



## Special Issue

# Strategic Choices in Myanmar's Transition and Myanmar's National Security Policies

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### Abstract

*Since 2011, Myanmar's leaders have concentrated on ensuring the success of their overall political transition, given the expectations created after the 'Arab Spring' of 2011–2012. Not surprisingly, designing a new national security policy was less a priority than achieving 'peace'; national security was viewed as a matter of continuity rather than transition. Moreover, many of the reformist objectives of the political transition were not applied to the evolution of a new national security strategy or to the challenge of adjusting national security policies. Indeed, many historically unacceptable military practices—human rights abuses, targeting of civilian populations in insurgency areas and acting outside the law in confiscating land, labour and resources—continued. While this different approach to national security reflected ingrained sensitivity on the part of Myanmar's leadership, reluctance to expose national security policy to scrutiny and determination to retain political control, they are not necessarily unreceptive to overseas experiences.*

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### 1. Introduction

Managing Myanmar's political transition so that it would not lose momentum, would not be derailed by unexpected events and would not be side-tracked by petty disagreements along the way was the highest priority for the Thein Sein government. Not only was minute attention needed constantly to ensure that policy-making processes could not be faulted on the grounds of lack of inclusiveness, illegality or inconsistency with historical or community values, but excess weight being seen to be given prematurely to overtly political objectives also had the potential to backfire on the government. Concentration of decision-making in a large president's office was one way to achieve better coordination and cohesion, but from the outset, the nature of the processes was critical. Here, the twin strategies of inclusiveness and openness were critical to success: from the beginning, policy workshops were convened bringing as many interested parties together as possible, with low-key participation by government representatives; acknowledgement that normal consultation processes could play a role in the transition helped and constant readiness to draw on relevant international advice enabled 'best practice' to be reflected in outcomes. Sector-specific conferences were constantly convened to expose domestic and international audiences to proposals under consideration, to reduce the risk of surprises and of unforeseen resistance. Not surprisingly, Myanmar's decision-makers felt overwhelmed at times. Yet, there was no official model, or template, or overall plan to keep Myanmar's

transition on track. There was no outside plan or expert to ensure that whatever was needed was done, and done at the right time. Reforms were being carried out in parallel, to a greater or lesser extent, through the mechanisms of the new parliament, which was itself both an unpredictable and highly sensitive instrument.

## 2. Factors for Consensus, Continuity and Stability in National Security

Strong historical factors contribute to a unifying cultural context for approaches to Myanmar's national security include neutralist or non-aligned foreign policy dating back to independence, its commitment to Buddhism—although not as a state religion or as an aggressive ideology—dating back to historical times, its support for a mixed economy (after flirting catastrophically with 'socialism' in the 1960s and 1970s) and its sustained belief that it can be a unitary multi-ethnic state. As a result, Myanmar does not see itself as exercising military power outside its borders, and even in matters of its own maritime security interests or cross border security interests, it has eschewed policies of aggression or territorial conquest. While the cohesion and security of the state are pre-eminent and have resulted in a 'special role' for the army in state building (Callahan 2004), they are not seen as allowing willful use of military force against Myanmar's neighbours. Myanmar's former military regime's 'three national causes', which have become the bedrock of Myanmar's national security philosophy, are entirely internally oriented goals and remain largely unchallenged as the country's national security policies.<sup>1</sup> These cultural contexts also define the extent and the way in which external influences can be accommodated by Myanmar's polity. Another matter, on which there is perhaps more consensus than some outside observers recognise, is

1. The military regime articulated what it rather crudely described as 'the three national causes' needed for the emergence of the new peaceful modern and developed state: non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty (Myoe 2007).

on the ongoing role of the army (Tatmadaw) in nation-building. Aung San Suu Kyi has always openly supported such a role. However, for the time being, there is no clear consensus in Myanmar supporting the assertion of civilian control over the military.<sup>2</sup> By providing formally for a National Security Council, the 2008 Constitution in effect calls for 'government control' of the military, but this does not necessarily amount to 'civilian control'; it is still too soon to pass judgement on this issue in Myanmar's transition. As he has gradually gained authority in office, Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has re-affirmed the Army's intention to remain engaged in national politics, but he publicly expressed the Tatmadaw's opposition to staging a *coup d'état* in Myanmar in a January 2015 interview with Channel News Asia (Min Aung Hlaing 2015).

Myanmar has traditionally shown great interest in its surrounding geo-political and now geo-economic circumstances and has notably chosen to pursue policies of peace and cooperation with its neighbours rather than the reverse. In the 1950s and 1960s, Myanmar was a prominent member of the Non-Aligned Movement alongside India and Indonesia, as well as of the Colombo Plan. Although it declined to join the British Commonwealth in 1948, it was quick to join ASEAN in 1997 when that organisation assumed a leading regional position, a decision taken by its military regime and not since challenged. One of the important security policies fiercely maintained by Myanmar since its independence is its refusal as a 'neutral' country to contemplate foreign troops being based on its soil (despite some Indian claims to the contrary).

Conformity with ASEAN norms and procedures, including in national security, is increasingly becoming one way in which Myanmar aligns its policies with those of its neighbours, although the importance of this alignment is

2. This is not a matter on which internationally accepted 'norms' operate. Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* is still the most authoritative source for this thinking, but Huntington dealt largely with the US situation, with passing (and not very penetrating) comparisons with Germany and Japan (Harvard University Press 1957).

not always recognised internationally. Myanmar attends all ASEAN meetings, seconds its staff to ASEAN sub-organisations and was keen to host ASEAN in 2014, which it did successfully after giving up its turn to host the summit in 2006. Through ASEAN, Myanmar participates also in the ASEAN Regional Forum on security issues and the East Asian Summit on geo-strategic matters. Myanmar's successful hosting of the ASEAN Summit in 2014 should reassure its neighbours—if this was necessary—about Myanmar's support for common regional interests. Myanmar's commitment to ASEAN, launched under a military regime, and extended during the reform period, has never been politically contentious in Myanmar, and conforming or complying with ASEAN standards has never been contested. Moreover, meeting its ASEAN obligations continues to be given high priority in Myanmar policy-making, and to date, there is no evidence of Myanmar falling down in meeting any of its ASEAN obligations. With 'normalisation' of Myanmar's international relations occurring particularly after April 2012, for example, Myanmar's military leaders have certainly participated more actively than ever before in international meetings and events with foreign counterparts. Indeed, the Tatmadaw itself increasingly enjoys close relationships with its ASEAN counterparts. Even within ASEAN, or on issues such as the South China Sea, Myanmar is likely to prefer not to take sides in disputes and may well seek to play the mediator if its own interests are not directly engaged. (To some extent, it played such a role in low key as chair of ASEAN in 2014.)

One challenge for Myanmar's transition was to achieve greater integration of the Tatmadaw into Myanmar's new political architecture, including the new multi-party parliament. So far, the Tatmadaw is acknowledged as having played a tolerant and permissive role, rather than adopting an obstructionist approach. While the Tatmadaw remains to a certain extent 'above the law'—in terms of accounting adequately for human rights and other abuses—since 2011, it has subjected itself to international scrutiny in several sometimes sensitive areas, such as its commitment to end the internationally unacceptable use of child soldiers, something that

would not have been imaginable a few years ago. In terms of domestic politics, the Tatmadaw has also been a relatively low-profile participant in the national peace negotiation process and has met multi-party political leaders on several occasions in 2012–2015. The Tatmadaw also reached out to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, inviting her to attend Armed Forces Day events in Naypyitaw for the first time ever in March 2013 and 2014. In these ways, the Tatmadaw has publicly demonstrated its support for national reconciliation, for normalisation of Myanmar's international relations and for an ongoing process of internal reform. Significantly, these policies have been directly associated with the Commander in Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who has participated in several of the high-level political dialogue meetings, and who personally welcomed Aung San Suu Kyi when she attended the Armed Forces Day celebrations. How far this might in future translate into an effective co-operative arrangement between the Tatmadaw and the National League for Democracy (perhaps as the government?) remains to be seen.

### **3. Ongoing Sources of Competition, Concern and Instability in National Security**

When it comes to national security policies in Myanmar's transition, many observers hoped the political transition would bring changed attitudes in the role of the military, but to date, there are only isolated examples of reversals of previous military policies. While the Tatmadaw has withdrawn somewhat from routine involvement in maintaining internal law and order, as the Myanmar government sought to use the Myanmar Police Force more systematically in this law enforcement role, it is not literally a case of 'back to the barracks' (ICG 2014), because the Tatmadaw has preserved most of its non-military interests. Indeed, Tatmadaw activities today have changed little from the questionable activities in which Tatmadaw members have engaged in over the years. Their continued reluctance to subject themselves fully to the rule of law domestically remains a major stumbling block. The

Tatmadaw's ongoing record of human rights abuses against the people is not only in conflict with the national goal of striving for peace and the end of conflict but continues to be openly contested and widely resisted. As long as the Tatmadaw continues their human rights abuses, forced confiscation of land and other breaches of the law, they will be roundly criticised in the United Nations (UN) and elsewhere. Sanctions against closer military collaboration with the Tatmadaw are almost certain to continue as a source of tension.

Sanctions were a form of forceful external policy towards Myanmar that were highly divisive inside and outside Myanmar and that did not always have the desired effect: they made no difference to the political will of the Myanmar military regime, harmed mainly the poor in Myanmar and deprived the United States of direct, meaningful influence in Myanmar (Selth 2012). Not only did sanctions act as a source of confrontation and disagreement, as inherently political instruments, they were also inherently unpredictable as to their continuity and subject to change and/or errors in their administration (Pedersen 2007). While most countries suspended their sanctions unilaterally after Myanmar's 1 April 2012 'free and fair' by-elections, in which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy achieved a near clean sweep of seats, the US Government surprised by dropping most of its sanctions to allow a resumption of most trade, and a limited resumption of US investment. The survival of any sanctions at all is, nevertheless, a reminder that Myanmar is not yet in a 'normal' situation but still subject to the whims of an external power, with the predictability and stability of its policy settings not assured, and externally driven uncertainty about future directions a dominating factor.

As a country that for so much of its independence had chosen to remain aloof or even isolated, internationally, Myanmar has been a 'test bed' for competing ideas or alliances relating to its security. Its leaders were always conscious of their 'strategic location' between China and India and at times were happy to try to play these two countries off against each other. In reality, however, Myanmar is a

relatively minor protagonist and has little scope to influence the postures of its major strategic neighbours. China always claimed to have a special relationship with Myanmar and to pursue a policy of non-interference and cooperation (although this was belied by China's active support for the Communist Party of Burma before 1989). Some Indian policy analysts still view Myanmar primarily in terms of its value in combatting potentially hostile Chinese influence, but their analyses significantly overstate any security challenges (or threats) that the poorest part of Myanmar (Chin State and the Naga Special Zone) might play alongside the poorest part of India (India's north-east provinces of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland). There is no evidence of any kind of existential security threat to India through Myanmar that could warrant India taking any extravagant precautions or (inherently more anti-Chinese) preventative security responses.

One of the factors that have brought the United States back to trying to establish a position of influence in Myanmar since 2010 has been the rise of China in the world. The apparent extent of Chinese influence in Myanmar, which grew substantially after the West imposed unilateral sanctions against Myanmar after 1988, caused undue alarm in some circles in Washington, which was already grappling with more assertive Chinese policies elsewhere. Particularly after Myanmar's unsuccessful 'saffron revolution' of 2007, this led to a sense in Washington that the United States should at least be competing more effectively with China in Myanmar. Indeed, this concern was said to be one of the reasons why US President Obama launched his 'pivot to Asia' policy in 2012.<sup>3</sup> Although the United States had virtually vacated the stage in Myanmar after the 1988 uprising, in reality, the United States was still admired and respected in Myanmar, including in the Myanmar Army as well as among Myanmar political leaders. Moreover, Tatmadaw officers who underwent

3. According to Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews. "Explaining the US Pivot to Asia". Chatham House, *Americas* 2013/01, August 2013, London.

training programs in the United States before 1988 tend to regard their US experiences extremely positively.<sup>4</sup>

Some observers are concerned by what they see as the Myanmar Government policy of increased 'militarisation' of border areas. Essentially this reflects the assertion of central government authority over areas where, traditionally, a quite modest central government presence reflected their lack of full control, for example in the Kokang and Wa special areas. (In Rakhine State, the abolition of the Border Security Force—Nasaka—in 2013 was followed by more visible regular army deployments.) While national and international non-governmental organisations have occasionally reported anecdotally increases (and recently, in Kayin/Karen State, decreases) in the size of the Tatmadaw presence, this has not been fully documented. Importantly, the Tatmadaw continues to confine its military actions to Myanmar territory, with the notable exception of two aerial incursions into Chinese territory in the course of the Kachin insurgency, which prompted understandably robust Chinese protests but did not escalate after the Myanmar Government apologised. (These incidents seem to have been inadvertent in an area where the border was not necessarily clearly delineated or where insurgents might have been seeking sanctuary across the border.<sup>5</sup>) It is not in the interests of either China or Myanmar to become engaged in conflict over their border. Along the Myanmar border with Thailand, conditions have probably been more incident-free than for many years after the conclusion of the first-ever ceasefire with the Karen National Union in 2012.

Residual concerns about the role of the Tatmadaw are articulated vigorously by bodies such as Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 2015), or the various national campaigns

for Burma, whose statements the Myanmar side tends to ignore, although international media tend to accord them the status of 'holy writ'. How effective are overseas activist groups in influencing Myanmar policies? Is a military-dominated Myanmar really open to being influenced by international lobby groups on the environment, on workers' rights, on freedom of expression or on responsible business and investment? One consideration here is whether or not the 'norms' against which Myanmar is being judged are truly global and universal, or whether they are Westernised international standards, with limited legitimacy or relevance in a Myanmar context. Certainly, in the past, when Western sanctions were unilaterally imposed against Myanmar, some of the political requirements being applied by the West seemed to Myanmar's military leaders to be selective and to involve double standards, with tougher requirements for a poor, weak state like Myanmar. Yet, these non-UN sanctions undoubtedly had some impact on the attitudes of the Myanmar leadership, even if the sanctions cannot really be said to be the main or only form of pressure for change, as some claim. Now, some of the criticisms being levelled at Myanmar by interest groups over international 'norm-free' areas like land rights are also having some effect (although the nature of the protests needs to be examined more thoroughly and in a more politically detached manner).

#### 4. Do Myanmar's Own Choices Matter

One of the key elements of Myanmar's transition is the extent to which the contents of its reform agenda were 'home grown', or for which Myanmar people felt 'ownership', rather than imposed by the outside world. Pursuing reform, or change, that was ultimately supported by the Myanmar military was also essential so that the military could justify their support for any changes as being goals they had identified themselves as in Myanmar's national interests. The fact that the military regime's 2003 'Seven-Point Road Map' reforms were not imposed by outsiders, but generated and widely

4. Author's conversations with senior Tatmadaw officers who underwent training in the United States.

5. Two incidents of aerial bombardment into Yunnan—across from Kachin State in 2012 and opposite Kokang Special Zone in February 2015—are almost certainly accidental. Insurgents are known to seek refuge in China from time to time, and borders in these areas are not clearly or readily demarcated.



supported inside Myanmar—albeit by a process that was not democratic—remains one of the main reasons why the process has been ‘unstoppable’. It also explains why Myanmar’s opposition has normally been very careful not to oppose outright any policies or ideas that have come quintessentially to represent Myanmar, such as the notion that the Myanmar Army plays a special role in ‘state-building’. However much Myanmar may seem disunited and prone to factionalism in the course of its transition, there is surprisingly little dissent from the central concept of Myanmar as a unitary, multi-ethnic/multi-party state (although not yet specifically described formally as a ‘federal’ state), a concept espoused initially through the pre-independence Panglong Agreement of 1947.<sup>6</sup>

Tatmadaw leadership in combatting internal insurgency, as part of its national security responsibilities, is accepted, even though the Tatmadaw is not at all disposed to welcome scrutiny or contestation of its behaviour. While the Tatmadaw has withdrawn somewhat during 2012–2015 from routine involvement in internal law and order, as part of a government policy of using the Myanmar Police Force more systematically in this role, Tatmadaw activities today have changed little from activities in which Tatmadaw members have engaged in over the years. Their continued reluctance to subject themselves fully to the rule of law domestically remains a major stumbling block for many in the international community. The Tatmadaw’s ongoing record of human rights abuses against the people is not only in conflict with the national goal of striving for peace and the end of conflict but continues to be openly contested and widely resisted. As long as the Tatmadaw continues their human rights abuses, forced confiscation of land and other breaches of the law, they will be roundly criticised inside Myanmar, in the UN and elsewhere. Sanctions against closer military

6. Even the ethnic groups that did not participate in the Panglong conference, such as the Karen, now support the principles enshrined in the Panglong Agreement. On 31 March 2015, all ethnic groups signed onto the Myanmar Government’s Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, although it remains to be seen how effective this will be.

collaboration with the Tatmadaw are almost certain to continue.

One change since 2011 is that Myanmar and the Tatmadaw have also been exposed to international conflict resolution strategies, especially via the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative (MPSI). MPSI activities range from support for negotiations to assistance to development projects in conflict-affected areas.<sup>7</sup> While the Tatmadaw itself is a party to the peace support arrangements concluded in 2012 between Norway and some other donors such as Australia and the UN, the Tatmadaw itself has not yet demonstrated much capacity for compromise or genuine negotiation. Encouraging the Tatmadaw to be mindful of the development imperatives that underpin ceasefires is not necessarily a first, but inculcating greater ‘sensitivity’ in the Tatmadaw to conflict impacts could be breaking new (and valuable) ground. (It is worth noting that MPSI staff—including those from Australia—are a mixture of civilian and military experts.)

Neutrality and non-aligned policies were traditionally the preferred course for governments of Burma/Myanmar; alignment with the United States, even via membership of the anti-communist SEATO block in the 1950s, was never an option, but seeking reasonable military-to-military relationships with the United States was not precluded. Naturally, Burma has never considered it could choose to opt out from seeking good working relations with China. Even when, in the past, Burma had major disagreements with China—over Chinese support for the Burmese Communist Party until 1989;

7. Details of the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative, on the Norwegian Foreign Ministry’s website, expect the MPSI to ‘provide concrete support to the ceasefire process and emerging peace process. Through the MPSI a number of projects have been initiated in ceasefire areas. A common approach for all these projects has been to work in a conflict sensitive manner and base the interventions on close consultations with all the stakeholders on the ground. MPSI is operating in areas previously inaccessible to international actors. An intention of the MPSI beyond the projects in themselves, has been to build sustainable and conflict sensitive aid practice that should inform further interventions as these areas become more accessible for the international community.’ See <http://www.myanmar.norway.info/NorwayMayanmar/MPSI/>

over Chinese manipulation of the Chinese community in Myanmar in the 1960s and 1970s; and over Chinese hunger for Myanmar's natural resources such as water, oil and gas exploitation, forest products and gems such as jade—it was believed that Burma/Myanmar had to accept much of whatever China decided, despite deep-seated basically racist anti-Chinese sentiments prevailing in Myanmar. Significantly, Myanmar has not usually believed it needed to choose between China and the United States.

### 5. Do External Policy Influences Matter

Myanmar has not sought to remain outside the international mainstream but has always retained its membership of international organisations, even when those organisations have criticised Myanmar or adopted measure against Myanmar. While prepared to defend itself against any criticisms, Myanmar has also been prepared at times to endeavour to bring itself into greater compliance with standards set by international bodies. In other words, Myanmar implicitly accepted the legitimacy of these organisations to comment on Myanmar policies and performance. This does not necessarily mean that Myanmar would conform fully or readily with relevant international norms, but it does suggest that Myanmar would not entirely ignore such norms. Indeed, the UN and a number of specialised agencies have openly sought to influence Myanmar policies; agencies such as the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organisation and UNICEF have long operated in Myanmar performing critically important, and objective, roles as independent upholders of international norms, which Myanmar is committed, at least rhetorically, to observe. Even after Myanmar's transition began, the prospects of international norms changing behaviour in Myanmar might not be high, but many international agencies continue to seek acceptance of their standards in Myanmar.

Myanmar actually proclaims its openness to international ideas, at least in principle, and its readiness to comply with relevant international conventions. Notwithstanding allegations about Tatmadaw involvement in illicit international

military activities—weapons purchases from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, nuclear weapon proliferation and chemical weapons production/use—there is no concrete evidence of the Tatmadaw overstepping the line into international military adventurism. There have—perhaps surprisingly—been no confirmed reports of arms purchases or weapons build-up by Myanmar causing concerns within the Southeast Asian region. Myanmar's conformance with international arms control agreements has, if anything improved, since 2011: it signed the additional protocol for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2013, ratified the Biological Weapons Convention in 2014 and cooperated with the International Atomic Energy Agency on low-level nuclear non-proliferation programs in 2013, although it has notably still not signed the anti-mining convention (although the impact of landmines is almost entirely internal).<sup>8</sup> At this point, international weapons control agencies have no outstanding requests of Myanmar (Santoro 2014).

One of the UN institutions with a long history of inter-action with Myanmar affecting aspects of Myanmar's national security is the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, appointed by the UN Human Rights Council, currently the South Korean academic Yanghee Lee, who has visited Myanmar twice since her appointment in 2014, but whose reports, and the recommendations in the reports, were having little impact (Lee 2015).<sup>9</sup> However, Myanmar's cooperation on international humanitarian law with the International Commission of the Red Cross and similar bodies remains limited and unsatisfactory. While Myanmar does not have a reputation for

8. It is also still not a party to the 1982 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

9. The Special Rapporteur's March 2015 assessment was that 'important challenges remain in establishing respect for the rule of law. Building confidence in the system of law enforcement and the judiciary will take time but must be based on the principle of accountability. Throughout her visit the Special Rapporteur was informed of continued failure to hold state authorities accountable for serious violations of international human rights law.' (Lee 2014, para. 57)

conforming well with international norms, generally speaking, it has remained prepared to consider international norms and standards both relating to domestic socio-economic policies and to responding to foreign policy and security concerns. Perhaps thanks partly to the prominence one of their own citizens, U Thant, achieved in the early days of the UN, Myanmar has always been relatively accessible to the UN system and inclined to tolerate UN influence rather than reject it outright. One notable exception is probably the GATT/WTO, of which Burma was always a member, but where it made little effort at compliance with international trade rules. On the other hand, Myanmar's compliance with international norms of trans-national crime prevention and law enforcement—ranging from drug trafficking and money laundering to people trafficking—has been reasonably satisfactory: it has signed and ratified anti-narcotics and anti-money laundering conventions since the early 2000s.

There may be limitations on what UN agencies can achieve in Myanmar in seeking compliance with international norms, even when the agencies are reasonably effective and 'courageous'. One example is the inability of the UN to make any noticeable progress in improving the treatment of 'Rohingya', although one can explain the lack of success as reflecting the lack of national consensus on the Myanmar side that accords humane recognition of the historical plight of the Rohingya. In this case, the dissonance between the (idealistic) international norm and the (essentially racist) Myanmar national viewpoint arguably makes it impossible for a simply articulated international 'norm' to gain traction domestically. The 'evidence' to support this interpretation lies in the National League for Democracy view on the Rohingya. What 'choice' does this leave those urging Myanmar to move away from 'unacceptable' policies?

Since 2011, the Tatmadaw has maintained its own limited international agenda, developing strategic and military-to-military relationships, exploring options for increased international collaboration on arms development, and military training with some partners, and

exploring quasi-military activities such as emergency relief, peace-keeping and so on. As examples, in recent years, Myanmar's senior military officers have participated regularly in ASEAN Regional Forum meetings and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meetings as well as the International Institute of Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue Meetings. In the course of President Thein Sein's official overseas trips, defence and military issues have been among the topics often discussed. As ASEAN Chair in 2014, Myanmar even chaired the 2014 East Asia Summit meeting in Naypyitaw that considered future 'regional security architecture'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Myanmar participated in the early development of new ideas and mechanisms for regional security, whereas only a few years earlier European members objected to Myanmar's presence at the Asia Europe Meeting. Exactly what any new practical mechanisms for regional security might entail is not yet clear, but Myanmar is not likely to play a leading role on this.

## 6. What Strategic Choices Really Exist in Relation to Myanmar

Before 2011, China took advantage of the opportunities presented to it to strengthen its influence in Myanmar significantly, but China was always conscious also of the burden (costs and responsibility) this imposed on China. For both China and Myanmar, however, the conclusion of a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership agreement with the new Myanmar government in May 2011 is a natural evolution of previous Chinese policies towards Myanmar, and not necessarily a sudden beefing up of bilateral relations. However, it has been apparent for a long time that China did not want to see the United States exercising

10. The East Asia Forum Chairman's Naypyitaw Statement says: 'We reaffirmed our commitment to enhance regional security cooperation in East Asia. To this end, we noted the convening of three Workshops on Regional Security Architecture held in Brunei, Russian Federation and Indonesia. We looked forward to continued discussions on elaboration of a common vision for security architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.'



strong influence in Burma/Myanmar. For its part, while Myanmar was pleased with the US decision to restore almost normal relations after 2011 and presumably hopes the US Administration will lift all US unilateral sanctions against it, Myanmar would still prefer not to have to choose one (the United States or China) over the other. While a comprehensive security partnership with China cements Myanmar–China relations on a level that no other country has with Myanmar, this does not amount to an exchange of mutual security guarantees. Over many years, both Myanmar and China have taken care to reassure each other whenever major changes in either side's political leadership occurred, including through constantly renewing high-level political and military contacts (Steinberg & Fan 2012).

Ironically, one of the reasons for the 2011 change of US policy towards Myanmar was the growing concern, especially in the US Congress, about the expansion of Chinese influence in Myanmar (not that Chinese influence was claimed to be threatening in itself). Many Washington commentators saw the thaw in United States–Myanmar relations, and indeed the 'pivot to Asia' announced by President Obama in November 2011, as a strategic victory for the United States (Campbell & Andrews 2013), although it would be impossible to quantify or substantiate this empirically. In reality, there is probably not much scope for other countries to influence any 'strategic choice' by Myanmar. Countries intent on pursuing their own interests primarily in Myanmar, and focused on perceptions of strategic competition with less concern about the quality of governance or of public policy outcomes in Myanmar, are not likely to achieve much progress if the Myanmar side is not persuaded that their commitment is also demonstrably in Myanmar's interests. Witness Myanmar's controversial decision in 2011 to suspend the Myitsonne Dam construction on the upper Ayeyarwady River, notwithstanding the disappointment this caused China as the contractor and source of funding. China may have enjoyed relative freedom for many years to position itself as the main source of assistance and 'investment' in Myanmar, but this did not mean Myanmar

would not object to specific unhelpful Chinese activities if Myanmar believed these activities went too far.

It is hardly surprising that Myanmar would pursue policies towards China based on careful assessments of Myanmar's national interests, based on its post-independence experiences. In some ways, China was after 1989 not a problem for Myanmar: despite its proximity, in recent years, China has consistently eschewed direct engagement in Myanmar politics, even encouraging dual citizens to respect Myanmar laws and policies. China generally did not publicly pressure Myanmar to change its policies and practices, unlike the United States, even when China was not satisfied with the way in which successive Myanmar governments implemented their policies and simultaneously often depended on China for financial and technical support.<sup>11</sup> India has frequently been inclined to exaggerate fears of Chinese influence in Myanmar, which it sees as inherently hostile towards India. Yet, many of India's fears—such as the alleged Chinese intelligence outpost on Coco Island—have not been substantiated. Rather too often, Indian proposals for cooperation with Myanmar have been couched in terms of what China is undertaking in Myanmar. Not surprisingly, Myanmar has responded somewhat coolly to India's attempts to compete with China either in supporting infrastructure development in Myanmar with poorly supported proposals (such as the Kaladan River network or proposals for rail connections with India), or in securing access to energy resources in Myanmar. This suggests that Myanmar is unlikely to be persuaded to help India achieve goals that seek to counter China.

Several Western countries (such as the United States, the UK and Australia) are keen to revive limited military cooperation with Myanmar—

11. In their recent study of Myanmar–China relations, Steinberg and Fan concluded that 'It seems evident that Myanmar will pursue what it regards as its national interests in terms of its internal power structure and external geopolitical settings and realities. The myths of Chinese hegemonic influence in Myanmar... should be modified to recognise the dynamic of the relationship and its impact on the region and the world. The dilemmas facing both states and other actors will need constant re-evaluation.'

even though a few still maintain some form of military sanctions—as a means on influencing Myanmar's military actions. Both the UK and the United States have made overtures about resuming military training for members of the Tatmadaw. Australia appointed a resident Defence Attache to the Australian Embassy in January 2014 for the first time in more than 30 years. That Western countries are to some extent wooing Myanmar for closer military ties suggests that there are no serious concerns in these countries about Myanmar 'breaking out' in breach of international norms or engaging in unwanted proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It also implies that they have not 'written off' Myanmar as being beyond their influence. But, it remains to be seen whether or not these new relationships (when fully developed) will translate into meaningful influence over Myanmar security behaviour.

Such international initiatives will not be resisted by the Myanmar Government, if there are no negative consequences for Myanmar's interests. It could be argued that these moves imply that Myanmar is being encouraged to pursue closer military ties with some Western countries, at least as a partial balance to its dependence on China. But decisions by Myanmar probably would not necessarily involve any greater exercise of 'strategic choice' and would not necessarily narrow Myanmar's options or freedom of action. Perhaps it would mean simply returning to a more 'normal' situation where a range of relationships—and even cooperative military-to-military arrangements—are maintained. Obviously, Myanmar would not choose new military relationships if they were contrary to Myanmar's national interests. Ultimately, the Tatmadaw might be prepared to comply with international norms, but only where these do not directly infringe Myanmar's strategic interests.

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