

20

Burma: Of arms and the man

(17:16 AEDT, 6 April 2010)

There was widespread international support for an arms embargo against Myanmar, but such a measure was never going to have much of an impact, either on the Tatmadaw's combat capabilities or on domestic political developments. Not only were Myanmar's friends and neighbours still prepared to sell arms to the military government, but also the regime's defence industries already manufactured what it needed to fight armed ethnic groups and maintain a firm grip on the population.

In their continuing search for policies that might have an impact on the Naypyidaw regime, nearly 30 countries have called for a global arms embargo against Burma.¹ Foreign Minister Stephen Smith expressed Australia's support for such a measure last August and Gordon Brown recently stated that an arms embargo remained a 'high priority' for the UK Government.²

Organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have thrown their support behind the proposal, as have Burmese exile groups, human rights campaigners and Nobel laureates, among others.

1 Stephen Smith MP, 'Questions Without Notice: Burma', *House Hansard*, Australia, House of Representatives, 12 August 2009, www.foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2009/090812_AungSanSuuKyi.html [page discontinued] [now at parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansardr%2F2009-08-12%2F0079;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2F2009-08-12%2F0182%22].

2 'UK Government: Burma Global Arms Embargo "Remains a Priority"', Burma Campaign UK, London, 15 February 2010, www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/news-stories/uk-government-burma-global-arms-embargo-remains-a-priority/111.

An arms embargo, mandated or at least endorsed by the UN Security Council, would have considerable symbolic importance. It would send a strong diplomatic signal to the generals in Naypyidaw. It would also complicate the maintenance and further development of the regime's coercive apparatus. However, the chances of such an initiative receiving widespread support must be considered slight. And, even if an arms embargo was implemented, it would have little practical effect on the situation in Burma.

There are always formidable obstacles in the way of an effective arms embargo, but in Burma's case these are perhaps even greater than usual.

Burma's major arms suppliers include China and Russia, both of which are unlikely to support moves in the Security Council to formally declare an embargo. They have already ignored bans on defence exports to Burma imposed by the US, the EU member states, the Nordic countries, Japan and Australia. Indeed, over the past 20 years, China has been largely responsible for the re-arming of Burma's armed forces. According to recent news reports, Beijing and Moscow are currently negotiating additional arms contracts with Naypyidaw.³

Also, since the abortive prodemocracy uprising in 1988 and the subsequent imposition of unilateral embargoes by Burma's traditional arms suppliers, a wide range of other countries have provided weapons and defence equipment to the military government. These have reportedly included India, Pakistan, North Korea, South Korea, Israel, Italy, Poland, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia and Slovakia.⁴ It is unlikely that all these—and several other—countries would support, let alone observe, a global arms embargo.

Notwithstanding the criticisms recently levelled against Burma by regional countries over Naypyidaw's draconian new election laws, it is also unlikely that ASEAN would endorse a global arms embargo. Such a move would be seen by some states at least as offending the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of association members. This is quite apart from the vexed question of whether or not a few ASEAN countries have themselves provided arms, equipment and training to the Burmese armed forces.

3 Mungpi, 'Russia, Burma Sign Arms Deal', *Mizzima News*, [Yangon], 23 December 2009, www.mizzima.com/news/world/3200-russia-burma-sign-arms-deal.html [page discontinued].

4 'SPDC Arms Suppliers', ALTSEAN-Burma, Bangkok, www.altsean.org/Research/SPDC%20Whos%20Who/ArmsSuppliers.htm#China [page discontinued].

Even if there was wide support for a global arms embargo, there are still many independent arms dealers who would be more than happy to step in and fill the gap—either directly or indirectly—by providing Naypyidaw with the weapons it wants. Burma has probably already received several shipments of arms and ammunition through third countries and other intermediaries.

These sorts of deals would be made easier by the fact that the kinds of arms purchased by Naypyidaw over the past 20 years tend to be readily available. Indeed, most major weapon systems in Burma's order of battle are widely considered to be obsolete and are being phased out elsewhere. This makes replacements and spare parts relatively easy to find, not only from other countries modernising their armed forces and keen to dispose of their old inventory, but also from private arms dealers and black marketeers.

This is quite apart from the fact that a wide range of equipment designed for civilian use—and thus readily available on the open market—can be used or adapted for military use. Only last year, for example, an Australian firm was accused of selling frequency-hopping radios to Burma, which the regime reportedly employed in its campaigns against ethnic insurgents.⁵ Whether or not these particular radios were adapted after delivery, Burma is widely recognised for its ingenuity in modifying civilian designs for military use.

Another factor to be considered is that, ever since the 1962 coup d'état, the military government has made an effort to develop Burma's own defence industries, specifically to reduce its reliance on overseas arms suppliers. Since 1988, this program has been greatly expanded and stockpiles of strategic materiel have been increased. Burma now manufactures a wide range of its own arms, ammunition and military equipment. Some are made under licence, but it has also developed a number of indigenous designs, ranging from small arms to armoured vehicles.

Burma's armed forces will always need some imported parts to keep their major weapon systems operational. Yet, despite the fears of some generals, Naypyidaw does not face any serious external threats that would make such purchases a pressing issue. More importantly, the military government does not rely on foreign arms to maintain its tight grip on

5 'Australia Breaches Burma Arms Embargo', *Green Left*, 12 February 2010, www.greenleft.org.au/2010/826/42468 [page discontinued].

the country. This is done almost exclusively with locally made weapons and ammunition, rendering a global arms embargo largely ineffective as a tool for political change.

Thus, the international community faces another conundrum over Burma. A global arms embargo would help register the widespread concern felt over Naypyidaw's behaviour, but is unlikely to have any real impact on the situation in the country. In fact, to launch a major initiative of this kind and have it fail—as seems most likely—would risk reminding the generals of the world's limited ability to influence developments in Burma.

This text is taken from *Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis*,
by Andrew Selth, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.