and military decorations must also be recognised. Indeed, observance of these principles is equated with loyalty to the Tatmadaw and the country, and is essential for an officer's survival and advancement. According to considerable anecdotal evidence, poor performance tends to be punished less severely than actions that are deemed to be disrespectful or disloyal.

Indeed, power in Myanmar is highly personalised.¹⁶⁶ Positions are often filled on the basis of friendships and perceived loyalty, either to a person or an institution, rather than as a direct function of proven competence, reliability or technocratic expertise. For example, Ne Win's philosophy was to choose a "good" person (ie a loyal one) over a "smart" person.¹⁶⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi was accused of taking a similar approach to the choice of her advisors and (after the formation of the NLD government in 2015) her ministers.¹⁶⁸ It is still said that, in the zero-sum game that characterises Myanmar politics, where you stand (in terms of one's allegiance) dictates where you sit (in terms of one's rank and position). Despite its hierarchical structure, the Tatmadaw is not immune to such influences. For example, patron-client relationships, in which senior officers (dubbed the *saya* or teacher) gather around themselves entourages of younger or more junior acolytes (known as *tapyit*), are common. This relationship even extends to entire units, with the *saya* acting as its "parent" and looking after the interests of its members. In return, the *saya* expects to receive the loyalty of the *tapyit*.¹⁶⁹ Inevitably, this leads to factionalism and competition as senior officers seek to place their proteges in positions where they can be of greatest value to them. Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, for example, is said to stand "at the apex of a pyramidal patron-client network based on personalised loyalty".¹⁷⁰ There are other risks too, as seen in the fall of General Khin Nyunt and the elimination of his entire support base, numbering around 3,000 officers and ORs, in 2004.¹⁷¹

Individualism

Aung San dismissed the notion of individualism as “nonsense”, preferring instead “one nation, one state, one party, one leader”.¹⁷² Democratically-elected Prime Minister U Nu was more inclined to argue for the “freedom and equality of the individual”.¹⁷³ The military governments which followed him, however, have portrayed Myanmar as a “collectivist” society, in which “the group, be it family, community or something else, is more important than the individual”.¹⁷⁴ This notion has been used to create real or imagined groupings of perceived value to the regime, and has been contrasted with the reportedly destructive “individualistic” cultures and societies of Western countries. Yet, foreigners have long viewed Myanmar as “moderately individualistic”, if not “hyper-individualistic” in nature.¹⁷⁵ Anecdotes aside, they have pointed to such “evidence” as the absence of family names and, in contrast to other Asian cultures, the legal and civil rights traditionally afforded to Burmese women.¹⁷⁶ Other observers have cited Myanmar’s notoriously fissiparous tendencies, which have seen political and social groupings splinter and form sub-groups that more often than not end up at odds with each other.¹⁷⁷ They have also drawn attention to the rather disorderly nature of many of Myanmar’s political, legal and social processes, in which individuals can play significant roles.

Also, as David Steinberg and others have pointed out, political parties in Myanmar have usually revolved around charismatic individuals (with strong *karma* and special leadership credentials, like Aung San’s daughter Aung San Suu Kyi) and personal loyalties, rather than on institutional structures, formal processes or policy platforms.¹⁷⁸ The NLD, for example, has depended heavily on Aung San Suu Kyi for its three remarkable electoral successes. On each occasion (1990, 2015 and 2020), a vote for the NLD was a vote for Aung San Suu Kyi.¹⁷⁹ Within the armed forces, individualism has always been seen as a potential problem and considerable efforts are made to stamp it out. The levelling nature of recruit training and indoctrination programs, for example, helps dampen down any inclination towards independent thought, as does recognition of the military rank system. The demand is for conformity in appearance, outlook and conduct. However, according to many unconfirmed reports, the corporate nature of military life in Myanmar can be side-stepped by strong personalities with their own goals, whatever they may be. For example, there was a time when Regional Military Commanders enjoyed considerable

autonomy.¹⁸⁰ Also, the disgraced General Khin Nyunt was a loyal Tatmadaw officer, but he had his own agenda and his own way of pursuing it.

Ambition

Much of the public comment about tensions within the armed forces is based on gossip, rumour and speculation. Often it refers to cliques or factions that have reportedly emerged within the senior officer corps. These have reputedly revolved around policy differences, like the handling of the NLD, or attitudes towards foreign countries. Other tensions can more accurately be described as personality clashes.¹⁸¹ However, it is apparent that there is also keen competition between officers for promotions and plum postings. Ambitious officers know, for example, that only by being appointed to head a Regional Military Command, taking over one of the ten Light Infantry Divisions, or getting posted to a similarly responsible line position can they expect to rise to the highest ranks.¹⁸² As Bo Nyein has said, “it is an unwritten understanding that anyone who wants to reach the top must have battle/command experience”.¹⁸³ Particular positions can also provide officers with opportunities to exploit the illegal economy and supplement their salaries from non-military sources, as well as promoting family interests. Indeed, such ambitions are expected, and are exploited by the Tatmadaw leadership to encourage loyalty to the organisation and strengthen officers’ commitment. Individual ambition can also lead to dramatic policy shifts. Several pundits have suggested, for example, that Min Aung Hlaing’s personal goals lie at the heart of the 2021 coup.¹⁸⁴

Ambition can be important in other ways. For example, the Tatmadaw leadership has long used promotions to reward exemplary conduct on operations and notable administrative (including leadership) skills. Since 2011, when manpower shortages became a more serious problem, promotions have also been used to acknowledge the ability of particular officers to attract recruits to the flag.¹⁸⁵ Senior officers have used their influence to help their proteges get promoted and posted to positions of potential personal advantage.¹⁸⁶ As one scholar has noted, even when the system was working by the book:

Most officers had equal chances to get promoted to higher positions. If the officer failed to impress his superiors, he might not get the promotion. However, when two

equally capable officers were considered for promotion, the better connected person is more likely to get the promotion.¹⁸⁷

Also, promotions are an integral part of the elaborate system of rewards and punishments that is employed to maintain the cohesion and loyalty of the armed forces, on which successive military regimes have depended for their power and durability. In this regard, the leadership has become adept at letting steam out of the competition for senior positions, for example by using structural adjustments, routine rotations and forced retirements to create fresh vacancies and share the spoils of office. After the Tatmadaw was reduced in size under Min Aung Hlaing's "standard army" reforms, an effort was made to prevent younger officers from becoming frustrated with "promotion logjams".¹⁸⁸

Fear

According to the veteran Myanmar-watcher Bertil Lintner, "Fear is the glue that holds Myanmar's military together".¹⁸⁹ Despite the more altruistic motives canvassed in this survey, many members of the armed forces seem to obey orders and resist the return of a more democratic system of government because they are afraid. This is not just fear of punishment for violating the Tatmadaw's strict rules and codes of behaviour. Many officers appear concerned that, if the Tatmadaw should lose control over the political process in Myanmar, they could face legal proceedings for human rights violations, corruption and other crimes dating back as far as 1988. Reference by a senior NLD official to Nuremberg-style trials after the 1990 elections was likely one reason why those polls were shelved by the SLORC.¹⁹⁰ Fear of such trials doubtless also prompted inclusion of clauses in the 2008 constitution that protect members of the SPDC and SLORC from retribution and decree that military personnel will only be tried in military courts.¹⁹¹ There has also been the spectre of international action against members of the armed forces. As Tun Kyaw Nyein and others wrote in 2006:

The images of Slobodan Milosovic standing trial in The Hague in front of the International Criminal Tribunal, and the recent Saddam Hussein trial, have definitely chilling effects on the junta.¹⁹²

This fear must now be felt by those officers and ORs who were involved, either directly or indirectly, in the

anti-Rohingya pogroms of 2016 and 2017, which are now the subject of formal proceedings in the ICJ.¹⁹³ More recently, there have been loud calls for those military and police officers responsible for the crackdown against protesters in 2021 to be made accountable for their crimes against humanity.¹⁹⁴

Another pervasive fear is the loss of special benefits. Military families usually live on Tatmadaw bases, or in dedicated accommodation. They have access to resources often denied to civilians, particularly during shortages and times of internal unrest, when municipal services fail and the basic necessities of life become scarce.¹⁹⁵ These benefits range from reliable electricity, water supplies and petrol, to food, clothing and medicines. Also, officers' families can, in theory at least, rely on well-equipped medical services, other kinds of social support and, when they are permitted to retire, regular pensions. Given the collapse of Myanmar's economy since the February 2021 coup, and the dramatic spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, such perks and privileges are now specially valued, making the fear of losing them, and other benefits, even greater. This all helps to encourage a continuing commitment to the organisation and its programs. It may also account for the fact that most defectors since February seem to have been young single men, with fewer vested interests in the system and less to lose than those with families.¹⁹⁶

Economic self-interest

It is impossible to escape the question of economic self-interest. It is difficult to be precise, but many members of the armed forces, particularly the more senior officers, benefit financially from their rank and positions. Extra-curricular sources of income take many forms. All officers profit directly and indirectly from their shares in the Tatmadaw's massive public companies, Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. (MEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC).¹⁹⁷ Through them, more than 130 business entities can be linked to the armed forces.¹⁹⁸ Many officers also have quasi-legitimate interests in private businesses, often exercised through family members. They also benefit from a variety of unethical and illegal business arrangements. These activities can be very profitable. When Senior General Than Shwe's daughter was married in 2006, for example, the staggering private wealth on display caused a scandal.¹⁹⁹ Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in Myanmar.²⁰⁰ More junior officers seem to rely mainly on graft and corruption

to line their pockets. Even the ORs use their military positions and access to scarce resources to make “tea money”, for example by dabbling in the black market or by extorting payments from members of the public.²⁰¹ As one Yangon businessman has lamented, “Either you have green (US dollars) or real khaki green, or you can’t do business and make real money in my country”.²⁰²

Broadly speaking, under General Ne Win such activities were not tolerated, but after 1988 attitudes toward the exploitation of military positions to make money on the side seemed to become more relaxed. They were a perk of office. Provided that officers were not too obvious, did not challenge the status quo, or in any other way disrupt military rule, the senior leadership seemed prepared to turn a blind eye to such activities. A recent UN study identified numerous off-budget sources of income, through the economic interests of military officers and their families, and favoured “cronies” of the regime.²⁰³ These activities provide powerful levers for officers to exercise their influence but it also makes them vulnerable. For example, it is believed that the allocation or withdrawal of MEHL shares has been used to reward loyalty and punish “unacceptable” behaviour.²⁰⁴ Also, ever since the days of Ne Win, successive regimes have maintained dossiers of incriminating evidence on all members of the military hierarchy, for use in the event that they fall out of favour or need to be disciplined.²⁰⁵ Charges of corruption have been levelled at many officers who the senior leadership has wanted to remove, for one reason or another. Most go quietly, for fear of having their ill-gotten gains confiscated.²⁰⁶

Buddhism

In devoutly Buddhist Myanmar, the Tatmadaw leadership has always been alive to the power of religion, and religious leaders, to influence the thinking of both the public and their troops. The generals try to portray themselves as devout Buddhists who share their compatriots’ beliefs. The highly publicised donations to pagodas and monasteries made by senior officers, for example, are for the benefit of military personnel as much as for the civilian population. The generals use Buddhism to help legitimise military rule, in part by emphasising the Tatmadaw’s stated role as protector of the religion.²⁰⁷ Successive paramount leaders have also invoked Buddhist concepts like *karma* to justify their “kingship” and dampen down any prospective challenges to their rule.²⁰⁸ The generals have also

tried to convince their troops that they can disregard Buddhism’s most sacred tenets without fear of spiritual repercussions. For example, Buddhism forbids the taking of life, and emphasises that misdeeds in this life will be weighed against future reincarnations, under of the doctrine of karma. This raises serious issues for personnel on active military operations. Similarly, the concept of the “middle way”, which stresses qualities like tolerance, balance and compromise, is hard to reconcile with the extremes found in military life, and the uncompromising nature of counter-insurgency campaigns.

The imperative to obey their superiors will almost always override any private reservations that servicemen and women might have about their orders, but the generals have made efforts to manage religious conflicts that have arisen in the ranks, and which could threaten military discipline. For example, during the 2007 Saffron Revolution, soldiers were told that the *pongyis* marching in the streets were “bogus monks”, in fact unemployed “riff-raff” who were not entitled to wear the traditional saffron (or red) robes. Accordingly, they did not deserve the troops’ respect.²⁰⁹ Some senior monks (*Sayadaws*) were encouraged publicly to support such a contention. Also, despite Myanmar’s long tradition of “political monks”, these Sayadaws were persuaded to express their concerns about the *sangha* (monkhood) becoming directly involved in worldly affairs, even taking part in street protests.²¹⁰ Similarly, during the 2016–2017 area clearance operations against the Rohingyas, another eminent Sayadaw was enlisted to reassure soldiers that by attacking Muslim communities in Rakhine State they were protecting Buddhism. The troops were also told that, if their adversaries were not Buddhists, then they were not really human beings, so killing them was not a sin.²¹¹

Personal feelings

The inner-most sentiments of individual Tatmadaw officers are of course very difficult to gauge, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that some have allowed their feelings towards particular people to colour their attitudes to wider issues. Indeed, some rivalries have become the stuff of legend. For example, Ne Win was reputed to be jealous of Aung San’s reputation as a nationalist icon. After the 1988 uprising, many serving officers felt that, as former generals, Aung Gyi, Tin Oo, Aung Shwe and U Lwin betrayed the Tatmadaw when they founded the NLD. This reportedly affected

the regime's attitude towards the country's main opposition party for years. Similarly, Senior General Than Shwe's hatred for Aung San Suu Kyi greatly hindered reconciliation and compromise at the political level. According to one 2007 news report:

[His] personal dislike for Suu Kyi is said to be so intense that he walked out of a meeting with a foreign ambassador simply because the envoy uttered her name".²¹²

General Khin Nyunt's long-running rivalry with Vice Senior General Maung Aye directly contributed to the former's downfall in 2004, and Min Aung Hlaing's dislike and distrust of Aung San Suu Kyi appears to have been a major element in his thinking before the 2021 coup.²¹³ In Myanmar's highly personalised society, such disputes at the elite level can have a significant impact on national policy. When Speaker of the US House of Representatives Tip O'Neill said that "all politics is personal", he could have been speaking about Myanmar.²¹⁴

Just as a footnote to this section, it might be worth briefly mentioning the concept of *anade*, which is seen by many observers as a unique element in Myanmar culture. *Anade* is very difficult to translate, but it can be described as a reluctance to assert oneself in human relations, particularly if there is a risk of causing distress or offence.²¹⁵ It has been equated with Buddhist values. *Anade* has even been linked to Myanmar's traditional stance of neutrality in foreign affairs. By being neutral and non-aligned, the government is not required to take one side over another, thus avoiding causing offence. It is relevant here, as such ingrained notions of deference and respect, sometimes accompanied by a low drive for personal achievement, can run counter to established military doctrine and practice. Indeed, this has been recognised by the Tatmadaw. For example, in 1981 one military officer was quoted as saying that:

We want to get rid of *anade*. We translate it as lack of moral courage. We want to bring up a new generation with moral courage — not to be ashamed to speak out".²¹⁶

The benefits to the armed forces of less sensitive and more assertive personnel are obvious, particularly in military operations against urban dissidents and rural insurgents.

THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

By surveying publications about the Tatmadaw produced since the 1988 uprising, it is possible to gain two quite different impressions. At one extreme, it is portrayed as an enormous, proud, well-resourced and efficient military machine that completely dominates Myanmar and threatens regional stability. In 1998, for example, one Western journalist described it as "one of the most formidable modern fighting machines in the region".²¹⁷ At the other end of the scale, the Tatmadaw has been characterised as a lumbering behemoth, lacking modern arms and professional skills, riven by internal tensions, suffering from low morale and preoccupied with the crude maintenance of political power.²¹⁸ In a few publications both propositions have been put forward. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two extremes but, without hard evidence, determining the precise point on the spectrum is difficult.²¹⁹ It can be confidently stated, however, that, despite outward appearances, and simplistic accounts in the news media, the Tatmadaw is a diverse, multi-layered organisation that is constantly evolving. In some respects, it is quite flexible. It is also a collection of finely balanced institutional and personal loyalties.²²⁰ More to the point, it includes a wide range of views, including on political matters, although for obvious reasons these are not openly expressed.²²¹

That said, Myanmar's armed forces have some enduring characteristics that need to be borne in mind by any government or international organisation that is contemplating dialogue and possible engagement with the new regime in Naypyidaw.

Durability

Several reasons have been put forward to explain how the Tatmadaw was able to sustain the longest military dictatorship in modern history (1962–2011).²²² Some relate specifically to its political and military strengths, others to the disunity and weaknesses of its opponents.²²³ Its continued influence on national affairs after the advent of a quasi-civilian administration in 2011 is due in part to the carefully contrived constitution of 2008, which gave it considerable autonomy as well as control over some key functions of government. It is also deeply embedded in the national economy. However, a critical factor throughout this period has been the Tatmadaw's remarkable ability to renew

itself through at least three generations of military officers. Despite recurring tensions and occasional crises, they have remained surprisingly cohesive and loyal. Generally speaking, discipline has held firm, guaranteeing the Tatmadaw's survival and continued dominance of Myanmar life, despite its lack of a popular mandate. Supported by an elaborate system of rewards and punishments that has kept its personnel in line, it was able to become even more powerful and autonomous. When the military regime handed over the reins to President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government in 2011, it was stronger than it had been at any time since the 1962 coup.²²⁴

Also, despite their appearance on billboards erected around the country (in both English and Burmese), and their obligatory reproduction in books and newspapers throughout the SLORC/SPDC period, the "three national causes" of "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and the perpetuation of sovereignty" are not just propaganda slogans. As noted above, they reflect deeply-held beliefs and shared commitments, derived from Myanmar's troubled history, current challenges and the Tatmadaw's perceived leadership role.²²⁵ It was on the basis of these principles, formally enshrined in the 2008 constitution, that in 2003 the Tatmadaw's leadership was able to launch a plan for the managed transition of the country from a military dictatorship to a "disciplined democracy", to be implemented over a decade or more.²²⁶ In doing so, the armed forces high command demonstrated an ability to think strategically, formulate and maintain the pursuit of long term goals, and adapt them as circumstances changed. It also showed that it was firmly committed to its self-appointed national role, and would not countenance any moves to challenge it, whether they were from a political party, mass movement, or foreign country.

Ethos and principles

There are in effect two Tatmadaws. One operates according to a plethora of formal structures and regulations, set out in training school curricula and a number of official publications. Like the armed forces of most other countries, its official ethos is one of high principle. Its guiding ideals emphasise patriotism, discipline and exemplary personal conduct. In recent years greater weight has been placed on "professionalism", although the actual word is avoided as in the Burmese language it suggests a mercenary force serving for pay, not out of personal commitment and an altruistic concern for Myanmar's

welfare.²²⁷ Throughout their careers, servicemen and women are repeatedly enjoined to observe both military and civilian laws, conduct themselves honourably and "preserve the noble dignity of the Tatmadaw".²²⁸ As Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing told a graduating DSA class in 2017, "Our Tatmadaw must be the shining example on the rules and laws of the Tatmadaw, field disciplines and civil laws."²²⁹ These expectations are outlined in a military code that is taught to all members of the armed forces.²³⁰ They also feature in propaganda vehicles of various kinds, including those intended for the Burmese public.²³¹

However, for more than 70 years Myanmar's armed forces have been fighting bitter civil wars that have proven professionally and morally deeply corrosive. Combat units in particular have succumbed to "a culture of brutality and impunity".²³² For decades, the Tatmadaw has been condemned by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Amnesty International and other organisations for repeated and egregious violations of human rights. It has earned a terrible reputation. As seen in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017, for example, and again in their clashes with unarmed protesters this year, members of the security forces have shown contempt for the laws of war and norms of civilized conduct. Yet, most officers do not seem to see any contradiction between this kind of behavior and the Tatmadaw's formal code of conduct. Such lapses seem to be justified in their minds by the conviction that the armed forces have a special role to play in Myanmar's national affairs and its leaders have a unique insight into the country's needs. Members of the armed forces are thus free to do "whatever it takes" to achieve their self-appointed task of restoring "law and order", as they perceive it, and "safeguarding" the Republic from all its enemies, armed and unarmed, domestic and foreign. Protesters, for example, are seen as criminals defying lawful authority, while armed activists are deemed "terrorists".²³³

Discipline and trust

When Senior General Min Aung Hlaing stated in his 2015 Armed Forces Day speech that "Military discipline is the lifeblood of the Tatmadaw", he was repeating a familiar line.²³⁴ Two years later, he told the graduating DSA class that "Military discipline is the backbone of the Tatmadaw, as well as the soul".²³⁵ His comments were heartfelt. Discipline in the armed forces is very strict and exercised ruthlessly by both commissioned and non-commissioned officers. It is

drummed into recruits that, when orders are given, they must be obeyed immediately and without question, even, according to one officer, without thinking.²³⁶ This level of obedience is seen as key not only to good order but also to the survival of both the Tatmadaw and the country. As former Commander-in-Chief Senior General Than Shwe told young officers graduating from the DSA in 2013, “Being militarily well-disciplined is essential to win a war”.²³⁷ It is also seen as necessary in other spheres. The SPDC’s description of the quasi-civilian government formed in 2011 as a “disciplined democracy”, for example, was not accidental. It was expected to behave a certain way and within certain bounds, as laid down by the Tatmadaw in the 2008 constitution.

Trust issues are also very important. Recruits undergo rigorous training programs that put great emphasis on loyalty to their comrades, their unit, their service arm, the Tatmadaw and the country. They are taught that they have a special responsibility to the armed forces and the three national causes that transcends their particular ethnic, religious, geographical and socio-economic backgrounds. Personal feelings and personal ties are made subordinate to the overarching authority of the Tatmadaw, as exercised through its officers. It is made clear to recruits (as it was to all Myanmar school children under past military regimes) that “the Tatmadaw is the mother, the Tatmadaw is the father”.²³⁸ Anyone seen to be disobeying orders or defying authority can expect to be dealt with very harshly. Many have been imprisoned and some have even executed.²³⁹ As already noted, deserters, defectors and informers are considered to be “traitor maggots”, and not looked upon kindly.²⁴⁰ These practices have been tested and proven effective over decades, giving the Myanmar armed forces a fearsome reputation for being able to endure great hardship in the field, for accepting high rates of casualties on operations and for inflicting terrible punishments to achieve their goals.

Education and training

It has long been the claim of activists and human rights campaigners that the Tatmadaw is recruited mainly from the rural peasantry and urban unemployed, who usually lack a decent education, do not understand Myanmar’s politics and have no knowledge of the outside world. They are thus ripe for indoctrination and exploitation. This may have been true of the OR, but the claim was often extended to the officer corps, which was recently

described by one commentator as “intellectually bankrupt”.²⁴¹ When Myanmar was under military rule before 2011, this caricature was encouraged by cartoons in magazines like *The Irrawaddy*, where the generals were frequently portrayed as overweight monkeys in uniform.²⁴² Similarly, feature movies such as Luc Besson’s hagiographic 2011 biopic *The Lady* portrayed Myanmar’s senior generals as ignorant, superstitious and brutal, in contrast to the refined, Oxford-educated Buddhist Aung San Suu Kyi.²⁴³ If this situation was ever true (during the 1950s, civil servants reportedly looked down upon military men who had risen through the ranks without a formal education), it has not been so for a long time, at least for members of the officer corps.

The Tatmadaw’s recruitment base now includes ethnic Bamar from all over the country, including the main population centres of Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw. Many in the lower ranks may still be “illiterate and uneducated”, but the officers are much more accomplished.²⁴⁴ The DSA, for example, provides Bachelor degree courses alongside its military training programs.²⁴⁵ Many officers have additional qualifications. For example, “those with the rank of commander of light infantry and military operations command and above must have a Master’s degree in defence studies offered by the National Defence College” (NDC).²⁴⁶ Officers assigned to the national parliament have been more highly educated than their elected peers.²⁴⁷ While still comparatively small, the number of Tatmadaw officers who have attended higher level courses overseas grew significantly after 2011, when foreign contacts with Myanmar became more politically acceptable. For example, between 1993 and 2018, some 6,000 officers attended Russian universities. Since 2015, Japan has invited two Tatmadaw officers a year to attend its National Defence Academy. In addition, the Nippon Foundation has given ten scholarships to Burmese military officers to pursue graduate degrees in international relations at Japanese universities.²⁴⁸ Foreign forces and organisations have offered the Tatmadaw training courses in Myanmar, in subjects like humanitarian law.²⁴⁹ Also, thanks to satellite television broadcasts and greater access to foreign news magazines, senior military personnel are more aware of international developments than in the past.

Indoctrination

The Tatmadaw’s extensive, multi-layered network of training institutions is designed not only to

teach and develop specific military, academic and technical skills, but also to implement a sophisticated ideological program. This starts with classes at cantonment schools for the children of servicemen and women, and continues for the entire careers of all service personnel.²⁵⁰ The program emphasises the central place of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's historical and political development, notably its role in the struggle for independence from the British colonialists and the critical part it has played in saving the country from a wide range of external and internal threats.²⁵¹ The latter has included not only ethnic, ideological and economic insurgents but also the Tatmadaw's civilian critics, variously described as "anarchistic mobs", "destructionists" and "terrorists".²⁵² The clear aim of these and other programs is to create a narrow and self-serving view of the armed forces and its place in Myanmar's history and society. Under the SLORC and SPDC, the message was reinforced by propaganda slogans posted on massive billboards around the country, stating for example that "The Tatmadaw will never betray the national cause", and "Tatmadaw and the people, cooperate and crush all those harming the Union". Some can still be seen in the larger population centres.²⁵³

Critics have described these programs as "brainwashing", and denied Tatmadaw men and women the capacity for independent thought. Whether that is true or not, and there are indications that such claims are exaggerated, these programs seem to be quite effective in convincing most military personnel of the Tatmadaw's critical role at the centre of Myanmar's national life, a role set out in the 2008 constitution.²⁵⁴ References to Myanmar's unique national culture also raise the age-old claim that only the people of Myanmar can understand and solve their problems and, because of its unique organisation, resources and dedication, the Tatmadaw is in the best position to do so. As described by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the Tatmadaw is "fearless and blameless" and "afraid of no-one".²⁵⁵ Also, as seen in the speeches given by successive Commanders-in-Chief at annual Armed Forces Day parades, graduation ceremonies and other such occasions, attention is drawn to the threat to Myanmar from a wide range of external enemies. These range from foreign countries and international organisations to activists, exiles and opportunists of various kinds. In countless speeches, official publications, state-run newspapers and movies, the need for vigilance, strength and discipline is a constant theme.²⁵⁶ A favourite propaganda slogan is "Only when the Tatmadaw is strong will the nation be strong".²⁵⁷

Suspicion of civilians

There has long been a conviction among Myanmar's senior military leadership that civilians, in particular civilian politicians, cannot be trusted. They are seen, and portrayed in official publications, as invariably "corrupt, inefficient, lacking developmental skills or foresight, unpatriotic, and capable of sacrificing the unity of the state to special ethnic or economic interests".²⁵⁸ As Nicholas Farrelly has written, "military leaders have also been exasperated by what they consider feeble (and foreign-controlled) civilian authorities that have been incapable of preventing national fragmentation".²⁵⁹ This attitude seems to be derived, at least in part, from the stories heard, and books read, about Myanmar's experiment with democracy between 1948 and 1962. During that turbulent period, there was constant bickering among the country's neophyte politicians, often over issues that were related more to their own ideological views and sectional interests than those of the country. As Mary Callahan has argued, these problems encouraged the army (there was then no navy or air force to speak of) to see Myanmar's citizens as "enemies of the state", either real or potential.²⁶⁰ It was largely this state of affairs that prompted a "legal coup" in 1958, when Ne Win pressured Prime Minister U Nu to invite the Tatmadaw to step in and run a "caretaker government".²⁶¹

For 15 months, that administration performed reasonably well, encouraging the view that the Tatmadaw could govern the country better than any civilian parliament.²⁶² Between 1962 and 1988, about 2,000 military officers were transferred to senior positions in the civil service.²⁶³ However, the military government soon became notorious for its corruption, ineptitude and ideological blindness. Since 1988, the armed forces have relied on favoured civilian businessmen, popularly known as "cronies", to help them develop Myanmar's economy. Some have also acted as brokers for the Tatmadaw's arms deals. It would appear from the NLD's landslide election victories in 2015 and 2020 that there are many in the armed forces prepared to see an elected civilian government installed in Naypyidaw. Even so, many officers still seem to doubt the competence, integrity and patriotism of civilian politicians, concerns probably confirmed by the NLD's decidedly lacklustre performance during its five years in office.²⁶⁴ More to the point, the generals know that Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD oppose the notion of a "disciplined" democracy, and are determined to reduce the Tatmadaw's political role. The party's persistent efforts to amend the 2008 constitution, and moves

to reshuffle ministerial responsibilities to give civilians greater power, have been viewed with concern.²⁶⁵ Indeed, the generals may have seized power in February 2021 to forestall such plans.²⁶⁶

Isolation

One aspect of the Tatmadaw that strikes many foreign observers is the extraordinary degree of control that is exercised over the private lives of both officers and ORs. Indeed, it has been claimed that, once someone joins the armed forces they have no private lives. This also applies to their families. Most servicemen and women live on military bases, where they are subject to constant surveillance by their peers, their superiors and the ubiquitous military intelligence service, the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA).²⁶⁷ Even allowing for some exaggeration, defectors have described a cloistered, strictly controlled life where “everything is monitored”.²⁶⁸ The level of control extends from the colour of the *longyi*s worn by soldiers’ wives (red is not favoured, as it is the recognised colour of the NLD) to their social media posts, “even how to decorate your home”.²⁶⁹ From many accounts, service personnel are also restricted in their reading and television viewing to censored news outlets, all with the aim of making the armed forces the sole focus of their lives.²⁷⁰ To a large extent, they are cut off from the outside world, and strongly encouraged to make friends among other military personnel. As one defector has told news reporters, “the Tatmadaw is the only world” for most servicemen.²⁷¹ Other defectors have compared soldiers to slaves. These controls are administered through both formal and informal mechanisms.

One defector has complained that “They want to turn people into robots, who don’t think [for themselves]”.²⁷² Isolation and close management may narrow the perspectives of service personnel, encourage closeted thinking and curb open dissent, but it does raise the question whether everyone is affected in the same way. Outward compliance and an apparent willingness to obey orders does not mean that the Tatmadaw is a “mindless mass” incapable of independent thinking.²⁷³ Students at the NDC, for example, have shown surprising originality in some of their written papers.²⁷⁴ In 2004, Robert Taylor stated that the Tatmadaw contained “reformers who understand the necessity of power-sharing and democratisation, of liberalism and economic reform”.²⁷⁵ In the Myanmar of today, with its much greater access to modern communications,

it would be very difficult to deny service personnel any knowledge at all of wider developments. Indeed, according to defector testimony, many servicemen and women privately sympathise with the civil disobedience movement (CDM) and People’s Defence Force (PDF) currently challenging the new Caretaker Government. They reportedly think about joining them, but fear the consequences for themselves and their families.²⁷⁶ Even so, according to unconfirmed claims, 1,500 soldiers, sailors and airmen have already done so.²⁷⁷

Need for control

If there is one aspect of the Tatmadaw’s mindset that stands out above all others, it is the generals’ apparent need always to feel in command, able to exercise control over the armed forces, the government, the economy, Myanmar society, indeed the whole country. For its entire existence, and at all levels, the military hierarchy has feared what it calls “chaos”.²⁷⁸ Described by many observers over the years, both loosely and in a more considered way, as a “paranoid security complex”, this desire for control seems to stem from a deep-seated and pervasive sense of insecurity, and a concern that unless all aspects of Myanmar are kept within tightly managed bounds then the country, the armed forces and even the generals themselves will suffer the consequences of the external threats and internal stresses that have led to so many problems in the past.²⁷⁹ These have included foreign domination, the loss of national identity, territorial fragmentation, civil wars, internal unrest, economic collapse and personal loss. The Tatmadaw leadership’s response to all these fears has been to impose, by force of arms where considered necessary, strong restraints on political and economic behaviour, curbs on social and cultural activities, and restrictions on relations with foreigners and foreign countries.

The term “paranoia” implies some intrinsic flaw in the thinking of the generals, indeed that they are in some ways mentally unbalanced. It also suggests that their fears are completely unfounded. However, a case can be made that, at different times, there have been solid grounds for their concerns. After all, Myanmar’s history has shown that the dangers of foreign intervention, economic exploitation, internal disintegration and civil unrest have been real and even now are ever present. After 1988, for example, when Myanmar was subject to almost universal condemnation, the SLORC was genuinely concerned that Myanmar might be invaded by one

or more countries, possibly with UN endorsement. After Cyclone Nargis struck the country in 2008, there were real fears in the SPDC, based on highly provocative statements by several foreign politicians, that the international community planned to intervene in Myanmar's internal affairs, possibly even by using military force.²⁸⁰ Since the February 2021 coup there have been loud calls for military intervention, under the principles of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P).²⁸¹ Remember too, that on more than one occasion Myanmar has come close to economic and social collapse. Even now, commentators are speaking of Myanmar as a "failed state".²⁸² Paranoid or not, over the years the generals have had good reasons to harbour a wide range of security concerns, and to feel a need to respond to them.

THE STATE LEVEL

Of more interest to foreign governments and international organisations, perhaps, are those intangible factors that appear to affect the behaviour of Myanmar's military leadership at the national, or state, level. In most cases, they cannot be completely distinguished from institutional and at times even personal concerns, but they are listed separately here because they have a greater impact on the Tatmadaw's thinking about the country as a whole, the wider strategic environment and Myanmar's foreign relations. In this regard, the one characteristic that stands out, and is most often commented upon by outside observers, is the intense nationalism displayed by the senior officer corps and the profound sense of exceptionalism that underlies the refusal of successive governments (both civilian and military) to cater to the concerns of the international community. These beliefs can also be seen in the Tatmadaw's strong ethnocentrism, its abiding suspicion of foreigners and determination to protect Myanmar's independence. Once again, the three "national causes" of stability, unity and sovereignty are a reflection of all these concerns.

Nationalism

The people of Myanmar have long been known for their intense national pride and strong sense of difference. As far back as 1886, the colonial civil servant J.G. Scott observed that:

This conviction not only of their own superiority, but of the superiority of their country over all others, has had a great influence on the Burmese character, both in their estimation of themselves and in the attitude which they have adopted towards foreign nations.²⁸³

This century, both military and quasi-civilian governments in Myanmar have been accused of displaying similar sentiments. Their feelings seem to have been sharpened by a begrudging recognition that the country had fallen well behind others in the region in terms of economic, technical and social development.²⁸⁴ It is an awfully long time since Yangon was described as "the pearl of the orient".²⁸⁵ Also, the Tatmadaw has long been inferior to comparable armed forces, at least in terms of its arms and equipment holdings.

Myanmar's strong sense of national pride can be seen in its sensitivity to perceived slights, its defensiveness and determination to go its own way. Since regaining its independence in 1948, it has investigated other political and economic systems, but has usually looked inwards, rather than outwards, for models.²⁸⁶ Even so, the transition to a quasi-civilian form of government in 2011 seems to have been prompted in part by the SPDC's wish to raise Myanmar's standing on the world stage, win back international respect and improve contacts with other countries, particularly the more advanced West. The modernisation and economic development programs pursued between 2011 and 2020 were also to help Myanmar catch up with its regional neighbours. Fitful though these efforts were, Myanmar has certainly made a number of significant technological advances.²⁸⁷ Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's plans for a "strong, fully efficient and modern" Tatmadaw in part at least reflected a desire to see the armed forces become more respected.²⁸⁸ The quest for national status and prestige probably also lay behind questionable projects like the acquisition of a submarine and the planned construction of a nuclear reactor, neither of which have a persuasive strategic rationale.

Ethnocentrism

Closely related to nationalism is ethnocentrism. The Burmese are a proud people, acutely conscious of their historical achievements and rich cultural heritage, closely tied to their sense of national identity.²⁸⁹ Since 1948, they have jealously guarded

their right to decide for themselves how their country is managed and developed. For example, in 2017 Aung San Suu Kyi told the world that:

We must work ourselves for our country's responsibilities, because we are the ones who best understand what our country needs.²⁹⁰

This cultural chauvinism has been manifested in other ways. For example, in 1997, when General Khin Nyunt learned that archaeologists had discovered rare human remains in Upper Myanmar, he commissioned a team to determine whether they were the oldest ever found, since the identification of Myanmar as the cradle of mankind would "greatly enhance the stature of the country in the world".²⁹¹ To take another example, it has long been a source of pride that Buddhism in Myanmar is "the purest form of that faith", close to the original teachings of the Buddha and free from foreign influences.²⁹² This has been related to the belief, encouraged by the Tatmadaw for its own narrow purposes, that to be truly Burmese, and thus a reliable and patriotic member of society, one must be both Bamar and Buddhist.²⁹³ The periodic outbursts from senior military officers against "alien cultural influences", such as Western pop music and Korean fashions, reflect a similarly chauvinistic and conservative mindset.²⁹⁴ When Aung San Suu Kyi wore jeans on a trip to Mongolia in 2013 she was "lambasted" on Burmese language websites.²⁹⁵

Pride in the country and its "national culture" is understandable, but in Myanmar it can have negative connotations. For example, ever since the 1962 coup the predominantly Bamar Buddhist armed forces have set out to "occupy" those parts of the country which claim alternative cultural traditions and observe different religious faiths.²⁹⁶ Successive military regimes have launched brutal counter-insurgency campaigns against ethnic armed organisations (EAO), mainly around Myanmar's periphery, imposed the Bamar language in minority areas through schools and the bureaucracy, and appointed Bamar administrators to enforce their laws and regulations. Vernacular languages and schools have been actively discouraged.²⁹⁷ This has all been done in the name of national unity. To an increasing degree, but particularly after 1988, the ethnic minorities have been seen as lesser peoples, not deserving the same rights as native Bamar.²⁹⁸ By worshipping foreign religions, they are seen as giving their loyalties to foreign countries.²⁹⁹ The same feelings of cultural superiority, expressed through

extremist groups like the Committee to Protect Race and Religion (*Ma Ba Tha*), help explain the periodic riots and campaigns of racial vilification (often initiated or encouraged by the armed forces) against Muslims.³⁰⁰

Self-reliance

From comments made by senior military figures over the years, there has long been a feeling in the Tatmadaw that Myanmar does not need the support or approval of any other country to survive and prosper. They believe that "the strength of the nation lies within".³⁰¹ Before 1962, U Nu's elected government pursued a strongly neutralist foreign policy, and took care to avoid entanglement in the strategic competitions between other countries. Myanmar retreated further from the world under Ne Win and even left the Non-Aligned Movement (which it helped to create) when it appeared to be leaning too far towards one power bloc. Ne Win is said to have asserted that:

All of Burma's problems could be solved if the country were chiselled free of its Asian neighbours and floated out into the middle of the Bay of Bengal.³⁰²

The American Myanmar-watcher Josef Silverstein described this attitude as Myanmar's "go it alone" credo.³⁰³ After the Asian economic crisis of 1997, the military regime concluded that the country had survived because it was self-reliant and insulated from international shocks of this kind.³⁰⁴ Myanmar joined ASEAN the same year, but it would probably leave that organisation too if it was felt to be drifting towards any major state, international organisation or alliance.³⁰⁵ The 2008 constitution, for example, lauds an "active, independent and non-aligned foreign policy".³⁰⁶ Indeed, ever since the 1962 coup, successive military regimes have demonstrated that they are prepared to pay a very high price, usually exacted through the long-suffering civilian population, to protect their ability unilaterally to determine Myanmar's future.

This fierce national pride, coupled with a suspicion of foreigners, fear of losing control over the country's resources, and sensitivity to interference in Myanmar's internal affairs, all contribute to the determination shown by the armed forces leadership to preserve Myanmar's independence and sovereignty. The economic and other sanctions imposed after the 1988 uprising were never

going to be very effective, not so much because the SLORC and SPDC could work around them (which they could) but because they were seen as an affront to Myanmar's national dignity.³⁰⁷ They simply strengthened the generals' resolve to resist international pressures, and increased their fortress mentality. There is a greater awareness these days of the inter-connectedness of the world, and the need for Myanmar to play its part on the world stage. It has a key role, for example, in managing transnational criminal problems like narcotics smuggling, human trafficking and money laundering.³⁰⁸ However, the sentiments which prompted military regimes in the past to take Myanmar down its own path remain strong. As one general said recently, in the face of renewed sanctions threats, Myanmar will "have to learn to walk with only a few friends".³⁰⁹ It had done so before, and could do so again.

Stability

There is an abiding obsession among Myanmar's military leadership with what its members call "stability". While perhaps deriving in part from a sense of military discipline and order, this concern seems to stem from a suspicion of any kind of diversity or pluralism. It manifests itself in many ways, ranging from a determination to crush any kind of dissent or internal unrest in Bamar-dominated central Myanmar to harsh counter-insurgency campaigns against the EAOs and the related ethnic communities found mostly around Myanmar's periphery. Criminal gangs and narcotics-based armies in the rural districts offend the generals' sense of mastery over all Myanmar's territory, but they seem to be tolerated more than ethnic insurgents (although the two categories often overlap), mainly because they are not directly challenging the authority of the central government.³¹⁰ Once again, this issue raises the vexed question of control. Whether it reflects a deep insecurity that can only be assuaged by rigid conformity, a genuine fear of the consequences of "chaos", or a conviction that the country's best interests are served by close management by the armed forces, Myanmar's military leadership has always wanted to manipulate the country's circumstances to its own advantage.³¹¹

At the same time, however, it needs to be acknowledged that the armed forces have precipitated much of the instability that has blighted modern Myanmar. It was the Tatmadaw, for example, working through the BSPP government and SPDC, that denied the people of Myanmar the basic human

rights that protesters demanded during the 1974 U Thant riots, the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution.³¹² Similarly, the 2021 coup took away the elected government and individual freedoms that flourished, albeit in a relative sense, after the 2011 transfer of power. This latest assertion of raw military strength has sparked the most widespread protest movement seen in Myanmar since 1948, and it has yet to run its full course. While several other factors are important, it cannot be denied that the armed forces have also played a major role in perpetuating the bitter civil wars with ethnic communities that have been Myanmar's curse, in some cases since 1948.³¹³ Even the race riots and outbreaks of religious unrest which have occurred since 1988 can be sheeted home, at least in part, to the machinations of successive military regimes.³¹⁴ It is clear that "stability" is a relative term that is interpreted and used in ways that suit the generals' interests.

Unity

There are many reasons why stability, and continued control by the armed forces, are seen by the military leadership as essential, but a key concern is that an unstable Myanmar, at war with itself, would risk its precious unity. The country's diversity is well understood. There is a deep and abiding fear among the armed forces hierarchy and, thanks largely to indoctrination, many in the ranks that, if not prevented, Myanmar will fragment, splitting along political, social, ethnic or religious lines. A reading of Myanmar's history shows how easily that could happen. Even the 2021 crisis has been seen by a few Myanmar-watchers as heralding the breakup of the country into several small sovereign states.³¹⁵ This fear has contributed to the imposition of draconian laws regarding dissent, and policies aimed at national and cultural homogenisation.³¹⁶ Under the NLD government, it was one reason why the Tatmadaw resisted the tentative steps being taken towards a nation-wide peace agreement that would have seen greater autonomy for Myanmar's ethnic communities.³¹⁷ A disunited Myanmar was seen as a vulnerable Myanmar, and thus a national security problem. The Tatmadaw's response was to play a spoiling role and effectively undermine any steps taken towards federalism.

There is another aspect to this issue, and that is the military hierarchy's deep-seated fear that the security forces themselves may break up.³¹⁸ Indeed, that is probably one of the generals' greatest

nightmares. They firmly believe that such a fissure would expose the country to the same kind of anarchy that was seen in Myanmar in the late 1940s when strikes in the police force, mutinies in the armed forces and multiple insurgencies around the country threatened the survival of the Union. It would also gravely weaken the Tatmadaw's grip on power, as the junta lacks any popular mandate and depends almost entirely on the state's coercive apparatus to maintain its position. This makes the cohesion and loyalty of the armed forces, and the maintenance of internal discipline, absolutely vital. The depth of the generals' fear can be gauged by the intensity of the indoctrination programs found in military schools and the propaganda evident in the news media and elsewhere. The prospect of serious dissent in the armed forces, or a split between the Tatmadaw and national police force, also helps to account for the large intelligence organisation established by Ne Win, which was expanded after 1988 by the SLORC and SPDC.³¹⁹ One of its primary tasks has been to watch for any sign of dissent among members of the security forces.³²⁰

Suspicion of foreigners

This strong sense of nationalism, coupled with Bamar chauvinism, gives rise to another characteristic of Myanmar under its military rulers, and that is a suspicion of all outsiders. A few observers have gone further. Nian Peng, for example, has stated that "The Burmese, as a people, are obsessively suspicious of foreigners".³²¹ Once again, this feeling can be traced back to the traumas of Myanmar's colonial and post-colonial past, when the country was victim to the machinations of foreign governments and business houses. One result of this troubled history, at least in part, was Myanmar's isolation between 1962 and 1988, and the autarkic economic policies of the Ne Win era. The country's military leadership distrusted foreigners and took extreme measures to deny them a place in national life. Tourists were restricted to stays of only 24 hours, extended in 1969 to 72 hours and in 1971 to seven days.³²² Foreign businesses were nationalised and, for most of the period, foreign investment was banned.³²³ Ne Win's bizarre socialist ideology aside, there was a real fear that the economic dominance and associated loss of political and social control that characterised the colonial era would be repeated. Until 1988, the country barely progressed beyond pre-war levels of prosperity, but it was saved by the fact that Myanmar could grow enough food for its people and was blessed with abundant natural resources.³²⁴ Despite the fact that

there was a black market in imported goods almost as large as the official economy, this encouraged modern military leaders to believe that Myanmar could survive on its own if it had to, with limited international contacts.

On occasion, there have been racist overtones to this attitude, as seen in the campaign of personal abuse waged against Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's state-run news media between 1988 and 2011. The SLORC and SPDC were keen to blacken the opposition leader's name and reduce her popular appeal, but there was also a cultural element to their actions. Aung San Suu Kyi was depicted as a foreigner's whore, through virtue of her marriage to a citizen of the former colonial power. She was also compared to the "Burma girl" in Rudyard Kipling's 1890 ballad "The Road to Mandalay", who was kissed by a British soldier beside "the old Moulmein pagoda".³²⁵ In the eyes of the generals, such women were no longer truly Burmese, and could not therefore be counted upon to give their primary loyalty to Myanmar.³²⁶ It was doubtless with Aung San Suu Kyi in mind that the 2008 constitution included a clause barring anyone with close foreign ties from becoming president of the country.³²⁷ From time to time, supporters of the opposition movement have displayed similar prejudices, for example by criticising "so-called hook nose Burma experts" who disagreed with them, foreign scholars who "take to the podium and talk in academic absurdities on Burma" and other so-called "Burma Brahmins".³²⁸ These activists seem to share the regime's suspicions about foreigners who wish to play a part in Myanmar's affairs, even if only at a distance.³²⁹

Fear of foreign interference

As already noted, Myanmar has a long history of foreign interference in its internal affairs, and this continues to influence the thinking of the Tatmadaw leadership. The three-stage British conquest of the country apart, it was invaded twice by imperial powers during the Second World War, with devastating consequences. After Myanmar regained its independence in 1948, ethnic Karen separatists were supported by British war veterans.³³⁰ Myanmar also suffered an incursion by remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's *Kuomintang* (KMT) army, which was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. In the 1950s, the People's Liberation Army launched a number of expeditions against the KMT forces in Myanmar, who were secretly being supported by the US and Taiwan.³³¹ Following the 1962 coup, several

insurgent groups and activist organisations based in Myanmar and around its borders received clandestine support from foreign governments and independent organisations. In the 1970s, for example, deposed Prime Minister U Nu's Parliamentary Democracy Party received covert support from the US.³³² Until the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1989, its insurgent army in northern Myanmar received substantial support from the CCP.³³³

If that was not enough to make Myanmar's military rulers nervous about foreign interference, in the wake of the abortive 1988 uprising the Western world turned on the new regime with vitriolic denunciations, economic sanctions, arms embargoes and travel bans. Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent almost 15 years under house arrest, was raised by foreign countries and international organisations almost to the status of a secular saint.³³⁴ Also, opposition groups both inside and outside Myanmar were supported in various ways by semi-official and independent organisations like the US Congress-funded National Endowment for Democracy and the Soros Foundation. The publicly avowed intention of almost all these governments, organisations and groups was regime change. Myanmar has also been the target of clandestine intelligence operations by several countries.³³⁵ From time to time, statements by Western leaders and other public figures have suggested that Myanmar might even be attacked. This led to a real fear in senior Tatmadaw circles that the country faced the prospect of an invasion by the US, or a coalition of forces under the UN flag.³³⁶ When derided for such notions, Myanmar's generals pointed to the extreme rhetoric of their critics, the various efforts made to undermine the regime over decades and military adventures by the US elsewhere.³³⁷

Sense of vulnerability

It is one of the more baffling aspects of the Tatmadaw's record over the years but, coupled with this defiance of the international community and ability to withstand enormous pressures, has been an equally strong sense of vulnerability. For Myanmar's military leaders appear deeply insecure. As noted

above, they worry about a wide range of threats, real and imagined, from within and outside Myanmar, from foreigners and EAOs, from civil society groups and dissident elements within the security forces. Since the 2021 coup, the nation-wide opposition movement and its strong international support can only have added to those fears. The generals' response has characteristically been to take whatever steps were deemed necessary to remove, or at least reduce those threats, all in the name of the country's stability, unity and sovereignty. In the pursuit of these three national causes, anything seems to be permitted, be it the seizure of power from an elected government, the unbridled use of force against Myanmar's own citizens, the collapse of the economy, or the destruction of the country's civil society through poverty, hunger and disease. In the face of perceived external threats, the junta has retreated into its mental and physical fortress.

It is this abiding sense of vulnerability, stemming from multiple perceived threats, that has given rise to the oft-repeated accusation that the generals are paranoid. However, as Golda Meir was reported to have said to Henry Kissinger (who later claimed the aphorism as his own), even paranoids have enemies.³³⁸ Looking at the world from their perspective, as Jerrold Post recommends, it is not difficult to see why the generals are so worried.³³⁹ Myanmar's deeply troubled history, its centrifugal ethnic, social and religious forces, its fluctuating economy and the fractious nature of Myanmar society have all posed major challenges for its rulers, both civilian and military. Since 1948, no government has found satisfactory solutions to what the British commentator Timothy Garton Ash once called Myanmar's "fiendishly complex problems".³⁴⁰ The actions of foreign countries, international organisations and activist groups have added to the worries of successive administrations. If threats are a function of capability and intent, then it is not surprising that the Tatmadaw's strategic analysts have argued at different times that foreigners pose an existential threat to the military government and even to Myanmar itself.³⁴¹ To respond to such threats is not paranoia, but something else.



Chapter Five

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERLOCUTORS

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. ... In short, international options for changing Myanmar are depressingly limited. Most observers usually end up just wringing their hands.

Morton Abramowitz and Jonathan Kolieb,
"A New Strategy on Myanmar",
Current History, November 2008.

If the foregoing survey is accepted, if only in part, then the picture of Myanmar's military leadership that emerges is multi-faceted, multi-layered and full of contradictions. It is a complex mix of the major and the minor, the positive and the negative, the real and the imagined. Outwardly, the senior officer corps displays unity, strength and resolve, and is marked by a firm commitment to specific goals. It shows no sign of compromising with its critics or abandoning its cherished ideals of national unity, stability and sovereignty, as it perceives them. Yet, on closer examination, the Tatmadaw's leadership seems to suffer from grave misperceptions, deep insecurities and an abiding sense of uncertainty on many critical issues. For its part, the Caretaker Government knows that Myanmar is facing one of its most serious crises since independence, and that it was sparked by the 2021 coup. The generals doubtless anticipated a strong public reaction, but the extraordinary response to the takeover on 1 February has clearly taken them by surprise, in its strength, persistence and geographical scope.³⁴² As one commentator put it, the Tatmadaw's seizure of power has "triggered a shift in national consciousness".³⁴³ This raises a host of difficult questions for the international community, including if, when and how to treat with Myanmar's new military regime.³⁴⁴ In short, what is more likely to produce positive changes, dialogue or diatribe?

In once again approaching this vexed question (for it has arisen many times since 1988), it is imperative that analysts and policy makers set aside for the moment their natural feelings about the "hell of untold miseries" in Myanmar, and objectively consider the costs and benefits of contact with the military regime.³⁴⁵ Principles are of course important and must always be kept in mind, but such an exercise demands a clear-sighted and hard-headed consideration of all the relevant factors.³⁴⁶ It is assumed that the aim of any policy toward Myanmar is ultimately to do good, not just to feel good, and that practical outcomes are to be preferred over empty symbolism.

CONTEMPLATING ENGAGEMENT

Myanmar's current military leaders are not the same as their predecessors. They have risen through the ranks in different times and under different circumstances. However, they display many of the same traits and beliefs. They are proud and deeply nationalistic. They are convinced of the rightness of their cause and are unapologetic about their harsh policies.³⁴⁷ They believe that Myanmar is unique and cannot be understood by foreigners. They feel that only they can solve the country's many complex problems, which must be tackled in their own way and in their own time. The generals are also sensitive to any suggestions that the military leadership, the armed forces or the country are in any way inferior to others. Myanmar's deeply troubled history offers them many lessons. One is the need to maintain the country's strong tradition of neutrality and self-reliance. They understand the benefits of international cooperation but believe that, if it has to, Myanmar can survive by going its own way. It has done so before and can do so again, with a little help from its friends. To do this, however, it must be stable, united and independent, as these terms are interpreted by the Tatmadaw.

To most observers, successive military regimes have seemed stubborn, even obstinate. They have refused to play according to the customary rules of diplomacy, preferring to stick to their own way of doing things. As an earlier government bluntly stated, "Myanmar will neither succumb to the lure of carrots nor be cowered (sic) by the threat of sticks".³⁴⁸ Indeed, it has become a point of honour among the generals not to show any weakness or lack of resolve. A readiness to compromise, even to maintain the pretence of a dialogue, could be painted as a betrayal of important principles.³⁴⁹ The greater the pressure applied by the international community, the more resistant the

regime seems to become. As Foreign Minister Win Aung stated in 1999, “Our mentality is not to succumb to any pressure. If there is pressure put upon us, we become more resistant to this pressure”.³⁵⁰ It took decades, and even now is not accepted by die-hard activists, but most governments and international organisations accept that economic and other sanctions were merely “modest inconveniences” for the SLORC and SPDC.³⁵¹ The hard line policies adopted by many countries demonstrably failed to change the generals’ thinking or make them amend any of their core policies. Sanctions were symbolically important, but they added to the problems foreign governments faced in facilitating change in Myanmar.³⁵² That said, a softer approach proved to be equally unsuccessful. As Josef Silverstein once said, “If you offer [the generals] a carrot, they will just eat it and ask for another one”.³⁵³

One reason why successive military regimes in Myanmar have felt able to thumb their noses at the international community is their “culture of impunity”.³⁵⁴ Despite recurring fears of foreign intervention, the generals know that, as long as they remain inside Myanmar, they cannot be touched.³⁵⁵ Repeated accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity have rolled off their backs in the knowledge that they are effectively beyond the reach of any national or international jurisdiction. The case brought against Myanmar in the ICJ in 2019, following the protracted Rohingya crisis, was from all accounts a shock to the generals. To be accused of genocide in such a forum was an affront to their self-image and the perceived standing of the Tatmadaw, if not the country. However, they know that, whatever the outcome of that case, it is unlikely that any senior officers will be held to account, and in any case as long as they remain in Myanmar they are safe from legal retribution. Also, after decades of sanctions, the generals’ offshore wealth is hidden in places that are difficult for hostile foreign governments to reach.³⁵⁶ Not being able to travel to countries like the UK and US is considered disappointing, but no great loss. Their families can still go on shopping excursions abroad and their children can still attend universities in places like Singapore and Australia.³⁵⁷

In looking at this long record of apparent policy failure, one factor that is often overlooked is the narrow professional background of Myanmar’s military leadership. The generals may be shrewd negotiators with significant management experience, but at heart they are “war fighters”, trained for combat. They do not think like most politicians, particularly those from the Western democracies.³⁵⁸ As Morten Pedersen has put it, they:

react to international diplomatic and economic pressure like they would an invading army. To them it is war, even if it is fought by different means, and they are not inclined to negotiate with the enemy.”³⁵⁹

As another observer wrote in 2006, “They are very street smart and because they have been in power for 43 years since 1962 they understand the meaning and effectiveness of ‘raw power’”.³⁶⁰ It has helped them achieve most of their goals, albeit over a long time and at great human cost. Also, Myanmar does not have a strong tradition of compromise. Power is usually seen as a zero-sum game. It cannot be shared. In other words, battles are either won or lost, with the cost counted only after victory has been declared. This means that only one side can emerge from negotiations as the winner. The other must be the loser. Similarly, strategies are cast as either offensive or defensive. After 2015, this problem lay at the heart of the uneasy coalition between the NLD and the Tatmadaw.³⁶¹ Aung San Suu Kyi, for example, believed that “You don’t have dialogue in the military. You have commands”.³⁶²

It has been suggested that successive military regimes in Myanmar have approached most problems in this way, seeing them as either black or white, whereas foreign traditions allow for more grey areas.³⁶³

For all the apparent rigidity in their thinking, however, Myanmar’s generals can be surprisingly flexible and pragmatic. This was apparent, for example, after the 1988 uprising when the SLORC negotiated cease-fires with several EAOs, to give it time to consolidate its rule.³⁶⁴ Also, the generals distrust China’s long term intentions, but have been prepared to accept its help, if only to survive.³⁶⁵ Since February 2021, China and Russia have provided protection for the junta in the UN Security Council, and are sources of arms.³⁶⁶ This does not mean, however, that they can dictate Myanmar’s policy positions. ASEAN is seen as a useful buffer against the rest of the international community, its policy of non-interference in its members’ internal affairs a guarantee that it will not exert undue pressure. The Western countries are seen as hostile, and interested only in regime change. Military intervention by one or more is still considered a possibility.³⁶⁷ The UN and even humanitarian agencies are also seen as threats, if they try to intervene in Myanmar’s internal affairs.³⁶⁸ To the generals, their critics are demanding nothing short of unconditional surrender, and the abandonment of everything they hold dear. That is not going to happen, and any general who even contemplated such an outcome would be replaced very quickly with someone with greater resolve.

The Tatmadaw is a hierarchical organisation with a clearly defined chain of command. Orders flow down from senior officers to more junior ones and from Defence headquarters out to subordinate commands. On paper, this places the Commander-in-Chief in a paramount position, able to direct the functioning of the entire organisation through both formal and informal channels. To that extent, he can be held personally responsible for the junta's policies and the actions taken by Tatmadaw units around the country.³⁶⁹ However, in practice, Myanmar's military leadership seems to act on a more collective basis, with the Commander-in-Chief reliant on his immediate subordinates to support and implement his decisions. For example, it is highly unlikely that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing would have been able to stage a coup in February unless he had the support of the senior officer corps. The eight military members of the SAC represented the chiefs of all three services and other key positions in the Tatmadaw hierarchy.³⁷⁰ Thus, while Min Aung Hlaing's personality, views and private interests are critical to any analysis of the regime's policies and behaviour, those of his close colleagues also need to be taken into account. As a recent study stated, "analysis of their educational backgrounds, career trajectories, demographic characteristics, economic roles and interests, and prior involvement in Myanmar's peace process, is crucial to any effort to understand the country's new military regime".³⁷¹

That raises another issue. Whenever critics of Myanmar's military leaders run out of explanations for their apparently self-defeating policies and refusal to respond to diplomatic approaches, they often fall back on the "fact" that the generals are very superstitious.³⁷² Past governments, for example, have been accused of making decisions not on the basis of rational and logical calculations, but on the advice of astrologers, numerologists and magicians. It is true that, since 1948, three of Myanmar's paramount leaders (civilian and military) have been known for their belief in the supernatural.³⁷³ Also, some generals have sought advice from astrologers and been reputed to practice *yadaya*, a mystical technique for manipulating the results of portents.³⁷⁴ Over the past 50 years, such beliefs have reportedly influenced many important military appointments and policy decisions.³⁷⁵ Little hard evidence has been offered to support such claims but, in any study of political culture and the behavior of national leaders, some allowance must be made for "irrational actors" and idiosyncratic decisions by powerful individuals. That said, it would be a mistake to assume that Myanmar's military leadership is incapable

of making sensible and rational decisions. The Caretaker Government's domestic and foreign policies may be controversial, but they are dictated by hard-headed calculations that, albeit in different contexts, would be familiar to many other governments.

Another complication in considering possible engagement with the new Caretaker Government is that, like their predecessors, its members do not see Myanmar's many problems in isolation but as part of an intricately interconnected whole. For example, even before 1988, the military leadership 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 were seen as indivisible. A perceived threat to one was considered a threat to all, arousing strong feelings among the leadership at all levels. Add to this a keen sense of personal survival, and a felt need to preserve private interests, 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 suffering or international opinion. In any future approaches to the Caretaker Government, these issues will have to be taken into account. At a more practical level too, foreign governments will need to understand that Myanmar is not a collection of discrete problems, but must be viewed as a complex web of inter-related challenges. Trying to address one will inevitably require getting involved in others, and that will usually mean working with the regime in various ways.

If there is one issue that stands out from this complicated picture, it is the generals' lack of trust. They are deeply suspicious of everyone, their so-called friends and foes alike. Their default option is to draw back, to rely only on themselves and what they can control. As always, there is a tendency to look inwards for solutions to problems and a reluctance to listen to advice from outsiders. There was an influx of foreign consultants and advisers under the NLD government, mainly in connection to the nationwide peace process (the so-called "peace-industrial complex"), but opinions about their contributions are mixed.³⁷⁶ It would seem that the generals listened to them politely, and sometimes took their advice, but retained their suspicion of "alien influences" and "subversive" ideas that might weaken the country, and their hold on power. Some activists have painted the entire consultation process as a cynical and expensive charade.³⁷⁷ The generals' fortress mentality now extends to the management of crises like Myanmar's economic collapse and the COVID-19

pandemic devastating the country. Recent reports predict that up to half the population will contract the virus, and millions may die.³⁷⁸ Yet, even in these dire circumstances, the generals seem to be calculating the odds on their own survival, the survival of the Tatmadaw and the survival of the country as a stable, united and independent state under their control.

In contemplating engagement with the Caretaker Government, there is a broader issue to be kept in mind. It has long been the mantra of the Western democracies, and the professed belief of many other countries, that the world is best served by the universal observance of international laws, expressed through governments chosen by free peoples and conducted according to ethical standards. Such principles have been cited in countless speeches, announcements and policies made in the wake of coups and human rights violations in Myanmar. Over the years, sanctions have been applied against successive military regimes, not only to punish those responsible for abuses, but also to demonstrate that there is a price to pay for a failure to observe what are generally accepted as international norms.³⁷⁹ As already noted, many of these measures have been largely symbolic. Yet, in one sense, their effectiveness, or otherwise, is not the point. Democratic governments and organisations like the UN need to demonstrate, both to their own constituents and to the international community as a whole that the rule of law is important, and that the principles on which these laws are based are being supported. Such gestures make a statement about international values and norms of behaviour. They also deny to military regimes in Myanmar the recognition they have craved, by emphasising their lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the world.³⁸⁰

In these circumstances, any government or international organisation that hopes to improve the situation in Myanmar, or even just provide practical help to its people, by attempting a dialogue with the generals, will need to consider their approach carefully.

PLANNING DIALOGUE

It is important that anyone intending to engage with Myanmar's military regime is aware of, and comprehends the country's troubled history, understands the background to its current problems and appreciates the impact that historical events have had on the thinking and behaviour of the Tatmadaw's hierarchy. For, consciously or not, the

generals constantly hark back to the colonial period. It is the Myanmar equivalent of China's "century of humiliation", which underpins Beijing's "never again" mentality.³⁸¹ Myanmar's leaders also recall the post-independence troubles, foreign interference in the country since 1948, and the foreign pressures applied against Myanmar after 1988. More recent developments are doubtless uppermost in their minds these days, but past events provide a context for the Caretaker Government's consideration of the criticisms levelled against it since February by the international community.³⁸² History also colours the thinking of the generals on other issues, makes them deeply distrustful of foreign involvement in Myanmar's affairs and adds to their wariness of any commitments that might expose them, the Tatmadaw or the country to danger, as they see it. Even then, regardless of any efforts made by outsiders to satisfy such concerns, the generals may, for reasons known only to themselves, reject any advances. Inaction is often seen as the safest response.

In addition, any approach that fails to show the military regime, the Tatmadaw and the country the respect that the generals feel they deserve will doom any subsequent proceedings. For example, foreigners speaking to the Tatmadaw's leadership need to be aware of its sensitivity to any suggestions of inferiority. To approach negotiations in the belief that Myanmar's leaders are uneducated or unworldly, or in a way that appears patronising, will immediately cause offence. Similarly, disparaging references to Myanmar's many obvious problems will not help win a sympathetic hearing. The current crop of generals has presided over the massacre of thousands of people, blighted the lives of millions and been damned in the eyes of the world, but across a negotiating table they demand to be treated as equals. Preaching, moralising, or threatening behaviour will see the negotiations fail.³⁸³ This has happened many times in the past. Inducements and concessions may be considered, but will be ineffective if they are not offered in the right way, and do not take account of the generals' core concerns. Even then, hopes for a positive response should be kept in check. As Foreign Minister Win Aung put it in 2002, "For us, giving a banana to the monkey and then asking it to dance is not the way. We are not monkeys".³⁸⁴

Every foreign government will have its own way of approaching discussions with Myanmar's military leaders, reflecting different national interests, diplomatic traditions and cultural backgrounds. A logical first step would be for them clearly to state their policy positions and acknowledge international

norms. That will be expected. After that, however, it is up to the negotiators. One approach would be to acknowledge the generals' commitment to Myanmar's best interests, as they see them. The point can then be made that these goals cannot be achieved unless circumstances change. This would not only be in the Caretaker Government's interests but also those of Myanmar more broadly. A critical first step, however, would be for the generals to shift their current stance and embrace policies that would help relieve Myanmar's immediate problems. If this was not done, history would judge them unkindly. By citing the Caretaker Government's own broad aims regarding matters like education, health and child welfare, many of which are uncontroversial, foreign delegations may get a sympathetic hearing. The obvious next step would be to ask how the international community can help the generals to make the necessary changes. Such an approach would not satisfy the regime's strongest critics, who want nothing less than the overthrow of the Caretaker Government, disbandment of the Tatmadaw and the trial of the senior generals. However, it may help more of Myanmar's people survive the current crisis.³⁸⁵

As part of such an approach, there may be value in pointing out to the generals that the resolution of Myanmar's current problems, or at least the provision of practical assistance, would not only be in Myanmar's interests but also in those of other countries. For example, even if Myanmar did not become a "failed state", whatever that may mean in this context, there would be serious repercussions for its immediate neighbours if it continued along its current trajectory. The social distress, civil unrest, human rights violations, terrorism and armed conflict that have together characterised the post-coup period are already overflowing Myanmar's borders. This problem will grow and cause bilateral tensions that Myanmar can ill afford. Inevitably, the international community too will be affected by the increased health risks, greater refugee outflows and expanding transnational crime networks that are likely to accompany a collapse in civil order.³⁸⁶ These problems would likely permit other security issues to develop that would in turn have a serious impact on Myanmar's stability, unity and sovereignty. It could be argued, therefore, that it would be in the Caretaker Government's own interests to allow external actors like humanitarian agencies to help the most vulnerable in Myanmar and to try to head off the wider consequences of the current turmoil.

Should foreign governments, notably the Western democracies, feel that direct talks with the Caretaker

Government are precluded by domestic political considerations, or because they have already offended the generals by their strong public positions, then another approach might be explored. As noted above, ASEAN has always been considered relatively neutral as regards developments in Myanmar. Even when its members have spoken out against the Tatmadaw's brutal treatment of the Muslim Rohingyas, or on other issues, the regional grouping itself has not been considered a serious threat.³⁸⁷ That has seen ASEAN dismissed by many activists and other observers as toothless and ineffective, if not worse.³⁸⁸ However, over the years it has been able to discuss sensitive matters with Myanmar's military leadership in ways that have not been open to other countries.³⁸⁹ Occasionally, this has produced positive results. After Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, for example, ASEAN was able to negotiate an agreement with the SPDC that saw much-needed aid (including supplies from Western countries) delivered to the victims of the storm.³⁹⁰ In a similar fashion, ASEAN may be able to pass messages to the Caretaker Government from third countries, or even to act as a conduit for foreign aid to assist the people of Myanmar. This seems to be Australia's current strategy.³⁹¹

Given the generals' unshakeable conviction that only they can understand Myanmar's problems, and only they know what is best for the country, any attempts by foreign delegations to seek a return to the *status quo ante*, or a new and genuinely democratic political system, would be futile. The nature of Myanmar's future government, and how it might be formed, are not subjects that the military leadership sees as being open for negotiation.³⁹² Nor is the junta likely to entertain any demands, or even suggestions, that it surrender to, or share power with, those diverse forces that it has already branded terrorists and traitors.³⁹³ That simply will not happen. At this stage, the only subjects that might be open to discussion are those that offer the junta something it wants, without the sacrifice of anything it deems important. Humanitarian aid, to help with the COVID-19 crisis, or other kinds of practical assistance, might fall into such a category. As occurred with Cyclone Nargis in 2008, however, any aid would have to be through neutral, civilian channels that did not threaten the generals' grip on power or their personal interests.³⁹⁴ Donors would have to expect that the Tatmadaw would take a share of any aid supplies given, as well as credit for their delivery. This may not appeal to some countries.

This sad state of affairs poses a number of practical problems for the international community. Such is the

level of public outrage and official concern generated by the 2021 coup and its bloody aftermath, that even to contemplate discussions with the Caretaker Government is to court controversy.³⁹⁵ Already there have been accusations that, simply by speaking to the junta, the international community has bestowed some form of legitimacy upon it.³⁹⁶ Many activists are demanding that talks be held instead with the self-styled National Unity Government (NUG), created in April 2021 by an eclectic mixture of elected NLD politicians, minor party members, EAOs and pro-democracy figures. However, the NUG has no formal standing, controls no territory in its own right, nor has the power to make significant changes inside Myanmar. Its stated policies may have popular appeal, at least outside Myanmar, but in many ways are quite unrealistic.³⁹⁷ Its “declaration of war” on 7 September 2021 caused widespread foreign concern.³⁹⁸ Some officials have already made contact with NUG representatives, but formal recognition is unlikely.³⁹⁹ Any government or international organisation that openly acknowledged this shadow administration would be condemned by the Caretaker Government.⁴⁰⁰ Their resident representatives would most likely be declared *persona non grata* and expelled from Myanmar. They would thus lose any chance they ever had of being able to assist in delivering the kind of aid that is so badly needed.⁴⁰¹

There is also the risk that, by acknowledging the historical, cultural and social foundations of the generals’ mindset, and consciously taking them into account in any negotiations, governments will be accused of being apologists for the junta.⁴⁰² As some Myanmar-watchers have already found to their cost, even to suggest that the generals may be justified in having certain concerns is to invite condemnation from members of the global activist community. Similarly, to posit various intangible reasons for the behaviour of the armed forces and its leaders over the years has been seen as making excuses for policies and practices that are by any normal measure inexcusable.⁴⁰³ Hard-headed analyses by veteran Myanmar-watchers that do not support the prevailing popular mood have also attracted the ire of pro-democracy activists, human rights campaigners and anti-junta Burmese.⁴⁰⁴ In the highly-charged atmosphere that surrounds contemporary Myanmar, even scholarly works employing established social science techniques, with the aim of producing objective, evidence-based analyses, have been dismissed as “bloodless erudition”, far removed from the harsh realities of life on the ground in Myanmar. Yet all such efforts help provide a clear-sighted understanding of current developments and, as far as possible, insights into the junta’s thinking.

All that said, to better understand the regime’s mindset, have any chance of persuading it to modify its policies, help avoid further bloodshed and to provide much-needed support to the people of Myanmar, some form of direct contact will be necessary.⁴⁰⁵ This could be done bilaterally, but at present the Caretaker Government seems to be speaking to few governments other than those prepared to accept its spurious claims to legitimacy.⁴⁰⁶ Contact could also be made through multilateral organisations, but the UN has strongly criticised the junta and been listed among the regime’s perceived enemies.⁴⁰⁷ ASEAN has invited Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to a summit meeting, and thus bestowed a form of recognition on the SAC, but the regional grouping is unlikely to shift the generals from any of their core positions.⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus and the despatch of a special envoy to Myanmar seem designed specifically to avoid putting any pressure on the new Caretaker Government.⁴⁰⁹ It can only be hoped that, faced with the imminent collapse of the country, either through the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing socio-economic crisis or the spreading violence (on both sides), the generals will become more amenable to talks with the international community. If Myanmar becomes a truly failed state, its problems will become even harder to resolve.⁴¹⁰

Given the potential problems associated with public contacts with the Caretaker Government, an argument can be mounted that any engagement with the regime might be more productive if conducted out of the public eye. This would allow exchanges to occur without undue expectations being raised. It would also provide a buffer between governments and activist groups, leaving the former free to explore a wider range of options. The generals too are likely to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive matters if they know that anything they say will not be broadcast widely, and immediately subjected to examination by their many vocal critics.⁴¹¹ Such a course of action may run counter to the ideals of democratic governments, which profess to support the principles of transparency and accountability. If revealed, any such talks would inevitably raise the cry of “secret diplomacy”, leading to suspicions of unacceptable compromises and cosy deals. However, such talks have been successful with other oppressive regimes in the past, and paved the way to some unexpected breakthroughs.⁴¹² If the aim is genuinely to establish a line of communication with the generals, and have productive discussions with the ultimate goal of helping the people of Myanmar, then it may be worth the risk. If they become known, the governments involved in such talks can always say that they were supping with a very long spoon!

CONCLUSION

In dealing with oppressive regimes, we need to try to understand them.

Vaclav Havel
"Foreword", in Benedict Rogers,
Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant
(Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010)

A survey such as this is a real "ramble through the brambles", as a veteran British diplomat once described discussions about policy options on Myanmar.⁴¹³ There are political thorns everywhere, threatening to draw blood, analytical thickets inviting entanglements of all kinds, and emotional bogs luring the reader deeper into impossible moral and ethical dilemmas. It is offered, however, in the interests of intellectual inquiry and in the hope that these musings will be of interest to those officials, academics and others who, in their own ways and for their own purposes, all follow developments in Myanmar with keen interest.

This study is necessarily laden with all sorts of caveats and cautions. In part, this is because it deals with intangibles, and what former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called "known unknowns".⁴¹⁴ The Tatmadaw begs for closer attention, but there is simply not enough hard data on which to draw firm conclusions. It is also because Myanmar's senior officer corps defies detailed analysis. In part, this is because there are vast gaps in the public record, not to mention the "unknown unknowns", or "the ones we don't know we don't know".⁴¹⁵ This leaves the field wide open to intuition, interpretation and speculation. Even if based on wide reading and long experience, these are very fragile bases for serious analysis. Inevitably, an exercise such as this attracts questions, criticisms and controversy of all kinds, made all the more heated by the dreadful events of the past eight months. As has been seen on many occasions before now, Myanmar has the power to arouse

strong passions on the part of officials, activists and members of the public, in many countries. In these days of the Internet, social media and other forms of mass communication, such emotions can easily overwhelm objective analysis, evidence-based or not.

It is to be hoped, however, that whatever the verdict passed on this exploratory survey, and its tentative conclusions, there is wide agreement about its basic premise. That is, before any progress can be made in resolving Myanmar's many complex problems, both those inside the country and those outside it need to understand much better the mindset of the generals who make up the Tatmadaw's senior officer corps, in particular those who are members of the Caretaker Government. They need to try and see the world from the generals' perspective and formulate their responses accordingly. For, unless it is known how the generals look at themselves, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar and the world, it will not be possible to treat with them in a productive fashion. Even then, interlocutors are going to require great patience and a willingness to compromise, even to win small gains. Indeed, if a decision is made to talk with the generals, as seems inevitable at some stage, then nothing could be worse than going into negotiations with a resolutely Western approach, making strong demands and insisting that to avoid dire consequences the generals in effect surrender their position. For all the reasons outlined above, that is simply not going to happen. It will only make the generals even more resistant to change. As always, it will be the long-suffering people of Myanmar who will pay the costs.

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136. Alexander McLaughlin, "A Look Inside the Myanmar Military", *Foreign Affairs Review*, St Andrews University, 30 April 2021, at <https://www.foreignaffairsreview.com/home/a-look-inside-the-myanmar-military>
137. Martin Smith, "The Enigma of Burma's Tatmadaw: A 'State Within a State'", *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2003, pp. 621-32.
138. See, for example, Moshe Lissak, *Military Roles in Modernisation: Civil-Military Relations in Thailand and Burma* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976), pp. 185-203.
139. In the 1990s, for example, one Roman Catholic of mixed Anglo-Burman and Indian ancestry became a Brigadier and a Cabinet Minister. He was also believed to have some Jewish heritage. This was David Abel, who held three ministerial posts under the SLORC and SPDC. See "David Abel, the junta's stymied reformer", *Frontier*, 22 January 2019, at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/david-abel-the-juntas-stymied-reformer/>
140. Some restrictions still applied, for example against Rohingyas and other Muslims. For this expansion and modernisation program, see Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces*.
141. Amara Thiha, "Understanding the Tatmadaw's 'standard army' reforms", *Frontier*, 22 June 2017, at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/understanding-the-tatmadaws-standard-army-reforms/>
142. In 2013, female officer candidates (for non-medical roles) were accepted for the first time since 1961. Tim McLaughlin, "First women graduate from officer training", *Myanmar Times*, 30 August 2014, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/11487-first-women-graduate-from-officer-training-school.html>
143. D.I. Steinberg, "The Military in Burma/Myanmar: On the Longevity of Tatmadaw Rule and Influence", *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 6, 2021 (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), p. 22.
144. The SAC includes the Tatmadaw's most senior generals. Seven of its eight military members are DSA graduates. One is a graduate of the OTS. The Teza officer recruitment program began in 1971 and ended in 2000, with the last officers commissioned in 2002.
145. Khin Nyunt's fall from grace has been explained in different ways, but the competition between these two factions is usually the most favoured. See Selth, *Secrets and Power in Myanmar*, pp. 61-5.
146. M.P. Callahan, "Junta dreams or nightmares?: Observations of Burma's military since 1988", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1999, pp. 52-8.
147. See, for example, M.P. Callahan, "Of kyay-zu and kyet-su: The military in 2006", in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds), *Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), pp. 38-9.
148. The best known of these episodes is the 1976 "captains' coup". See, for example, E.W. Martin, "Burma in 1976: The Beginnings of Change?", *Asian Survey*, vol. 17, no. 2, February 1977, pp. 155-6. There have been several other plots to assassinate Myanmar's most senior military leaders, but they were hatched by elements outside the Tatmadaw. See, for example, Kyaw Zwa Moe, "The Assassin Who Couldn't Kill", *The Irrawaddy*, 21 October 2011, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=22303&page=2; and "A Look at Myanmar's Long History of Political Assassinations", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 August 2021, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/a-look-at-myanmars-long-history-of-political-assassinations.html>
149. For example, during the 1960s, General Ne Win favoured men from his old command, the 4th Burma Rifles, knowing that he could count on their personal loyalty. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Whose army?", *The Irrawaddy*, 31 March 2014, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/whose-army.html>
150. Ironically, after 1988 it was a matter of concern for senior Tatmadaw officers that, following the negotiation of cease-fires with most major insurgent groups, many junior officers did not have such formative experiences. Rather, they spent much of their early careers managing civil construction projects and performing administrative tasks. The lack of combat experience not only caused morale problems but, it was feared, weakened the commitment of those officers to the military government. See Callahan, "Junta dreams or nightmares?", pp. 54-6.
151. See, for example, J.M. Post, *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behaviour* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
152. One attempt to analyse Myanmar's "national culture", by applying a values system devised in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a Dutch industrial psychologist, suggested that "Myanmar is a low power distance, highly feminine, moderately individualistic, high uncertainty avoidance culture with a moderate long-term orientation". See C.A. Rarick and Inge Nickerson, "An Exploratory Study of Myanmar Culture Using Hofstede's Value Dimensions", *SSRN*, 20 February 2006, at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1114625
153. The term Other Ranks describes service personnel who are not commissioned officers. This includes soldiers, sailors and airmen, non-commissioned officers and warrant officers.

154. Melford E. Spiro, "Human Nature in Its Psychological Dimensions", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 56, no. 1, February 1954, pp. 19-30.
155. A key aspect of Tatmadaw propaganda is Myanmar's glorious past, under its three great unifying kings, Anawratha, Bayinnaung and Alaungpaya. See, for example, Andrew Selth, "A statue in Naypyidaw: Exploring motifs and meanings", *New Mandala*, 8 May 2012, at <https://www.newmandala.org/a-statue-in-naypyidaw-exploring-motifs-and-meanings/>
156. See, for example, Angelene Naw, *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2001).
157. See, for example, "Myanmar Press Accuses EU of 'Neo-Colonialism'", *Reuters*, 18 February 1999, at <https://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199902/msg00390.html>. See also Htet Aung, "Burma's State Media Accuses US Donor Foundation of Neo-colonialism", *The Irrawaddy*, 15 June 2007, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=7489
158. Senior General Than Shwe, quoted in *Kyodo News*, 30 January 2001. This has been a constant theme, repeated by other senior military figures. See, for example, Wai Moe, "Junta Media Warns of Neo-colonialist Dangers", *The Irrawaddy*, 30 December 2010, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=20443
159. James Hookway, "Myanmar Says Clearing of Rohingya Is Unfinished Business From WWII", *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 September 2017, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-army-chief-defends-clearing-rohingya-villages-1504410530>
160. D.S. Mathieson, "The Enemy Within", *The Irrawaddy*, 1 May 2004, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=963
161. Jameson, "How Burma's Generals View the World", p. 1. On the Tatmadaw's reaction to other world events, see for example Trevor Wilson, "Democratisation in Myanmar and the Arab Uprisings", in Amin Saikal and Amitav Acharya (eds), *Democracy and Reform in the Middle East and Asia: Social Protest and Authoritarian Rule after the Arab Spring* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014), pp. 187-202.
162. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (2008), p2.
163. Burmese show their respect or homage to those of higher social standing by kneeling before them and paying obeisance by joining their hands together and touching the floor with their forehead three times, in a ceremonial practice known as *shiko* or *gadaw*. See, for example, Ma Thanegi, "Customs, Ceremonies and Festivals", *My Magical Myanmar*, October 2013, p. 6.
164. Bunge, *Burma: A Country Study*, pp. 109-13. See also Andrew Selth, *Civil-Military Relations in Burma: Portents, Predictions and Possibilities*, Regional Outlook no. 25 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2010).
165. Aung Zaw et al, "The Enemy Within", *The Irrawaddy*, vol. 8, no. 3, March 2000, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=676
166. Andrew Selth, "Myanmar's personalised politics", *The Interpreter*, 11 March 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-personalised-politics>
167. Bo Kyaw Nyein, "Understanding the SPDC Generals", Translated blog post, January 2006, at https://translate.google.com.au/translate?hl=en&sl=my&u=http://bokyawnyein.blogspot.com/2009/09/blog-post_3818.html&prev=search&pto=aue
168. See, for example, Christina Fink, "Governing Myanmar", *The Diplomat*, 24 February 2017, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/governing-myanmar/>
169. Win Min, "Looking Inside the Burmese Military", in Lowell Dittmer (ed), *Burma or Myanmar: The Struggle for National Identity* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2010), pp. 156-9.
170. Michal Lubina, "A Burmese Tragedy of Power", *Berkeley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs*, 8 March 2021, at <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/a-burmese-tragedy-of-power>. It is assumed that, after ten years in command of the Tatmadaw, Min Aung Hlaing has filled most key positions with officers who he considers loyal to himself.
171. It is not known exactly how many members of the then Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI) were dismissed after Khin Nyunt's arrest, but estimates have ranged from "scores" to 30,000. The actual number was probably around 3,000. Some low-ranking servicemen were later reinstated. Selth, *Secrets and Power in Myanmar*, p. 66.
172. Josef Silverstein, "The Idea of Freedom in Burma and the Political Thought of Aung San Suu Kyi", *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 2, Summer, 1996, p. 219.
173. *Burma Weekly Bulletin* (new series), vol. 8, no. 50, 5 April 1960, p. 459.
174. See, for example, Nyi Win Hman, "Change yourself, change the nation", *Myanmar Times*, 10 December 2012, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/3546-change-yourself-change-the-nation.html>
175. Rarick and Nickerson, "An Exploratory Study of Myanmar Culture Using Hofstede's Value Dimensions". See also Geertz, "A Study of National Character", p. 209.
176. See, however, Tharapi Than, *Women in Modern Burma* (London: Routledge, 2014). She argues that women in Myanmar are not as "liberated" as often portrayed.
177. See, for example, R.H. Taylor, "Do states make nations? The politics of identity in Myanmar revisited", *Southeast Asia Research*, vol. 13, no. 3, November 2005, pp. 261-86.

178. See, for example, D.I. Steinberg, "The 'Lady' tests the limits", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 12 April 2016, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/David-I.-Steinberg-The-Lady-tests-the-limits>. See also Zoltan Barany, "Burma: Suu Kyi's Missteps", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 29, no. 1, January 2018, pp. 5-19.
179. Shibani Mahtani, "Suu Kyi's godlike status drove her election win. It threatens to rip the country apart", *Washington Post*, 18 November 2020, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/myanmar-elections-democracy-suu-kyi/2020/11/18/5d3b9672-2588-11eb-9c4a-0dc6242c4814_story.html
180. Win Min, "Looking Inside the Burmese Military", in Dittmer, pp. 158-9.
181. Win Min, "Looking Inside the Burmese Military", *Asian Survey*, pp. 1018-37.
182. Of the eight military members of the State Administration Council in February 2021, six had been Regional Military Commanders. See Htet Myet Min Tun, Moe Thuzar and Michael Montesano, "Min Aung Hlaing and his Generals", p. 6.
183. Bo Kyaw Nyein, "Understanding the SPDC Generals", p. 8. See also Htet Myet Tun et al, "Min Aung Hlaing and His Generals", p. 7. General Khin Nyunt was a notable exception to this rule, a factor that contributed to his downfall.
184. It has been suggested, for example, that Min Aung Hlaing wished to avoid compulsory retirement in July 2021, wanted to safeguard his enormous personal wealth, or was anxious to protect his family from jealous rivals. These propositions may be true, but there is no hard evidence to support any of them. See, for example, Andrew Selth, "The coup in Myanmar: What do we know?", *The Interpreter*, 3 February 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/coup-myanmar-what-do-we-know>; and Zaheena Rashid, "Why Myanmar's military seized power in a coup", *Al Jazeera*, February 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/1/who-is-min-aung-hlaing>
185. "Abolish the fascist army': Tatmadaw defector says unarmed resistance is not enough to defeat coup regime", *Myanmar Now*, 10 April 2021, at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/multimedia/abolish-the-fascist-army-tatmadaw-defector-says-unarmed-resistance-not-enough-to-defeat>. See also *Sold to be Soldiers: The Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2007), pp. 32-44.
186. Htet Naing Zaw, "Younger Myanmar Military Officers Promoted to Key Roles in Reshuffle", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 May 2020, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/younger-myanmar-military-officers-promoted-key-roles-reshuffle.html>
187. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, "Setting the rules for survival: Why the Burmese military regime survives in an age of democratisation", *The Pacific Review*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2009, pp. 271-91.
188. The reduction in the size of the Tatmadaw after 2011, for example, prompted fears among young officers (inducted during an earlier period of expansion) of a promotions "logjam". See Maung Aung Myoe, "The Soldier and the State: The Tatmadaw and Political Liberalisation Since 2011", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 233-49.
189. Bertil Lintner, "Fear is the Glue That Holds Myanmar's Military Together", *The Irrawaddy*, 9 March 2021, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/fear-glue-holds-myanmars-military-together.html>
190. The implication was that military personnel responsible for atrocities during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising would be put on trial by the new NLD government. Roger Mitton, "Entering the rule-of-law minefield", *Myanmar Times*, 21 May 2015, at <https://www.mmtimes.com/opinion/14586-entering-the-rule-of-law-minefield.html>
191. *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* (2008), p. 178.
192. Tun Kyaw Nyein, et al, "Rethinking the Burma Strategy: A New Approach", *Bo Kyaw Nyein*, January 2006, at <http://bokyawnyeinstein.blogspot.com/2008/02/rethinking-burma-strategy-new-approach.html>
193. "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Gambia v Myanmar)", *International Court of Justice*, at <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/178/orders>
194. "Myanmar: Coup Leads to Crimes Against Humanity", *Human Rights Watch*, 31 July 2021, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/31/myanmar-coup-leads-crimes-against-humanity>
195. The 2007 Saffron Revolution, for example, was sparked by dramatic and unexpected rises in the price of staple foods and public transportation, which caused hardship for many Burmese. *Crackdown: Repression of the 2007 Popular Protests in Burma* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 6 December 2007), at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/12/06/crackdown/repression-2007-popular-protests-burma>
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202. Aung Zaw, et al, "The Enemy Within".
203. Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, "The Economic Interests of the Myanmar Military", *Human Rights Council*, 9–27 September 2019, Agenda Item 4.
204. Joshua Cheetham, "Myanmar coup: The shadowy business empire funding the Tatmadaw", *BBC News*, 9 March 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56133766>
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218. See, for example, Aung Zaw et al, "The Enemy Within".
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236. See also Saw Tun, "The Military Mind-set", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 March 2009, at https://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=15290.
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240. This can be seen, for example, in Nic Dunlop's 2010 film "Burma Soldier". See Hillary Brenhouse, "HBO Documentary 'Burma Soldier' Shows Life Under Junta", *Time*, 18 May 2011, at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2071006,00.html>. See also Swe Win, "'The Tatmadaw is the mother and the father!' - inside the militarised schools training Myanmar's civil servants", *Myanmar Now*, 30 January 2019, at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/the-tatmadaw-is-the-mother-and-the-father-inside-the-militarised-schools-training-myanmars>; and Chan Thar and Nyan Hlaing Lin, "Tatmadaw 'imposes harsher punishments' for desertion as more military medics abandon their posts", *Myanmar Now*, 7 January 2021, at <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/tatmadaw-imposes-harsher-punishments-for-desertion-as-more-military-medics-abandon-their-posts>
241. Mathieson, "The Enemy Within".
242. See, for example, Harn Lay, *Defiant Humour: The Best of Harn Lay's Political Cartoons from The Irrawaddy*, 2nd edition (Yangon: U Thaung Win, 2016).
243. "The Lady", directed by Luc Besson (EuropaCorp, 2011), *International Movie Database*, at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1802197/>. Aung San Suu Kyi graduated from Oxford University with a third class degree in politics, philosophy and economics in 1967.
244. Brenhouse, "HBO Documentary 'Burma Soldier' Shows Life Under Junta".
245. It must be said, however, that in the nature of many Myanmar educational programs, cadets at the DSA are not taught critical thinking, nor encouraged to question their teachers.
246. Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p. 140. These positions are usually filled by Brigadiers or Colonels (*Bo Hmu Gyi*).

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321. Nian Peng, *International Pressures, Strategic Preference, and Myanmar's China Policy Since 1988*, p. 26.
322. Andrew Selth, *Burma Watching: A Retrospective*, Regional Outlook no. 39 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2012), p. 10. After 1988, the SLORC gradually opened up the state, initially granting visitors visas for a month and permitting foreigners to live in the country for extended periods. Under strict controls, foreign investment was also permitted.
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332. Martin Smith, "Ethnic Conflicts in Burma: From Separatism to Federalism", in A.T.H. Tan (ed), *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), p. 307. See also Kenton Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar Since 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 226-33.
333. Bertil Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1990).
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336. Andrew Selth, *Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?*, Regional Outlook no. 17 (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2008).
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339. Post, *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World*, p. ix.
340. Timothy Garton Ash, "Beauty and the Beast in Burma", *New York Review of Books*, 25 May 2000, at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/05/25/beauty-and-the-beast-in-burma/>
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345. "President Thein Sein's Inaugural Speech". The phrase was originally used to describe the suffering of the Burmese people from decades of armed conflict and other strife, but seems apposite again now.
346. See, for example, "Submission by Nicholas Coppel", Foreign Affairs and Aid Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, Parliament of Australia, Public Hearing on Myanmar, 13 April 2021, at file:///C:/Users/Andrew/Downloads/Sub%2012%20-%20Nicholas%20Coppel%20(8).pdf. See also "Written evidence from Dr Lee Jones, Queen Mary University of London", UK Parliament, Foreign Affairs Committee (MYA0001, The Myanmar Crisis), 13 May 2021, at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/35856/pdf/>
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andrew Selth is an Adjunct Professor at the Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, in Brisbane, Australia. He has been studying international security issues and Asian affairs for more than 45 years, as a diplomat, strategic intelligence analyst and research scholar. Between 1974 and 1986 he was assigned to the Australian missions in Rangoon, Seoul and Wellington, and later held senior positions in both the Defence Intelligence Organisation and Office of National Assessments. He has been an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University (ANU), a Visiting Fellow at the ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, a Chevening Scholar at St Antony's College, Oxford University, an Australian Research Council Fellow at Griffith University and a Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia. Dr

Selth has published 11 books, 25 research papers and more than 50 other peer-reviewed works, most of them about Myanmar (Burma) and related subjects. He has also contributed to the public debate on Myanmar through numerous articles, commentaries and reviews in magazines, newspapers and online fora.

Books by Andrew Selth

- 1986 *The Terrorist Threat to Diplomacy: An Australian Perspective*
- 1988 *Against Every Human Law: The Terrorist Threat to Diplomacy*
- 1996 *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces Since 1988*
- 2002 *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*
- 2012 *Burma (Myanmar) since the 1988 Uprising: A Select Bibliography*
- 2015 *Burma (Myanmar) since the 1988 Uprising: A Select Bibliography* (2nd edition)
- 2017 *Burma, Kipling and Western Music: The Riff from Mandalay*
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- 2019 *Secrets and Power in Myanmar: Intelligence and the Fall of General Khin Nyunt*
- 2020 *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*
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Griffith Asia Institute
Griffith University Nathan campus
Nathan Queensland 4111, Australia
Email: gai@griffith.edu.au
LinkedIn: [griffith-asia-institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/griffith-asia-institute)
Facebook: [griffithasiainstitute](https://www.facebook.com/griffithasiainstitute)
Twitter: [@GAIGriffith](https://twitter.com/GAIGriffith)

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