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Burma's continuing fear of invasion

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In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, the international community struggled to give practical effect to its perceived 'responsibility to protect' the victims of the natural disaster. Its efforts were made even more difficult by the military regime's abiding fears of foreign intervention and the generals' determination to resist any attempts by the outside world to interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs.

Even before 1988, when the armed forces crushed a massive prodemocracy uprising and took back direct political power, Burma's military government feared an invasion of the country. In those days, the greatest danger was seen to emanate from China, but over the past 20 years, the US and EU countries have been seen as Burma's greatest military threats. Even the UN is distrusted.

In the wake of the 1988 crackdown, the regime feared that the US, or a coalition of countries led by the US or the UN, planned to invade Burma and restore democratic rule. A US fleet stationed offshore to evacuate US nationals was seen as a possible invasion force. This fear was renewed by the strong international reaction to the regime's refusal to hand over power to the government elected in 1990. Perceptions of an external threat were strengthened by the measures taken by the US, EU and a range of other countries in the years that followed. The various economic sanctions levelled against Burma, for example, were seen as part of an effort to weaken the regime and prepare the ground for

forcible regime change. In response, the regime implemented a range of countermeasures, including an ambitious program to expand and modernise Burma's armed forces.

Around 2000, fears of direct military action against Burma seemed to fade, but the regime remained convinced—with some justification—that powerful members of the international community were determined to bring it down. Continued criticism of the military government in multilateral forums like the UN, and links made with rogue regimes like those in Iraq and North Korea in speeches by US President George W. Bush, seemed to presage external intervention.¹ US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice labelled Burma, along with these countries, 'an outpost of tyranny', to which the US must help bring freedom.² Attempts in the UNSC to declare Burma a threat to regional security, public praise for Aung San Suu Kyi and the opposition movement and aid to Burmese dissident groups have all been interpreted as part of a concerted campaign to subvert the military government. If it could not be brought down by the direct application of military force, it was believed, the US and others were trying to cause its collapse by fomenting internal unrest. The 'Saffron Revolution' in September 2007 was apparently seen in this light.

Thus, when the US, UK and France positioned warships off the Burmese coast in May 2008, after Cyclone Nargis, the regime was immediately suspicious of those countries' motives. There were clearly other factors, but fears of military intervention helped persuade it to rule out accepting direct assistance from such countries to the cyclone victims. The regime's fears were greatly strengthened by bellicose statements made by the French Government and others about the international community's overriding 'responsibility to protect' those in need in Burma. There were also calls for an invasion of Burma to provide aid to the cyclone victims, regardless of Burma's national sovereignty and the regime's wishes. Such statements can only have hardened the military leadership's conviction that it, and thus the country itself, remains under threat of armed intervention, against which it must prepare.

1 Stephen Lee Myers and Christine Hauser, 'Bush Announces Tighter Sanctions on Myanmar', *The New York Times*, 25 September 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/09/25/world/25cnd-bush.html.

2 'Rice Names "Outposts of Tyranny"', *BBC News*, 19 January 2005, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4186241.stm.

There has never been any likelihood since 1988 that Burma would actually be invaded, by the US or anyone else, but in international relations, perceptions are often more important than reality. Fears of armed intervention, and of more subtle forms of external interference in Burma's affairs, remain strong influences on Burma's strategic thinking. These fears must be taken into account in the consideration of any future policies towards the military government. Failure to do so will make the delivery of desperately needed aid to the cyclone victims, and the search for viable long-term solutions to Burma's many complex problems, infinitely more difficult.

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