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West reaches out to Burma's security sector

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The advent of Thein Sein's reformist government reduced the sensitivity of bilateral security relations with Myanmar and made it possible for Western countries like the US and the UK to contemplate—within limits—the provision of assistance to the country's armed forces and police force.

One of the most striking aspects of Burma's reemergence as an international actor has been the readiness of the Western democracies to renew or strengthen ties with the country's armed forces and police. Before the advent of President Thein Sein's reformist government in 2011, any relationship with Burma's reviled security forces was politically very difficult.

The policy change has been enthusiastically welcomed by Naypyidaw and, albeit more cautiously, by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. It has been condemned as premature and ill-advised by activists and human rights organisations, but it is hoped that foreign assistance can ameliorate the very problems about which Burma's critics are most concerned.

Most of the new initiatives have been expressed in principled terms, including by Thein Sein,¹ but essentially they can be divided into two separate, if related, sets of proposals. One is aimed at increasing the

1 Thein Sein, 'Myanmar's Complex Transformation: Prospects and Challenges', Transcript, Chatham House, London, 15 July 2013, at www.networkmyanmar.org/images/stories/PDF15/Chatham-House-Thein-Sein.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.files.ethz.ch/isn/167435/150713Sein.pdf].

professionalism of the armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) and reducing its political role. The other relates to the modernisation and civilianisation of the Myanmar Police Force (MPF).

After Barack Obama's visit to Burma in November 2012, Naypyidaw was invited to send observers to Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand.² In April 2013, the State Department announced that the US was looking at ways to support 'nascent military engagement' with Burma as a way of encouraging further political reforms.³

Pentagon officials have since referred to a 'carefully calibrated' plan⁴ that includes Burmese cooperation in the search for the remains of US personnel missing since World War II. *Tatmadaw* officers have participated in events sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawai'i, and a military dialogue or 'partnership' has not been ruled out.⁵

During Thein Sein's March 2013 visit to Australia, Canberra announced it was restoring the resident defence attaché's position in Rangoon. Prime Minister Julia Gillard said that this was to permit engagement with the *Tatmadaw* in areas such as peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and to enhance other dialogues.⁶

The UK has also been active in this area. During Thein Sein's recent visit to the UK, London announced that it, too, was posting a defence attaché (DA) to Rangoon. An arms embargo (sort of)⁷ remains in place but the *Tatmadaw* has been offered training courses in human rights, the laws of armed conflict and the accountability of armed forces in democracies. Thirty senior Burmese officers will attend a staff course in the UK next year.

2 Daniel Schearf, 'Burma Observers Participate in US-Led Military Exercises in Thailand', *Voice of America*, 11 February 2013, www.voanews.com/content/burma-observers-participate-in-us-led-military-exercises-in-thailand/1601193.html [page discontinued] [now at www.voanews.com/east-asia/burma-observers-participate-us-led-military-exercises-thailand/].

3 Erika Kinetz, 'US to Boost Military, Trade Ties to Burma', *The Irrawaddy*, April 2013, www.irrawaddy.org/archives/33140.

4 'US Begins "Calibrated" Defence Engagement with Myanmar', *Zee News*, [Noida, India], 26 April 2013, zeenews.india.com/news/world/us-begins-calibrated-defence-engagement-with-myanmar_844777.html.

5 Barrister Harun ur Rashid, 'US-Myanmar Military Engagement: A Step to Counter China?', *Daily Star*, [Dhaka], 1 December 2012, archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=259409.

6 Naomi Woodley, 'Australia Further Strengthens Ties with Myanmar', *The World Today*, [ABC Radio], 18 March 2013, www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2013/s3717728.htm.

7 Hanna Hindstrom, 'UK Approves US\$5 Million in Arms Export Deals to Burma', *Burma Link*, 18 July 2013, www.burmalink.org/uk-approves-us5-million-in-arms-export-deals-to-burma/.

There has also been considerable international interest in the reform of Burma's police force.⁸ While most proposals refer to the need to strengthen the 'rule of law' in Burma, they also seem to envisage direct aid to the MPF. Earlier this year, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime was asked to conduct a survey of the force's strengths and weaknesses, to help focus the provision of foreign assistance.

This process has already begun. The EU has just posted two officers to Burma in response to a request from Naypyidaw for advice on crowd control and community policing. Foreign training in the management of public protests was recommended by Aung San Suu Kyi's commission in its report on the Letpadaung incident last year, when the MPF used excessive force.⁹

The UK sent a police expert on an exploratory mission to Burma in June and appears to be contemplating a relationship with the MPF. While Burmese officials routinely denigrate the colonial administration, including its police forces, both countries acknowledge that the MPF owes much to its British heritage and see this as the basis for fruitful cooperation.

For its part, the US has lifted its embargo on Burmese attendance at the Bangkok-based International Law Enforcement Academy and seems to be considering assistance to the MPF. A US interagency 'rule of law' mission visited Burma earlier this year. Independent organisations like the US Institute of Peace are also looking at ways to help the MPF improve its performance.¹⁰

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has maintained an office in Rangoon since 2000. Joint activities and training courses have focused on transnational crime such as narcotics trafficking and people smuggling.¹¹

8 Andrew Selth, 'Burma Police: The Long Road to Reform', *The Interpreter*, 13 December 2012, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/12/13/Burmas-police-The-long-road-to-reform.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-police-long-road-reform].

9 Ei Ei Toe Lwin, 'Fury Over Letpadaung Copper Mine Report', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 18 March 2013, www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/5175-fury-at-copper-mine-report.html.

10 United States Institute of Peace, *USIP Burma/Myanmar Rule of Law Trip Report* (Washington, DC: USIP Rule of Law Center, June 2013), newcrossroadsasia.com/main/images/monthly/usip.pdf [page discontinued] [now at themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Burma-Myanmar_Rule_of_Law_Trip_US_Institute_of_Peace_June2013.pdf].

11 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Myanmar Country Brief* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2016), www.dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/myanmar_brief.html [page discontinued] [now at www.dfat.gov.au/geo/myanmar/Pages/myanmar-country-brief].

It is not known whether there are any plans to increase this level of cooperation, given the MPF's current receptivity to closer foreign ties, but the AFP is well placed to do so.

The risks associated with closer ties to the *Tatmadaw* and MPF will be explored in a follow-up post.

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