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BURMA: A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

Andrew Selth

*Visiting Fellow, Strategic and Defense Studies Center,
Australian National University*

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Author's Note

After the creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988, Burma's name was officially changed from its post-1974 form, the "Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma," back to the "Union of Burma," which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989, the military regime changed the country's name once again, this time to "Myanmar Naing-Ngan," or the "Union of Myanmar," a direct transliteration of the official name in the Burmese language. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform to their original Burmese pronunciation. These new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations and most other major international organizations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to an elected civilian government. In this study, the better known names, for example Burma instead of Myanmar, and Rangoon instead of Yangon, have been retained for ease of recognition.

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For centuries, that part of Southeast Asia which eventually became modern Burma was largely isolated from, and ignorant of, the wider world. While visited by travelers and traders from a very early date, and Europeans from the 14th century, Burma was really only of strategic interest to its immediate neighbors, with whom it fought a number of wars. India, China, and Thailand have all invaded, and been invaded by, Burma at different times. As the major European empires expanded, however, and geopolitics began to be practiced on a global scale, this situation changed and it became more widely recognized that Burma occupied a geostrategic position of some importance. It was, and still is, the place where South, Southeast, and East Asia meet, and where the dominant cultures of these three subregions compete for influence. In Samuel Huntington's terms, it lies across the fault lines between three major civilizations, those of the Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians. Also, at critical times, Burma has been a cockpit for rivalry between the superpowers and, in the fluid strategic environment of the early 21st century, its important position is once again attracting attention from analysts and officials.

Burma's Geostrategic Position

Covering 657,740 square kilometers, Burma is the largest independent state in mainland Southeast Asia. Its 5,876 kilometer land boundary touches five different countries, including two strategic giants. To the west, it shares a 1,463 kilometer border with India, a nuclear power that dominates the South Asian subcontinent and Bay of Bengal. To the northeast, Burma shares a 2,185 kilometer-long border with China, now within reach of the great power status, which it has long felt was its due. In the east, Burma's frontier runs southwest and south for 1,800 kilometers alongside Thailand, still an influential player in the region despite a number of setbacks in recent years. At its eastern-most point, Burma shares a short border with Laos (235 kilometers), and at its western-most point, another with Bangladesh (193 kilometers). While in most places these borders cross very rugged and heavily forested terrain, they have always been porous to local ethnic communities, traders, drug smugglers, insurgents, and invading armies.

Burma's coastline is 1,930 kilometers long, not counting the 852 islands that lie within its waters (most in the Mergui Archipelago). Burma faces the Bay of Bengal west of the capital, Rangoon, and the Andaman Sea to the south. In 1977, the Burmese government declared a territorial sea of 12 nautical miles (22 kilometers) and a zone of 24 nautical miles (44 kilometers). Since that time, Burma has also laid claim to a continental shelf, and an exclusive economic

zone (EEZ), of 200 nautical miles (370 kilometers), thus extending its maritime interests to cover an area of 148,600 square kilometers. While Burma's security concerns have traditionally been land-based, this large expanse of open ocean and coastal waters has long been exploited by local fishermen, traders, smugglers, poachers, pirates, and the navies of other countries. While Burma is close to some Indian Ocean shipping lanes, it does not dominate any major sea lines of communication (SLOC). It is crossed, however, by a number of important east-west commercial air routes.

A major dispute over the land boundary with China was satisfactorily resolved in 1960, and the land border with Bangladesh was agreed in 1999, but differences over territorial claims still arise with Burma's neighbors. These disputes tend to occur as a result of poorly demarcated boundaries and shifting river courses, leading to occasional tensions with Thailand in particular. Maritime disputes are also common. Burma has laid claim to its waters in a number of ways that seem to violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. An agreement was reached with India over some of Burma's claims in 1986, and in 1993, a trilateral agreement was negotiated between Burma, India, and Thailand, over the tri-junction point between the three countries in the Andaman Sea. However, Burma has yet to settle a number of maritime disputes with Thailand and Bangladesh, which still cause problems over fishing rights. Burma has also attracted criticism from the United States for some of its broader claims, including its insistence that foreign warships must obtain permission from Rangoon prior to entering its territorial sea and contiguous zone.

Surrounded by rugged mountains to the west, north, and east, and wide seas in the south, Burma is to a large extent geographically self-contained. Communications with the rest of the world are poor. Indeed, before 1938 there were no road or rail routes to any neighboring countries. The Second World War saw the construction of the Burma Road between Chungking and Lashio, the Ledo Road from Mogaung to Ledo in north eastern Assam, and a railway from Ban Pong in Thailand through Three Pagodas Pass to Thanbyuzayat. However, as Charles Fisher has noted, "all of these were of strategic rather than commercial importance," and none survived as a trunk route after the war. Access to Burma overland is still very restricted, but there are projects under way to restore parts of the old Burma and Ledo Roads, and to upgrade land communications with India and Thailand. There are still no international rail links, but it is possible that the old Japanese line from Thailand may eventually be rebuilt as part of a proposed trans-Asia railway. As a result of all these factors, most legitimate foreign trade over the last few centuries has been seaborne.

This is not to discount the massive scale of smuggling across Burma's land borders since 1962, a problem that has hardly been affected by a 1989 agreement legalizing trade with China.

Within Burma, most rivers run north and south, as do the main transport corridors. East-west travel is difficult. Burma boasts 12,800 kilometers of inland waterways, 3,200 kilometers of which are navigable by large commercial vessels. The Irrawaddy River, for example, permits traffic to penetrate from the sea to Bhamo, more than 1,000 kilometers inland and only 50 kilometers from the Chinese border. The Sittang, lower Chindwin and lower Salween rivers are also used extensively by launches and other river boats, as is the maze of distributors and creeks in the Irrawaddy delta. Indeed, "the role of river navigation in traditional Burmese life can scarcely be exaggerated," and these waterways remain a fundamental component in the country's transport network. Burma also has 28,200 kilometers of roads, but many follow the rivers and railway corridors. Only 3,440 kilometers of roads are paved. Since Independence, Burma has placed increasing reliance on air transport but the national fleet has always been small. Of the country's 80 airfields, only three have paved runways over 2,400 meters. Most are unpaved.

Burma's rulers have long been fearful of the massive populations of their larger neighbors, and the potential threats they pose. Burma's birthrate has been rising, but its population of 50 million is dwarfed by those of China and India, the world's two most-populous countries, with 1,262 million and 1,014 million people respectively. At an average of 73.5 people per square kilometer, Burma's population density is still lower than most major Southeast Asian countries. Greatly complicating the demographic question for Burma is the fact that its population is not homogeneous. At present, about 68 percent are made up of ethnic Burmans, who have traditionally dominated the central lowlands. The remainder of the population is divided between numerous ethnic groups and subgroups, most of which have tended to be concentrated in separate areas around the country's highland periphery. The most important of these groups are the Shan (who constitute 9 percent of the population), Karen (7 percent), Arakanese (4 percent), and Mon (2 percent). There are significant groups of Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), PaO, Palaung, Lahu, Wa, and Rohingya. There are also sizeable communities of Chinese (3 percent of the population) and Indians (2 percent), most of whom are found in the urban areas and along the main transport corridors.

Despite the development of a few cities like Rangoon (with 4 million

people), Mandalay (800,000), and Moulmein (300,000), about 70 percent of Burma's population still live in small rural towns and villages. Roughly the same proportion are dependent on agriculture as the main means of livelihood, a figure that has held surprisingly constant for the past century. Burma enjoys an abundance of natural resources, and has been described as potentially the richest country in Southeast Asia. Before the Second World War, it was the largest rice producer in the world and a major exporter of oil. Even now, about half the country remains covered by forest and woodland, its fishing grounds are relatively unexploited and it has 75 percent of the world's known reserves of teak. Burma had not recovered from the war, however, before management of the economy fell into the hands of the armed forces, which adopted an ideology known as the Burmese Way to Socialism. Despite some modest growth, this doctrinaire and highly centralized system was a manifest failure, and in 1987 Burma was declared by the United Nations to be one of the world's least developed countries (LDC). Despite some improvement in the economy since 1988, largely due to a more open system, state enterprises remain highly inefficient and privatization efforts have stalled. There have been attempts to widen the economic base, but the light industrial sector is still small. At US\$300, Burma's average annual per capita income is lower than most other Asia-Pacific countries. Nearly 25 percent of the population is below the official United Nations poverty line.

A Historical Framework

These geostrategic factors have helped to shape the way Burma views the world, and the way in which its armed forces have developed. Yet, domestic political developments have been an even more powerful influence. Over the past 1,000 years, the history of Burma has been punctuated by wars, internecine conflict, and social upheaval. It has also been marked by the continued efforts of the Burman majority to gain and maintain control over the other ethnic groups in the country. In all these areas, the role of the armed forces has been central.

Before the 11th century there were two rival centers of power in Burma, a Mon kingdom in the south and a Burman kingdom based in the central plains. The country was first unified by King Anawrahta in 1044 and remained an independent state until 1287, when an invasion by Kublai Khan's Mongol warriors effectively destroyed political order. There followed five centuries of internal turmoil, compounded from the mid-16th century onwards by intermittent wars with Siam (now Thailand). In the late 18th century, the country was reunited by King Alaungpaya. Under him and his successors Burma managed to expand into Thailand, Manipur, Assam, and Arakan, while resisting four separate Chinese invasions. During the 19th century, however, Burma became entangled in a competition for regional influence between the British and French. Between 1824 and 1885, Burma fought three unsuccessful wars with the United Kingdom, each of which resulted in the annexation of parts of the country to British India. When the capital of Mandalay finally fell, King Thibaw was exiled to India and the old political system was destroyed. Burma's strong Buddhist culture survived more or less intact, but with the monarchy went many of the country's traditional institutions and social arrangements.

Burma was directly ruled as part of British India from 1886 until 1923, when it was granted a measure of autonomy. This was extended in 1937 when a formal act of separation granted Burma a constitution and limited self-government. Over this 115-year period, the British introduced a relatively efficient administrative and legal system. They also oversaw a remarkable development of the Burmese economy, based largely on agriculture and extraction industries. Rangoon, always Burma's main port and Britain's headquarters in the delta, came to rival other regional centers as a vibrant, modern city. Yet most of the local population felt disenfranchised, unable to influence events in their own country or benefit from its prosperity. The colonial administration differentiated not only between Europeans and others, but also between the majority Burmans and the

ethnic communities in the designated “Frontier Areas.” Members of the minorities were recruited into the armed forces, and Indians helped run the bureaucracy. Important sectors of the economy were in the hands of British, Chinese, or Indian merchants, entrepreneurs, and money-lenders. All these factors contributed to a rising sense of nationalism, particularly on the part of the Buddhist Burman majority. In 1930, a rural rebellion broke out in Lower Burma and, as the Second World War approached, there were several major demonstrations and strikes in the cities, protesting against colonial rule.

In December 1941 the Japanese bombed Rangoon, and by May 1942 they had driven the colonial administration out of Burma. With the help of a group of young nationalists led by Aung San, the Japanese established a puppet Burmese government under Dr Ba Maw, as Naingngandaw Adipati (or Head of State). It was overwhelmingly ethnic Burman in character, a factor underlined by the harsh treatment it accorded some Karen communities. Aung San and his followers soon became disillusioned with the Japanese, however, and secretly arranged to throw their support behind the returning allies. Although a number of the smaller Burmese ethnic groups had remained loyal to the British throughout the war, and helped them conduct a guerrilla campaign against the Japanese, Aung San’s widespread popularity and considerable political influence made his nationalist coalition the dominant force in post-war Burma. Recognizing these realities, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee agreed to enter into negotiations with Aung San over the question of Burma’s independence from the United Kingdom. This was granted on January 4, 1948, but not before Aung San himself was assassinated by a jealous rival. The leadership of the nationalist coalition and thus the government of the Union of Burma fell to Aung San’s deputy, U Nu.

The new Prime Minister inherited a country devastated by war and riven by political, ideological, and ethnic disputes. By 1949, a number of serious insurgencies had broken out and the survival of the fledgling government in Rangoon was in grave doubt. The country’s small armed forces were divided and weak. Gradually, however, internal security was restored in the Burman heartland and a measure of economic growth was achieved. Nu’s democratic regime was popular, but it was weakened by personality clashes and internal political wrangling which led to a major split in the ruling party in 1958. Faced with the prospect of a military coup, Nu “invited” the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (Tatmadaw), General Ne Win, to form a “caretaker government” until fresh elections could be held. These took place in 1960 and resulted in a decisive victory for Nu’s party. Barely two years later, however, in March 1962, Ne Win seized

power. He claimed that the intervention of the armed forces was necessary to restore civil order and to prevent the disintegration of the Union. He set aside the 1948 Constitution and installed a Revolutionary Council under his own leadership. The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was declared the sole legal political party and civil society was effectively abolished. Burma's 14-year experiment with democracy had abruptly ended.

In most of these historical events, the armed forces had played a critical role. The Burmese monarchs had frequently resorted to military action to settle disputes with their neighbors, enlarge their kingdoms, and to settle local differences. They were not always successful, but over the centuries the nature of these conflicts and the number of their victories gave rise to a certain pride in Burma's military prowess. "Under the kings the basis of society was not so much the village in which a man lived as the regiment to which he belonged." This also led to a degree of complacency, however, and "there was little incentive to spur improvements or modernization of the armed forces, and they remained stagnant, ignoring the progress being made in the world around them." By the time the British mounted their expedition up the Irrawaddy River in 1885 the Burmese were ill-prepared to resist a modern, disciplined military force, equipped with the latest weapons. After Upper Burma was formally annexed the following year, the Burmese armed forces as an institution disappeared. Sporadic guerrilla ambushes against the British continued for another five years or more, but there was no central control over this campaign and often attacks were simple acts of dacoity disguised as patriotism.

Before the formal separation of Burma from India there were no ethnic Burmans in the regular army. A company of sappers and miners (engineers) had been recruited in 1887, and during the First World War four battalions of Burmese saw active duty in Palestine and Mesopotamia. In 1925, however, a decision was taken by India Army Headquarters to recruit only Chins, Kachins, and Karens, whom the British equated with the "martial races" which they had encountered in India. All Burmans then in the army were discharged on the grounds that it was not only unnecessary and uneconomical to retain them, but also unwise. In general, it was felt the Burmans had not made good soldiers, and their loyalty had become increasingly suspect as nationalist agitation mounted. The decision was a blow to Burman pride and was bitterly denounced in the Burma Parliament. As defense was an area reserved for the British Governor's direct control, however, there was little the Burman Members of Parliament could do. After 1935 the need to open the ranks to Burmans was recognized, but little effort was made to meet it. In any case, young Burmans

were not attracted to a career in the armed forces, which tended to be viewed as an instrument of state power through which the minorities helped repress the legitimate aspirations of the Burman majority. As J.S. Furnivall has observed: “the army remained non-Burmese, entirely distinct from the people and an instrument for the maintenance of internal security rather than for defense against aggression.”

When the Imperial Japanese Army marched into Burma in January 1942, many of the Burmans who had been recruited by the British deserted to join the Bamar Lutlatye Tatmadaw (Burma Independence Army or BIA), the force that had been formed in 1941 by Aung San and a group of young nationalists, subsequently known as the Thirty Comrades. The BIA was disbanded by the Japanese in mid-1942, largely because of its unruly behavior, but also because they feared that such a large force could constitute a threat to their own position in Burma. In July 1942, a smaller, more disciplined force of some 3,000 BIA men was selected to form the Bamar Karkweye Tatmadaw (Burma Defense Army) and steps were taken to make this the core of an independent Burmese military force under Japanese control. Aung San was placed in command and Ne Win took charge of one of its three battalions. A military academy was established outside Rangoon, and selected recruits were sent to Japan for advanced training. When Burma was granted its “independence” by Japan in September 1943, and a Burmese government established under Dr Ba Maw, Aung San was made Minister for Defense. The army was reorganized under Ne Win as the Bamar Ahmyotha Tatmadaw (Burma National Army). It was this army that Aung San led out of Rangoon in March 1945, ostensibly to fight the returning allies, but in fact to join them.

The period between the end of the war in 1945 and Independence in 1948 was one of considerable confusion and tension. The rivalries within both the British and Burmese camps, which had been barely suppressed in the name of defeating the Japanese, quickly re-emerged and multiplied. There were serious disagreements over the country’s political future, the place of the ethnic minorities, and the fate of those who had fought in various Burmese armies. The country was also awash with weapons. Within a few months of Burma regaining its independence, one Communist Party faction had broken away from the coalition government and taken up arms. They were followed by the Muslim Mujahids in Arakan State. As described by Ba Than:

Other insurrections followed one after another until after about a year, there were in all seven insurgent groups totaling over

30,000 in strength, armed and organized, including a considerable number of army deserters, over-running practically two-thirds of the country including strategic towns and keeping the seat of Government virtually under siege.

About one half of the government's own troops had mutinied, taking with them 45 percent of the army's equipment. At the same time, Nationalist Chinese (Kuomintang, or KMT) forces had begun occupying northeastern Burma, and all around the country small, pocket armies (known as tats) were being organized by ambitious politicians. By the time that Ne Win assumed the position of commander-in-chief in 1949, he had barely 2,000 soldiers under his command. As Mary Callahan has written, "That the Burmese army emerged from this chaos as the powerful force that after 1962 would dominate state and society for more than 30 years is indeed remarkable."

In the years that followed, the country's military leadership struggled to organize and develop a force that could meet the many challenges it faced. At first, the Tatmadaw was small, poorly trained, under-equipped, and lacking any clear strategy or doctrine. Its organization was weak, and there were serious differences in the officer corps over how it should be structured and managed. It faced a growing number of insurgencies, as other ethnic and single-interest groups rose against the central government. It also had to manage a plethora of ad hoc military forces, including 52 companies of Territorial Forces, or *sitwun - dan tats*, which had been raised for local service in the districts. While tackling all these problems, however, the Tatmadaw managed to stage a major conventional campaign against the KMT in the 1950s, and followed this in 1961 with a combined operation with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) against the remaining KMT forces. By the time it seized power in 1962, the Tatmadaw had also won back much of central and southern Burma for the government and, by the mid-1970s, most of the remaining insurgent groups had been driven into the country's rugged highland periphery. The armed forces felt that, against enormous odds and at considerable cost, they had saved the Union from disintegration and deserved a major say in its future.

From an early stage, the members of Burma's armed forces saw themselves as having a political role. Many of the young nationalists who helped create the BIA were politicians before they were soldiers, and their ambitions did not disappear with the creation of a regular state army. Aung San took off his uniform in 1945 to pursue a political career, but he remained in close touch with his

supporters in the Burma Army and used the threat of renewed violence to win concessions from the United Kingdom. As a civilian, Nu was more inclined to view the members of the Tatmadaw purely as servants of the state, but the nature of the internal security problems he faced made it inevitable that the armed forces would play a significant role in his government. As Robert Taylor has stated:

The inclusion of Supreme Commander General Ne Win in the cabinet in April 1949 as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs as well as for Defense made official for a brief period what was unofficial throughout the first 14 years of Burma's independence.

All of Burma's civilian governments were dependent on the armed forces for office, in that they alone prevented the insurgents from capturing state power. Even after Ne Win left the cabinet in 1950, the army remained politically involved. Not only did senior officers keep in touch with key politicians but the complex inter-disciplinary nature of counter-insurgency warfare encouraged field commanders to exercise more than a purely military role. The 18 months of the "caretaker government" gave the Tatmadaw a taste for direct power and convinced many in the military leadership that they could do a better job of running the country than the civilian politicians. This confidence doubtless contributed to the decision to seize power in 1962.

Even judged against its own standards, the regime's record between 1962 and 1988 was poor. By imposing a single-governing philosophy ("the Burmese Way to Socialism") on the entire country for the first time, the Tatmadaw affected a profound political, economic, and social revolution in Burma. Yet it failed to deliver the results expected. Despite the adoption of a new constitution and the creation of an ostensibly civilian government in 1974, there was widespread resentment against military rule. A pervasive intelligence network helped to keep urban dissent to a minimum, but from time to time the surface calm in the cities was disrupted by demonstrations against the lack of democratic freedoms, or the regime's economic mismanagement. While there was some growth, the BSPP's doctrinaire socialist policies and lack of professional expertise saw a gradual deterioration in the country's economic fortunes until 1987, when it formally acquired its LDC status. It was really only Burma's natural riches and the ubiquitous black market that permitted most people to survive. The Tatmadaw scored some military successes against insurgents, but the regimes'

harsh policies, particularly towards the ethnic minorities, only encouraged further armed opposition to the central government.

As 1988 dawned, the outlook for Burma was bleak. On all fronts, the military government was struggling to maintain its control. The country was facing severe political, economic, and social problems, and Rangoon's writ still did not run in large tracts of territory around the country's periphery. The demonstrations that erupted in August and September that year both resulted from these internal stresses, and greatly exacerbated them, putting more pressure on the old system than it could bear. Some kind of change was inevitable, although few people anticipated the return of direct military rule and the reinvigoration of the totalitarian system of government, which the Burmese had endured since 1962. On September 18, after weeks of massive public demonstrations in Rangoon and other centers, the Tatmadaw created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and took back direct control of the government. The pro-democracy uprising was crushed by the army at the cost of thousands of lives.

The massacres of unarmed demonstrators and others in Rangoon in 1988 were a significant turning point. It provoked a strong international reaction, resulting in a series of measures against the military regime. This in turn fundamentally altered the way in which the regime looked at the outside world. At the same time, the new government in Rangoon undertook a major program to expand and modernize the Burmese armed forces. This, too, has become a focus for international attention, and concern.

Development of the Tatmadaw

Before 1988, the Tatmadaw enjoyed the grudging respect of many Burmese, but suffered from a number of serious problems. The Burma Army was essentially a poorly equipped light infantry force capable only of limited counter-insurgency operations. It was battle-hardened, but suffered from a lack of mobility, insufficient fire support, poor logistics, and inadequate communications. For its part, the Burma Air Force was small, ill equipped, and crippled by its dependence on foreign logistics. It was hard-pressed to keep its obsolete and over-worked aircraft flying, and could only perform a very limited role in support of the army. It had no credible air defense capability. The Burma Navy suffered from similar problems to the air force, and as a result was confined to patrolling Burma's inland waterways and coastal fringes. After 1988, however, the armed forces hierarchy resolved to address all these problems. With the full resources of the country at its disposal, it formulated and implemented a comprehensive plan to expand and modernize all three Services. Given what appears to be the rather ad hoc nature of policymaking by the regime, and its unpredictable economic fortunes, this plan has doubtless been revised and amended many times over the past 12 years. In general, however, it has been remarkably successful, producing the far-reaching results that can be seen today.

Since 1988, the Tatmadaw has dramatically increased in size. Estimates vary greatly, but the number of Burmese men and women in uniform appears to have doubled, from around 200,000 in 1988, to about 400,000 now. There are also some 72,000 in the paramilitary police force (including 4,500 combat police). Senior Burmese intelligence officials told the author in 1995 that the regime's ultimate goal was a well-equipped military machine of about 500,000. This increase in manpower was being achieved by a variety of means, including propaganda campaigns in the state-controlled news media, financial and other inducements for new recruits, various kinds of conscription, and other forms of coercion. Standards have been lowered to increase numbers. For example, Burma is now reputed to have the largest number of child soldiers of any country in the world. Also, with Burmese society tightly controlled under the current military regime, and most tertiary education institutions closed for lengthy periods, a career in the Tatmadaw offered young men (and, to a much lesser extent women) one of the few means to gain precious professional and technical skills. By joining the armed forces, they can also get access to scarce services and consumer goods, protect their families from discrimination, and achieve a measure of social mobility.

During the same period, the SLORC, and its later incarnation, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), have purchased a wide range of new and more modern weapon systems and military equipment for the Tatmadaw. The Burma Army, for example, has taken delivery of Type 69 main battle tanks, Type 63 light amphibious tanks, and Type 85 armored personnel carriers. It is likely there have also been deliveries of Type 85 main battle tanks and Type 90 armored personnel carriers. The army has acquired new field and anti-aircraft artillery (including 155mm guns, multiple rocket launchers, and shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles), transport and construction vehicles, communications equipment, infantry weapons, and ammunition. The Burma Air Force has acquired more than 150 new combat aircraft, including F-7 fighter-interceptors, A-5 fighter-ground attack aircraft, G-4 counter-insurgency aircraft, and both transport and attack helicopters. It has also taken delivery of Y-8 turbo-prop transport aircraft, FT-7 dual-seat jet trainers, and K-8 training aircraft. Since 1988, the Burma Navy has commissioned about 30 new naval vessels. This includes Hainan class coastal patrol boats, Houxin class guided missile fast attack craft, and PB-90 inshore patrol boats. It has also ordered three corvettes and a number of motor gunboats from local shipyards.

Most of the Tatmadaw's new arms and equipment has been acquired from China, under very favorable purchasing arrangements. The regime's military expansion and modernization program has been accompanied by a sweeping reorganization of Burma's command and control system. In 1990, the Ministry of Defense in Rangoon was reshaped, and a powerful Office of Strategic Studies formed under the Director of Defense Services Intelligence. At the same time, control of the Tatmadaw's main fighting units was placed under a single Bureau of Special Operations. In addition, the number of Regional Military Commands was increased to 12. A range of subordinate subregional commands have also been created, partly to provide greater operational focus and flexibility, and partly to permit closer military administration of critical areas (like eastern Shan State). A large number of new army units have been formed, including two mobile Light Infantry Divisions, armor and artillery formations, and specialized engineer battalions. Army bases have been established or expanded in areas where, before 1988, there had been little or no permanent military presence. Also, the number and geographical distribution of Burma's major naval bases and air stations have been increased, and improvements made to their supporting infrastructure. Certain critical maintenance and support functions, once performed only in Rangoon, have been decentralized for greater efficiency.

A major effort has also been put into the improvement of Burma's antiquated military communications network. With the help of countries like China and Singapore, modern computers and other electronic equipment have been installed in the Ministry of Defense, and at the headquarters of the 12 Regional Military Commands. Radios and other communications equipment at the operational and tactical levels have been substantially upgraded. Through its new computer equipment, the Tatmadaw has developed a limited capability to conduct information warfare. Also, Burma's electronic surveillance capabilities have reportedly grown significantly, at both the strategic and operational levels. Other parts of the country's already formidable intelligence apparatus have been expanded and improved. In large part, this has been to help the Rangoon regime predict and counter any signs of renewed internal unrest (including in the Tatmadaw itself), in order to retain its firm grip on political power. A considerable effort, however, has also been put into purely military intelligence, to improve the regime's strategic assessments and the Tatmadaw's operational capabilities.

As part of most major arms deals negotiated by the SLORC and SPDC over the past 12 years, training packages have been included. Burmese personnel from all three Services have received extensive training in China, while members of the air force have also been trained in Poland and Yugoslavia. The Burma Navy has also trained in Yugoslavia. There have been reports that specialist training courses, for example, for an army parachute team and military intelligence officers, have been provided by Singapore, in Singapore. Pakistan has offered a range of courses, ranging from armor and artillery to "anti-submarine" training. In some cases, foreign instructors appear to have been sent to conduct technical training in Burma itself, for example from China, Russia, and possibly Singapore and Israel. As far as can be determined, the training provided to date seems to have been related largely to the operation and maintenance of new weapons and equipment purchases. It does not appear that much attention has been devoted to investigating foreign approaches to broad strategic analysis or war fighting, nor to incorporating foreign ideas into the development of new military doctrines, operating procedures, or tactics. Steps have been taken however, to increase the number of Burmese military officers studying abroad, and attending staff and defense colleges in places like China, India, Pakistan, Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

To underpin all these initiatives, the SLORC and SPDC have taken a number of important steps to strengthen Burma's defense scientific and industrial base. The aim seems to be two-fold: to increase the logistic support available to the

new, expanded, and more diversified Tatmadaw, and to help release Burma from its former dependence on outside suppliers for critical defense material. For example, Burma has launched a major defense import substitution program. Details are difficult to obtain, but there is little doubt that the country's already extensive network of arms and ammunition factories is being modernized and expanded. Older factories are being upgraded and new plants built, a number with the help of countries like China and Singapore (which seem to have replaced Germany as the main source of Burma's military technology). An effort has also been made to upgrade Burma's abilities to produce its own armored cars and specialized fighting vehicles. Ancillary industries, like iron and steel plants, are being modernized to provide the necessary support for the new arms factories and, as far as Burma's continuing foreign exchange problems permit, stockpiles of strategic raw materials are probably being increased.

Despite numerous claims in recent years by a number of ethnic insurgent groups, notably the Karens and the Kachins, there is no firm evidence that the Tatmadaw is either manufacturing or using exotic weapons like chemical and biological agents. It appears that a chemical weapons program begun by former President Ne Win in the early 1980s (reportedly with West German help), was abandoned after a few years, when reports of its existence began to appear in the international news media and pressure was applied against the Burmese government by the United States. Suggestions that the SLORC and SPDC have received assistance from China to develop such weapons for use against ethnic insurgent groups appear groundless. Similarly, rumors that the Rangoon regime is interested in acquiring short-range ballistic missiles from China lack foundation.

Its massive expansion and reorganization, the acquisition of new weapon systems and equipment, and Burma's improved defense industrial base, all give the Tatmadaw the potential for greatly increased operational capabilities. The army, for example, is now much bigger, more widely distributed, more mobile, and can call on far greater armored and artillery support. It can sustain operations at a higher tempo, and for far longer, than at any time in the past. It is also in a much better position to fight more than one campaign at a time, if that is required. With its new aircraft, upgraded bases, and improved munitions, the air force has far greater flexibility and operational reach than in the past, and is capable of much greater striking power. Its new communications and radar equipment can provide a useful air operations picture of the country for the first time, contributing (with the air force's new interceptors and air-to-air missiles) to a more credible national air defense capability. Similarly, if the navy's modern-

ization and expansion program continues, Burma will be in a much better position to police its extensive territorial claims and protect its maritime resources from unauthorized exploitation. Its Houxin class guided missile patrol boats, for example, give the navy its first anti-ship cruise missile capability, and its three new corvettes will give it a modest capacity to conduct blue water operations.

In addition, the Burmese armed forces have begun to develop a capacity to conduct joint operations. Over the past five years there have been several reports that the Tatmadaw has been conducting joint military exercises, some on quite a large scale. Exercises held in 1995 and 1997, for example, were reported to have involved over 30,000 troops, 100 field artillery pieces, nearly 300 armored vehicles, about six squadrons of aircraft, and around 30 naval vessels. Some members of the local People's Militias, auxiliary forces (such as the Myanmar Red Cross and Fire Brigades), and members of the mass Union Solidarity Development Association, were also mobilized to assist. More recently, large-scale amphibious exercises were reported to have been held in southern Burma, once again involving infantry, armored vehicles, artillery, and both naval and air force assets. In July and August 2000, it was reported that the Tatmadaw was even trying its hand at combined operations with units from the People's Liberation Army. Chinese aircraft, naval vessels, and troops were all said to be taking part in military exercises in southern Burma. However, this development is most unlikely.

The Tatmadaw in 2001 is thus an entirely different military organization from that which existed in 1988. It is now able not only to put down civil disturbances in the cities, and conduct much larger-scale counter-insurgency operations in the countryside but, for the first time in its history, the Tatmadaw has the means to carry out extended conventional operations in Burma's defense. It still faces many challenges and its future is clouded by persistent questions over its professional role, lack of popular support, and ultimately, its legitimacy as a national institution. However, after decades of struggling to achieve its core military goals with limited resources, it now stands equal in many respects to the armed forces of other regional countries. Indeed, after Vietnam, Burma's armed forces are now the largest in Southeast Asia and have the most combat experience. They are also among the best equipped. In that sense alone, they add a new factor to consideration of the regional strategic environment.

International Rivalries Before 1988

Throughout modern history, the importance of Burma's geostrategic position has been recognized by the world's most powerful countries. One of Britain's prime motives for annexing the coastal districts of Arakan and Tenasserim in 1824 to 1826 was to safeguard eastern India and close the gap between Bengal and the Straits Settlements. Sixty years later, both the United Kingdom and France were competing for influence at the Burmese court in Mandalay. Indeed, by attempting to balance the rivalry between these two colonial powers, King Thibaw probably helped precipitate his own downfall. The authorities in Delhi subsequently saw Burma as a bulwark against French expansion west from Indochina. It also promised a possible overland trade route to China. After Japan's invasion of China in 1937, it was quickly realized that Burma offered Chiang Kai-shek's embattled Nationalist government a life-line to Europe. Even before the Burma Road was officially opened in January 1939, vital military supplies were flowing north to Chungking through the port of Rangoon. During the Second World War, Burma was a major theater of operations. Both allied and Japanese strategists appreciated that it not only provided China with access to the Indian Ocean, and dominated the Bay of Bengal, but it lay between Japan's conquests in Southeast Asia and the allied bastion of British India. Lasting from December 1941 until August 1945, the campaign for Burma was to be the longest and one of the most difficult of any during the entire war.

After the war, Burma continued to figure in the security calculations of key Western policymakers. The UK Ministry of Defense, for example, was anxious to retain the rights to use Burmese ports and airfields, and persuaded the Attlee government to include the question of access in its independence agreement with the Burmese. In the face of rising nationalist sentiment in the Asia-Pacific region, and the danger of communist insurgencies in colonies like Malaya, Mingaladon airfield outside Rangoon became a more important factor in British defense planning. It was considered necessary "in connection with His Majesty's Government's air reinforcement route to the Far East, and, in the event of an emergency arising, for the rapid movement of air and land forces, to and through Burma." Burma was also strategically important in that it was one of the main sources of rice for Britain's Asian dependencies, where food shortages were fuelling anti-colonial sentiment. Burma was inside the Sterling area and rice for places like Malaya could be purchased without the UK using its precious reserves of United States dollars.

After 1948, Burma's geostrategic position attracted wider attention. Close to China, India, and Vietnam, it was seen as being "on the periphery of the free world." During the 1950s, when Rangoon was threatened by a number of insurgencies, including one led by the powerful Communist Party of Burma (CPB), considerable efforts were made by the British Commonwealth countries to shore-up Prime Minister Nu's government. To the members of the South East Asia Treaty Organization, Burma at the time was an Asian "domino" of almost as much strategic importance as Vietnam. The United States, for example, firmly believed that "should Burma come under communist domination, a communist military advance through Thailand might make Indochina, including Tonkin, militarily indefensible." To the UK, the loss of Burma to the Chinese-sponsored CPB was seen as a threat to the security of Malaya (then including Singapore), and the vital Straits of Malacca. Some other analysts (who clearly had not experienced the terrain) were concerned that China had "a relatively easy invasion route from Yunnan Province across northern Burma to India's Assam province." It has been claimed that India had a tacit understanding with Burma over the joint defense of the Assam-northern Burma area in the event of a Chinese invasion.

Burma may not have been the most important Southeast Asian country facing a communist insurgency at the time, but all these concerns helped to emphasize Burma's strategic role in the ideological struggle then being conducted between the superpowers in the Asia-Pacific region.

The United States and its allies were convinced that China was actively supporting communist "subversion" throughout Southeast Asia, and that this effort was being coordinated, or at least encouraged, by the Soviet Union. While it could not be persuaded to join any military alliances, Burma was identified as an ideal place for the West to establish "listening posts" and to observe developments inside China. At the height of the Korean War, the United States even drew up plans to use Burma as a springboard from which to launch the southern half of a "double envelopment operation" against China. From 1951 until the mid-1950s, the Central Intelligence Agency provided covert military support to the Kuomintang troops, which had fled China after the communist victory in 1949 and established bases in Burma. With additional troops flown in from Taiwan, and supplemented by local insurgents, these forces eventually exceeded 12,000 men. They staged seven unsuccessful "invasions" of China, before Burmese pressure in the United Nations forced the United States to end its assistance and repatriate some 6,000 KMT troops to Taiwan. Ironically, it was only when Burma sought Chinese help in 1961, and 20,000 PLA soldiers conducted

a joint operation with the Tatmadaw in northern Burma, that the remnants of the KMT forces were finally driven into Thailand.

The United States' secret support for the KMT helped to confirm the reservations felt by Burma's leaders about becoming involved with any foreign power. There was a strong feeling at the time that Burma could, and should, manage its own affairs. In the 1950s, Prime Minister Nu was acutely conscious of the need to maintain good relations with Burma's powerful neighbor China, but strove to follow a foreign policy of strict neutrality in international affairs. While Burma was desperately in need of external assistance to recover from the war, he preferred to receive aid from "independent" countries like Israel and Yugoslavia, and was a major force behind the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961. After 1962, Burma withdrew even further from mainstream global affairs. Fearful of almost all outside influences, the military regime strengthened the former government's neutral foreign policy and shunned most international contacts. In 1979, Burma even withdrew from the NAM on the grounds that the grouping had become unduly influenced by the Eastern bloc. Also, the doctrinaire socialist system introduced by the BSPP permitted little external participation in the country's economy. Foreign aid was still welcomed, particularly after the failure of the regime's socialist policies, but was accepted on a scrupulously even-handed basis. Preference was given to assistance through multilateral bodies like the United Nations and schemes like the Colombo Plan.

After Ne Win's coup, and the country's retreat into xenophobia and isolationism, Burma's geostrategic importance greatly diminished. It rarely figured in published studies of the region's security. Yet, to a certain extent, it was still seen as a prize in the global competition between the major power blocs. The United States, Soviet Union (USSR), and People's Republic of China (PRC) all maintained large missions in Rangoon, which served as bases for active diplomatic and intelligence campaigns. Divided countries, such as the two Koreas, East and West Germany, and North and South Vietnam, also competed for Burma's diplomatic support in forums like the UN General Assembly. Burma's success in balancing all these pressures can perhaps be gauged by the fact that, at the height of the Cold War, a Burman, U Thant, was twice unanimously elected Secretary-General of the United Nations. International interest in Burma's geostrategic position, however, declined even further after the collapse of the USSR and end of the Cold War in 1990. Indeed, had it not done so, it is unlikely that the US (and its friends and allies) would have felt able to adopt such a strong position against the military government after 1988. Ironically, the imposition of economic sanctions and arms embargoes by these countries encouraged

the Rangoon regime to develop a much closer relationship with China, a development which has in turn prompted other Asia-Pacific countries to reassess their relations with Burma.

The Modern Strategic Environment

The Western democracies have all claimed that the strong stance they adopted against Rangoon reflected a principled stand against the massacres of pro-democracy demonstrators, the failure of the regime to recognize the results of the 1990 general elections (which resulted in a landslide victory for the main opposition parties), and the Tatmadaw's continuing record of human rights abuses. Yet, it can be argued that such a strong and sustained policy position would have been less likely if the Cold War had not ended, and Burma's importance in the global competition between the superpowers had not significantly diminished. Lacking any pressing strategic or military reasons to cultivate Burma, and with few direct political or economic interests at stake, countries like the United States and the United Kingdom could afford to isolate the Rangoon regime and accord it pariah status. If this was indeed the calculation made in the late 1980s and early 1990s, then it is possible that the changes that have occurred in the strategic environment since then may prompt a reconsideration of these policies. Already, the development of the Tatmadaw and its close relationship with China have served to remind South and Southeast Asian countries at least of Burma's geostrategic importance, and prompted a markedly different policy approach.

The creation of the SLORC in 1988, and subsequent introduction of a range of new policies by the military regime, coincided with some dramatic shifts in the global strategic environment. The collapse of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe saw the emergence of the US as the world's sole superpower. In this climate, the agenda of the United Nations became much more aligned to US interests and values, and more interventionist in nature. Yet, this in turn has prompted a backlash by a diverse group of countries united by a desire to deny the United States its paramount position in world affairs. Also, with the close of the Cold War came the end of the relative stability and predictability of the old power balance. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the means to deliver them, has greatly complicated management of the strategic environment. A number of new states and substate actors have appeared, and new tensions have arisen. There is now much greater fluidity, and thus greater uncertainty, in international relations. In particular, the last 20 years has seen the rise of China, to the extent that it is now considered a serious competitor for the United States' pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Perhaps more than any other factor, it is perceptions of China that are influencing the way in which regional states are responding to changes in the

strategic environment. These perceptions may be based, as Robert Tilman has suggested, on a selective reading of history and a number of enduring myths about China's world view, but in international relations perceptions become the reality. Governments make national policy on what they believe to be the case, as much as on the objective truth. For example, China has not, since the 18th century, harbored expansionist ambitions towards, or engaged in open hostilities, with Burma, Thailand, or Laos. Although China once included parts of these and other states in a list of "lost territories," this list has been omitted from Chinese public statements since the Cultural Revolution. Yet, regional perceptions of China's long-term strategic intentions are still colored by the historical evidence of China's support for communist guerrilla movements during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, its war with India in 1962, its (albeit unsuccessful) invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and maps showing China's claims to large tracts of Southeast Asia (including all of Burma and the South China Sea). China's economic growth and military development program are being watched closely by analysts in the region, and any signs that China is looking to extend its strategic reach are considered causes for concern.

In this regard, Burma's close relationship with China since 1989, in particular its defense links, has attracted considerable attention. Over the past 12 years, there have been numerous reports in the international news media and professional journals to the effect that China has provided the Rangoon regime with a wide range of military equipment, arms production facilities, and training programs. There has also been a spate of stories stating that China and Burma have an intelligence-sharing arrangement, and that Chinese military personnel are helping to operate some of the more specialized electronic surveillance equipment reportedly acquired by the Burmese armed forces. Some commentators have gone even further and claimed that China has already established a permanent military presence in Burma, which includes naval and air bases, and specialized facilities to replenish Chinese naval vessels (including submarines) during regular deployments to the Indian Ocean. Burma has been characterized as a "pawn" of China, or at least a satellite state.

While some of these reports are true, either in whole or in part, the accuracy of others is highly suspect. Few can be verified from independent sources, and a number are clearly based on unsubstantiated rumors or idle speculation. Some of the more outlandish stories may have even been planted deliberately by self-interested parties. Yet, accurate or not, these and similar reports have played on existing suspicions of China's long-term aims, and helped fuel a more immediate concern that Burma's relationship with China could threaten regional

stability. These perceptions have in turn prompted a number of specific policy decisions by Southeast Asian governments. For example, while there are clearly strong economic motives, part of their reluctance to join in the West's condemnation of the Rangoon regime almost certainly stems from a fear of driving Burma further into the arms of China. In addition, there were a number of reasons why Burma was admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, against the wishes of its dialogue partners in the West. One reason seems to have been a desire on the part of member states to draw Rangoon away from Beijing's orbit and prevent it from becoming China's stalking horse in the region.

India, at first an outspoken critic of the SLORC, soon reassessed the value of maintaining a hard line against Rangoon. Since 1989, New Delhi has watched anxiously as Chinese capital, aid, and military equipment has flowed into Burma. Fears of China's long-term intentions have been heightened by the repeated news reports of Chinese naval bases being constructed on the Burmese coast and intelligence collection stations being developed in and around the Andaman Sea. As one Indian analyst has put it:

While China professes a policy of peace and friendliness towards India, its deeds are clearly aimed at the strategic encirclement of India in order to marginalize India in Asia and tie it down to the Indian subcontinent.... Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have been assiduously and cleverly cultivated towards this end. Myanmar has been recently added to this list.

These fears prompted a major policy switch in the early 1990s, as India became afraid of pushing Burma further into China's embrace. New Delhi is now engaged in a policy of establishing closer bilateral ties with Rangoon through increased political, trade, and even military ties. At the same time, India is trying to develop its economic relations with Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, while offering itself to countries such as Singapore and Vietnam as a strategic counter-weight to China.

Others in the Asia-Pacific region are also feeling uneasy. For example, Japan is apparently concerned about China's increasing influence in Burma, and the implications for regional stability of its rivalry with India. According to Henry Kissinger, this is one reason why the Japanese government has been keen to restore aid to Burma, despite the opposition of the US and other Western

democracies. Japan is also reported to be worried about the security of its SLOCs through the Malacca Strait, which are essential for Japan's Middle East oil imports. The possibility of increased Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean, and the reported construction of Chinese naval and intelligence facilities in the Mergui Archipelago, have added a new factor to Japan's consideration of this issue. The Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) shares some of Japan's concerns. It, too, is dependent on oil shipments from the Middle East, and hopes to develop its "textbook-complementary" trade with Burma. While President Kim Dae Jung has been a consistent supporter of the Burmese democratic movement, the ROK too is keen to see international friction avoided in that part of the world.

For its part, the PRC has much to gain from a close relationship with Burma. China remains anxious about the security of its frontiers, including the 2,185 kilometer border it shares with Burma. A friendly and politically compatible government in Rangoon, looking to China for support against the Western democracies, is very much to Beijing's liking. This is particularly the case, given that the alternative to the military regime is opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, seen by Chinese leaders as being strongly sympathetic to the United States. A democratic government in Rangoon would thus add to China's own fears of strategic encirclement by the United States and its allies. While regular Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean are a distant prospect, some analysts believe that access to Burmese ports could eventually permit the PLA Navy to "control and dominate the Indian Ocean's SLOCs," including the Straits of Malacca. Burma's geostrategic position on the Bay of Bengal has reportedly attracted the interest of China's intelligence services. Beijing is also keen to develop the economy of southern China, by exporting goods through a transport corridor stretching from Yunnan to the Irrawaddy River at Bhamo and thence to the Bay of Bengal. Burma is already exporting timber, agricultural, and marine products, and precious stones to China, and is receiving light industrial machinery and consumer goods in return.

At a broader diplomatic level, the ASEAN countries are probably correct in judging that China sees Burma as a sympathetic voice in regional councils. In this regard, Beijing would not have to dictate terms to Rangoon, as the Burmese government already shares Beijing's views on such key issues as internal security, human rights, and the entitlement of other governments and multilateral organizations to involve themselves in a country's domestic affairs. In addition, China no doubt welcomes the addition of Burma to that diverse coalition of countries around the world (including Russia, Iraq, Libya, India, and Malaysia) which

share a concern about the United States' sole superpower status and global economic influence. These countries also distrust the United Nation's increased preparedness since 1990 to intervene in global crises, on the grounds of humanitarian sentiment or the need for regional stability. China knows that its position on the UN Security Council is seen by the Rangoon regime as an ultimate guarantee against a UN-sponsored military operation to restore democracy in Burma or to create autonomous ethnic states, along the lines of the multilateral intervention in East Timor. In return, it feels it can count on Burma's support in other United Nation debates, relating to subjects like human rights and arms sales.

The Future

There are two main schools of thought about China's future relations with Burma. The first harks back to the great power politics and strategic balances of the Cold War era. Its members argue that small, poverty-stricken Burma will inevitably succumb to the pressures of its much larger neighbor, and effectively become a pawn in China's bid to become a world power. In addition to China's enormous strategic weight, the members of this school cite China's apparent "stranglehold" over Burma, as exercised through its loans, arms sales, and trade. The second school argues that, throughout history, Burma has always been suspicious of China, and only turned to Beijing in 1989 out of dire necessity after it was ostracized by the West. Proponents of this school claim that China has not been as successful in winning Burma's confidence as sometimes reported. They also believe that the Rangoon government would be prepared to pay a very high price to remain independent, and accept the military regime's assurances that Chinese military bases will never be permitted in Burma. Should the Rangoon government wish to break out of China's embrace, this second school argues, then India, other regional countries, and possibly even the Western democracies would be prepared to assist. The latter school has benefited from a deeper understanding of Burmese history but, in any case, the conclusion that Burma has become a satellite of China, and would be a willing ally in any future military confrontation between China and other regional countries, should not go unchallenged.

Indeed, it can be argued that, in many respects, it is not Beijing but Rangoon that has the whip hand. The military regime recognizes Burma's considerable debts to China, and its vulnerability to a range of diplomatic, economic, and military pressures from its larger neighbor, but it believes it can manage the bilateral relationship in a way that preserves Burma's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom of action. The regime may have been encouraged by the way that Chinese officials in Burma have kept a low public profile, and learned to tread warily in contacts with their Burmese counterparts. This seems to be out of concern that they will upset the notoriously volatile and unpredictable Burmese leadership, and lose the gains China has made since 1988. They may even retain memories of the violent anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon in 1967. In any case, the SLORC and SPDC have been quick to recognize Burma's growing importance in the more fluid Asia-Pacific strategic environment. Over the past 12 years, the military government has become adept at exploiting Burma's geostrategic position and manipulating the concerns of its regional neighbors. For example, it has been quite comfortable about using its close relationship

with Beijing, and the possibility that it might become an ally of an expansionist China, to gain attention in important councils like ASEAN, and to attract support from influential countries like India and Singapore.

There are other security issues that have focussed attention on Rangoon since 1988. Thailand and Bangladesh, for example, have both repeatedly expressed concern about the wider implications of Burma's continuing internal problems, particularly the periodic passage of refugees across its borders. Burma has also attracted strong criticism over its failure to stem the flow of narcotics from the Golden Triangle, or to take action to counter Burma's rapidly growing HIV/AIDS problem. Both are seen to have far-reaching strategic implications. The US Secretary of State has even characterized the HIV/AIDS issue as Southeast Asia's greatest threat to health and security. More recently, international attention has been drawn to the problems of forced labor, child soldiers, the indiscriminate use of landmines, and the traffic in small arms. The Rangoon regime has been slow to react to representations about these issues, although it made a rare policy change in 1992 when the Islamic countries in ASEAN expressed concern about the treatment of the Rohingyas in Arakan State. At the time, the United Nations Secretary-General stated that he was "seriously concerned" that the crisis could threaten the stability of Southeast Asia.

In such an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust, the development of Burma's armed forces, the manner in which this has been achieved, and how they might be used in future, has attracted increased attention. While it still faces a number of problems, the Tatmadaw is now capable not only of multiple, large-scale counter-insurgency campaigns against internal security threats, but also more conventional operations in defense of Burma's territory and maritime claims. While it has limited power projection capabilities, neighboring countries like India and Thailand have already cited Burma's military acquisition program as justification for costly improvements in their own armed forces. There has also been an increase in the Tatmadaw's international contacts. In these circumstances, Burma can no longer be dismissed as a weak and isolated player in the region, with little or no impact on the wider strategic environment.

About the Author

Andrew Selth holds degrees in History and International Relations from the Australian National University (ANU), and a Graduate Diploma in Strategic Studies from the Australian Joint Services Staff College. He has published widely on strategic and Asian affairs, including two books on international terrorism. His major works on Burma include, *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces Since 1988* (Canberra, 1996) and *Burma's Secret Military Partners* (Canberra, 2000). He is currently a Visiting Fellow at the ANU's Strategic and Defense Studies Center.

Endnotes

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4. These and the following statistics are drawn from *The World Factbook 2000*, produced by the Central Intelligence Agency, and found on the internet at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bm.html>
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10. See, for example, "Junta jails more than 300 Bangladesh fishermen," Reuters, December 7, 1999; and "Fishing ban preserved to replenish stocks," *Bangkok Post*, December 23, 2000.
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12. C.A. Fisher, *South-east Asia: A Social, Economic and Political Geography* (Methuen, London, 1964), p.464.

13. Interviews, Rangoon, April 1995. See also Bertil Lintner, "Burma Road," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (hereafter *FEER*), November 6, 1997, pp.16-17.
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26. In 1826, the British annexed the Arakan and Tenasserim coastal strips. In 1852, they added Lower Burma, including Rangoon. Mandalay fell in 1885, and with it most of what is now modern Burma.

27. See, for example, F.S.V. Donnison, *Public Administration in Burma: A Study of Development During the British Connexion* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1953); and J.R. Andrus, *Burmese Economic Life* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1953). A more critical interpretation of British rule can be found in Maung Tin Aung, *A History of Burma*. Also relevant is Maunuel Sarkisyanz, *Peacocks, Pagodas and Professor Hall*, Papers in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series No.24 (Ohio University Centre for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, Athens, 1972).

28. See, for example, A.D. Moscotti, *British Policy and the Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1917-1937* (University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1974); Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma, 1920-1940*, Australian National University Monographs on South Asia No.4 (Manohar, Delhi, 1980); and Patricia Herbert, *The Hsaya San Rebellion (1930-1932) Reappraised*, Working Paper No.27 (Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, 1982).

29. Andrew Selth, "Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.20, No.3, July 1986, pp.483-507.

30. The best source for this period is Hugh Tinker (ed), *Burma: The Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948*, 2 vols, (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1983).

31. For details, see Kin Oung, *Who Killed Aung San?*

32. Callahan, "The Origins of Military Rule in Burma," pp.468-80.

33. Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (Oxford University Press, London, 1957), p.312.

34. Henderson, *Area Handbook for Burma*, p.275.

35. The British lost more men to guerrillas and dacoits in the following four years than were killed during the advance on Mandalay. See A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Pagoda War: Lord Dufferin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Ava, 1885-6* (Faber and Faber, London, 1972), p.108; and Charles Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma* (Frank Cass, London, 1968), pp.1-3.

36. Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, p.314.

37. J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and*

Netherlands India (New York University Press, New York, 1956), p.184. At the outbreak of the Second World War only 472 Burmans (including here Mons and Shans) were members of the regular armed forces, although together the three ethnic groups constituted over 75 percent of the country's population. By contrast, there were 1448 Karens (then 9.3 percent of the population), 868 Chins (2.3 percent), 881 Kachins (1.05 percent) and 168 members of other ethnic groups. Of the officers, only four were Burman while 75 came from the minority ethnic groups. See Dr Maung Maung, *Burma in the Family of Nations* (Djambatan, Amsterdam, 1956), p.90.

38. The 30 men had secretly left Burma in early 1941 to be trained by the Japanese. See Dr Maung Maung (ed), *Aung San of Burma* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1962); and Izumiya Tatsuro, *The Minami Organ*, (Higher Education Department, Rangoon, 1985).

39. Joyce Lebra believes BIA numbers reached 200,000, but this is too high. Yoon Won-zoon claims there were only 10,000 in the BIA. Ba Than is likely to be closer to the mark with an estimate of 23,000. See Lebra, *Japanese Trained Armies*, p.65; Ba Than, *Roots of the Revolution*, p.33; and Yoon Won-zoon, "Japan's Occupation of Burma, 1941-1945," unpublished PhD thesis, New York University, 1971, p.173.

40. By 1944 the BNA consisted of six battalions of infantry, two of anti-aircraft personnel, and one of sappers and miners. It was overwhelmingly Burman in character, despite the late inclusion of one battalion of Karens. Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, p.319. See also Selth, "Race and Resistance in Burma," p.493.

41. Two personal perspectives on this period can be found in Balwant Singh, *Independence and Democracy in Burma, 1945-1952: The Turbulent Years*, Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, No.40 (Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1993); and J.H. McEnery, *Epilogue in Burma, 1945-48: The military dimension of British withdrawal* (Spellmount, Tunbridge Wells, 1990).

42. Ba Than, *The Roots of the Revolution*, p.67.

43. Ibid. See also *Burma and the Insurrections* (Government of the Union of Burma, Rangoon, 1949).

44. Callahan, "The Origins of Military Rule in Burma," p.6.

45. This period is examined in detail by Callahan, "The Origins of Military Rule in Burma."

46. Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, p.323.

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47. Aung San could also use the threat of trouble from the People's Volunteer Organization, a militia established in December 1945 from Burmese war veterans who had not been taken into the regular army.
48. R.H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Hurst, London, 1987), p.237.
49. Ibid.
50. The caretaker government's own record of its achievements was published as *Is Trust Vindicated? A chronicle of the various accomplishments of the Government headed by General Ne Win during the period of tenure from November, 1958 to February 6, 1960* (Director of Information, Government of the Union of Burma, Rangoon, 1960). See, however, Callahan, "The Origins of Military Rule in Burma," pp.491-7.
51. See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Death of a Hero: The U Thant Disturbances in Burma*, December 1974, Australia-Asia Paper No.49 (Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1989).
52. See, for example, Tin Maung Maung Than, "Burma in 1987: Twenty-Five Years after the Revolution," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1988* (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1988), pp.73-93. Also useful is the series of articles by Bertil Lintner in the *FEER*, including, "Poor amid plenty" (October 6, p.65), "Searching for a new road" (October 20, p.111), and "All the wrong moves" (October 27, p.83).
53. The best source for these events is Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1990). A different perspective is given by Dr Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, Monograph No.49 (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, New Haven, 2000).
54. The following section is drawn from Andrew Selth, "The Future of the Burmese Armed Forces," in Morten B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland, and R.J. May (eds), *Burma-Myanmar: Strong Regime, Weak State* (Crawford House, Adelaide, 2000), pp.52-90.
55. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Order of Battle: An Interim Assessment*, Working Paper No.351 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000).
56. Interview, Rangoon, April 1995. This number was later confirmed in official statements by senior members of the regime.
57. *Asia Report: Myanmar, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers*, London, 2000. This report can be found on the internet at http://www.child-soldiers.org/reports_asia/myanmar.html

58. It is estimated that about 1 to 2 percent of the Tatmadaw is made up of women. Some have technical military skills, for example as signallers, but most seem to perform medical and administrative roles.

59. Selth, *Burma's Order of Battle*, p.12; See also Micoool Brooke, "The Armed Forces of Myanmar," *Asian Defence Journal*, January 1998, p.13.

60. Andrew Selth, "The Myanmar Air Force Since 1988: Expansion and Modernization," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.19, No.4, March 1998, pp.388-415.

61. See, for example, "Asian infowar: the top ten," *Jane's Foreign Report*, No.2617, November 16, 2000, pp.5-6; and Tiffany Danitz and Warren P. Strobel, *Networking Dissent: Cyber-Activists Use the Internet to Promote Democracy in Burma*, United States Institute of Peace, Virtual Diplomacy Report, 8 November 1999, found at http://www.usip.org/oc/vd/vdr/vburma/vburma_intro.html

62. The most comprehensive work on this subject is Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1998).

63. Andrew Selth, "Burma's Intelligence Apparatus," *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.13, No.4, Winter 1998, pp.33-70.

64. William Ashton, "Myanmar: Foreign military training a mixed blessing," *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, Vol.24, No.2, February/March 1998, pp.10-11.

65. Andrew Selth, "Burma's Defence Expenditure and Arms Industries," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol.19, No.2, August 1998, pp.23-49.

66. Bruce Hawke, "Exposed: Burma's weapons industry," *Jane's Pointer*, December 1998, pp.8-9.

67. Andrew Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Working Paper No.334 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999).

68. Maung Aung Myoe, *Military Doctrine and Strategy in Myanmar: A Historical Perspective*, Working Paper No.339 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1999), pp.15-16.

69. "Burma, China to hold Joint Military Exercises in Coastal Region," *Democratic Voice of Burma*, July 6, 2000, reproduced in *Burma Update News*, Sydney, August 2000, pp.8-9. In modern military parlance, "combined operations" (or exercises) are conducted by the armed forces of a number of countries, while "joint operations" are those undertaken by more than one Service of

a single country's armed forces.

70. Fisher, *South-east Asia*, p.435, note 15.

71. Woodman, *The Making of Burma*, pp.222-30; and Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, pp.117-21. See also O.B. Pollak, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1979), pp.153-72.

72. While now dated, a useful account of the birth of the Burma Road can be found in J.L. Christian, *Burma and the Japanese Invader* (Thacker and Company, Bombay, 1945). pp.210-36.

73. The best one-volume history is Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-1945* (Dent and Sons, London, 1984).

74. Tinker, *Burma: The Struggle for Independence*, Vol.2, p.693 and p.736.

75. T.D. Roberts et al, *Area Handbook for Burma* (American University, Washington, D.C., 1968), p.v.

76. For the thinking behind this policy, see Andrew Selth, "Australian Defence Contacts With Burma, 1945-1987," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.26, No.3, July 1992, pp.451-68.

77. "1952 Policy Statement by US on Goals in Southeast Asia," Key Document No.2, *The Pentagon Papers* (Bantam Books, Toronto, 1971), p.28. See also Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Touchstone, New York, 1995), p.624 and p.632.

78. A.J. Levine, *The United States and the Struggle for Southeast Asia* (Praeger, Westport, 1995), pp.12-13. See also Andrew Selth, "Burma: 'Hidden Paradise' or Paradise Lost?" *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Vol.68, No.6, November 1991, pp.4-5.

79. *Union of Burma: Background Notes*, (US Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1971). Anyone who believes that an invasion of India through this part of Burma would be "relatively easy" would be advised to read Bertil Lintner, *Land of Jade: A Journey Through Insurgent Burma* (Kiscadale, Edinburgh, 1990); and Shelby Tucker, *Among Insurgents: Walking Through Burma* (Radcliffe Press, London, 2000).

80. T.N. Dupuy (ed), *The Almanac of World Military Power* (Dupuy Associates, Dunn Loring, 1970), p.252.

81. See, for example, Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1970), pp.62-3.

82. Bertil Lintner, "The CIA's First Secret War," *FEER*, 16 September 1993, pp.56-8.

83. *Kuomintang Aggression Against Burma* (Ministry of Information, Rangoon, 1953). See also R.H. Taylor, *Foreign and Domestic Consequences of the KMT Intervention in Burma*, Data Paper No.93 (Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1973).

84. According to Bertil Lintner, KMT activities in Burma did not end here. Until forced out by the CPB in the late 1960s and early 1970s, KMT intelligence networks in northern Burma provided Taiwan and the US with regular reports on developments in China and Chinese arms shipments to neighbouring countries. Lintner, "The CIA's First Secret War," p.58.

85. This brief reference does not do justice to the complexity of Burma's foreign policy during the post-war era which, as David Steinberg has pointed out, "within the overall neutralist position, has shifted markedly in response to both internal and external stimuli." D.I. Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia* (Westview, Boulder, 1982), p.122.

86. K.P. Misra, "Burma's Farewell to the Nonaligned Movement," *Asian Affairs*, Vol.12, No.1, February 1981, pp.49-56.

87. See, for example, Aleksandr Kaznachaeev, *Inside a Soviet Embassy: Experiences of a Russian Diplomat in Burma* (Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1962). Edgar O'Ballance has suggested that Russia was looking for access to Burma's naval facilities, but this seems unlikely. See "Burma: Back Water or Black Sheep?" *Asian Defence Journal*, April 1986, pp.28-35.

88. Thant served as UN Secretary General from 1961-1971. See June Bingham, *U Thant: The Search for Peace* (Victor Gollancz, London, 1966), pp.211-21.

89. R.O. Tilman, *The Enemy Beyond: External Threat Perceptions in the ASEAN Region* (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1984).

90. For example, a Chinese textbook entitled, *A Brief History of Modern China, published in Beijing in 1954*, includes a map which shows all of mainland Southeast Asia and the South China Sea falling within China's borders until the Opium War in 1840.

91. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Myanmar's Chinese connection," *International Defense Review*, Vol.27, No.11, November 1994, p.23-6; and Andrew Selth, *Burma's Arms Procurement Programme*, Working Paper No.289 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1995).

92. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," *FEER*, December 16, 1993, p.26; Bertil Lintner, "Enter the Dragon," *FEER*, December 22, 1994, pp.22-4; and Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1998), pp.219.

93. See, for example, "China and the Indian Ocean: Poised for Chaos," in Jayant Baranwal (ed), *SP's Military Yearbook 1992-93* (Guide Publications, New Delhi, 1992), p.374; and Poshpinder Singh, "Concern at Chinese Build-up," *Asian Defence Journal*, February 1993, p.8.

94. There have been suggestions that certain Indian groups have deliberately encouraged fears of a growing Chinese threat in Burma, for both domestic and international political purposes. See, for example, William Ashton, "Chinese Bases in Burma — Fact or Fiction?" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.7, No.2, February 1995, pp.84-7; and Sandy Gordon, "Sino-Indian Relations After the Cold War," *Strategic and Defence Studies Centre Newsletter*, March 1993, pp.1-4.

95. Selth, *Burma's Secret Military Partners*, pp.38-43.

96. Robert Cribb, "Burma's Entry Into ASEAN: Background and Implications," *Asian Perspective*, Vol.22, No.3, 1998, pp.49-62.

97. See, for example, Swaran Singh, "Myanmar: China's Gateway to the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, Vol.3, No.1, November 1995, pp.80-7; "India trying hard to build military ties with Burma," *Asian Age*, 7 July 2000; and Bertil Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," p.26.

98. Gurmeet Kanwal, "Countering China's Strategic Encirclement of India," *Indian Defence Review*, Vol.15, No.3, July-September 2000, p.13.

99. Andrew Selth, "Burma and the Strategic Competition Between China and India," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.19, No.2, June 1996, pp.213-30.

100. Michael Vatikiotis, "A Friend in Need," *FEER*, July 10, 1997, p.32. See also Ranjan Gupta, "Singapore buys Indian protection as old friendships cool," *The Australian*, February 7, 1994.

101. "The new world order, according to Dr Kissinger," *Financial Review*, November 17, 1995; and "China fears stoke new passions," Reuters, December 9, 2000.

102. Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," p.26.

103. See, for example, Than Nyun and Khin Maung Oo, "Prospects for Myanmar-Korea Economic Cooperation," in Than Nyun and Dalchoong Kim,

Myanmar-Korea Economic Cooperation, East and West Studies Series No.22 (Institute of East and West Studies, Yonsei University, Seoul, 1992), pp.189ff.

104. Interview, Beijing, October 1999.

105. YB, "Beijing Consolidates Its Hold on Myanmar," *Defense and Foreign Affairs*, July 1997, p.3; and Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," p.26.

106. Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets*, pp.219-29.

107. Bertil Lintner, "Enter the Dragon," pp.22-4. See also Pan Qi, "Opening the Southwest: An Expert opinion," *Beijing Review*, Vol.28, No.35, September 2, 1985, pp.22-3.

108. See, for example, E.C. Chapman, "Cross-Border Trade Between Yunnan and Burma, and the Emerging Mekong Corridor," *Thai-Yunnan Newsletter*, No.19, December 1992, pp.15-19; and Mya Maung, "On the Road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the Sinonization of Upper Burma," *Asian Survey*, Vol.34, No.5, May 1994, pp.447-459.

109. Robert Karniol, "New channels of Asian diplomacy unfold," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, June 24, 1995, pp.27-31.

110. Interview, Rangoon, November 1999.

111. These two schools were identified in Kay Merrill, "Myanmar's China connection: a cause for alarm?" *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, 1998 Annual Reference Edition, Vol.24, No.1, January 1998, pp.20-1.

112. See, for example, J.M. Malik, "Sino-Indian Rivalry in Myanmar: Implications for Regional Security," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.16, No.2, September 1994, pp.137-56; and J.M. Malik, "Burma slides under China's shadow," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.9, No.7, July 1997, pp.3

113. See, for example, "Junta denies it poses threat to region," Reuters, 10 August 1999.

114. See, for example, Selth, "Burma and the Strategic Competition Between China and India," pp.213-30; and Kay Merrill, "A closer look at Sino-Burmese links," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.9, No.7, July 1997, p.323.

115. Interview, Rangoon, December 1999. This interpretation has been questioned by, for example, J.M. Malik, "Myanmar's Role in Regional Security: Pawn or Pivot?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.19, No.1, June 1997, pp.52-73.

116. See, for example, William Ashton, "Burma receives advances from its silent

suitors in Singapore,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, Vol.10, No.3, March 1998, pp.32-4.

117. One of the best studies on this subject is Hazel J. Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (Cornell Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, forthcoming). See also *Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: The Search for a Lasting Solution*, *Human Rights Watch/Asia*, Vol.9, No.7, August 1997.

118. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, *The Drug Trade in Southeast Asia*, Special Report No.5, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, April 1994; Bertil Lintner, “Global Reach: Drug Money in the Asia Pacific,” *Current History*, April 1998, pp.179-82; Sarah Stewart, “Myanmar facing AIDS catastrophe,” Australian Associated Press (AAP), November 27, 2000; and “Burma continues to present unusual threat,” *Burma News Update*, May 1998, p.8.

119. “HIV/AIDS Number One Security Threat in SE Asia: Albright,” Agence France Presse (AFP), July 28, 2000.

120. Bertil Lintner, “The secret mover,” *FEER*, May 7, 1992, p.21.

