

Defence relations with Burma: Our future past

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When president Thein Sein took office in 2011 and began an ambitious program of political, economic and social reforms, Myanmar began to shed its pariah status, making it easier for Western countries to contemplate the development of military relations. Australia had a long history of defence links with Myanmar, and there were suggestions that the resumption of such ties was going to be part of the 2013 Defence White Paper process.

John Blaxland's persuasive piece on the possible renewal of defence cooperation between Australia and Burma (Myanmar) prompts a look at past contacts in this field.¹ For it is a little-known fact that Australia was once an important source of military training and advice for the Burmese armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*). It could become so again.²

Between 1948, when Burma regained its independence from Britain, and General Ne Win's coup d'état in 1962, Australia provided training for more than 90 Burmese military officers and noncommissioned officers.

1 John Blaxland, 'Myanmar: Time for Australian Defence Cooperation', *The Interpreter*, 23 October 2012, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/10/23/Myanmar-Time-for-Australian-Defence-Cooperation.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-time-australian-defence-cooperation].

2 Lindsay Murdoch, 'PM Raises Prospect of Defence Ties with Burma', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 2012, www.smh.com.au/opinion/political-news/pm-raises-prospect-of-defence-ties-with-burma-20121105-28u6m.html.

They were drawn from the army and air force as part of a major effort by the fledgling *Tatmadaw* to develop its technical and leadership capabilities (there is no record of any naval trainees).

Australia was also considered a source of expertise in areas relevant to Burma's national security. In 1957, an Australian army officer was chosen over candidates from several other countries to train the Burmese in counterinsurgency warfare, in Burma. In 1960, he was made a strategic advisor to the *Tatmadaw*.³

When the xenophobic Ne Win seized power, this assignment was terminated and most foreign military contacts ceased. However, a small number of Burmese officers still attended training courses in Australia, the last in 1987. Despite its alliance with the US, Australia was viewed by Rangoon as a friendly country prepared to provide assistance to Burma, in both military and civil fields, without trying to exert undue political influence or subvert its trainees.⁴

After the *Tatmadaw* crushed a nationwide prodemocracy uprising in 1988, such defence contacts ceased, as Australia joined wider Western efforts to isolate and punish the new military regime. Yet, even then, Australia took a measured approach and kept open important lines of communication. Australia's defence attaché (DA) had been withdrawn from Rangoon in 1979, mainly for financial reasons, but after 1988, the DA in Bangkok remained accredited to Burma and continued to make occasional visits.

It was reported in January that defence relations with Burma will be considered as part of the 2013 White Paper.⁵ Given the remarkable changes taking place under President Thein Sein—believed by many to be 'Burma's Gorbachev'⁶—this move is timely.⁶ In both practical and symbolic terms, the outcome of those deliberations could have far-reaching implications.

3 John Farquharson, 'Serong, Francis Philip (Ted) (1915–2002)', *Obituaries Australia* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, 2002), oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/serong-francis-philip-ted-901.

4 Ademola Adeleke, 'The Strings of Neutralism: Burma and the Colombo Plan', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.76, No.4, Winter 2003–04, pp.593–610, www.pacificaffairs.ubc.ca/files/2011/09/adeleke.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.jstor.org/stable/i40001464].

5 Cameron Stewart, 'Defence Door to Myanmar Ajar', *The Australian*, 24 January 2013, www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/modest-relations-considered-to-support-reform/story-e6frg8yo-1226560412364 [page discontinued].

6 Joshua Hammer, 'Myanmar's Gorbachev?', *The New Yorker*, 14 January 2012, www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/01/myanmars-gorbachev.html.

Over the past 24 years, activists have successfully painted the *Tatmadaw* as a brutal and corrupt military machine that has not only dominated Burma's political affairs, but has also been guilty of terrible human rights abuses. Some now claim that nothing has changed. They point to the strong military bias in the 2008 constitution, the excessive force used against the Rohingyas in Arakan State in 2012⁷ and the bitter civil war in Kachin State.⁸

It is precisely because the *Tatmadaw* remains the most powerful political institution in the country, however, and continues to employ harsh measures against its opponents, that a carefully managed program of external engagement with the armed forces is so important.

Despite continuing scepticism on the part of some commentators, it is clear that Thein Sein's reforms are real and that Burma has entered a new phase of political, economic and social development. The Burmese Government still faces many challenges and, in most areas, reforms will be slow. Old habits on the part of the security forces will die hard, particularly among those with vested interests in the old system. However, the best way to encourage further reform is to strengthen the hand of the reformers and to give the armed forces a larger stake in a more democratic Burma.⁹

There are many officers in the *Tatmadaw* who broadly welcome their government's reforms and share Thein Sein's wish to see Burma become a more modern, prosperous, stable and respected country. By inviting such people to Australia for training in nonlethal disciplines—such as those offered by staff colleges, engineering schools and medical colleges—Australia can expose them to international norms, promote new ways of thinking and encourage them to consider different ways of approaching Burma's complex problems.

As a recent visit to Burma revealed, the *Tatmadaw* is keen to resume contacts with developed Western countries. Not only would this help balance its links with other states—notably, China—but also Burma's military is hungry for the technology, expertise and ideas of the West.

7 'Burma: Government Forces Targeting Rohingya Muslims', *News* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 31 July 2012), www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/31/burma-government-forces-targeting-rohingya-muslims.

8 Anthony Davis, 'Pyrrhic Victory in Myanmar', *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 31 January 2013, www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/OA31Ae03.html [page discontinued].

9 Morten Pedersen, 'The Real Threat to Democracy in Myanmar', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 26 February 2012, www.fletcherforum.org/2013/02/26/mortensen/ [page discontinued].

The door is already open. During his December 2012 visit, Barack Obama foreshadowed closer US–Burma defence ties¹⁰ and last month, for the first time, Burma sent a team of observers to Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand.¹¹

No one realistically expects that a six-month staff course will turn Burmese officers into pocket democrats, able to influence national events on their return. Some may even reject the lessons offered to them. Yet, it would seem worth making a modest investment in this area while the need is greatest and the outcomes potentially so beneficial. Also, until the reappointment of a resident DA, these officers can offer points of entry for Australian officials into a system that for decades has been closed to them.¹²

It is perhaps also worth making the point that, due largely to the efforts of Burmese exiles, human rights campaigners and other supporters of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma has long been held to a higher standard than that applied to any of its regional neighbours, even North Korea.¹³ Australia already has close defence ties—including exchanges of personnel—with several countries that have less than perfect records when it comes to their systems of government and the conduct of their armed forces.

Notwithstanding Thein Sein's ambitious reform program, the *Tatmadaw* will exert a strong influence on Burma's government, economy and society for the foreseeable future. In considering the question of bilateral defence relations, the Australian Government can look at Burma's dark past and imperfect present or it can look to the future and take the opportunity to assist in the development of a more professional, capable and openminded officer corps. That would be in not only Burma's long-term interests, but also Australia's.

10 Aung Zaw, 'Can US–Burma Defense Ties Return Generals to the Barracks?', *The Irrawaddy*, 21 December 2012, www.irrawaddy.org/archives/21815.

11 Donna Miles, 'Exercise Cobra Gold 2013 Kicks Off in Thailand', American Forces Press Service, US Department of Defense, 11 February 2013, www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=119256 [page discontinued].

12 John Blaxland, 'Myanmar: Time for Australian Defence Cooperation', *Security Challenges*, Vol.7, No.4, Summer 2011, pp.63–76, asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/public-submissions/dr-john-blaxland_0.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.jstor.org/stable/26467117?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents].

13 David I. Steinberg, 'Disparate Sanctions: US Sanctions, North Korea and Burma', *East Asia Forum*, 23 June 2011, www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/06/23/disparate-sanctions-us-sanctions-north-korea-and-burma/.

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