

# 56

## Risk and reward with Burma's security sector

(13:26 AEDT, 26 July 2013)

*While Western assistance to the Tatmadaw and MPF became less sensitive after the reformist president Thein Sein took office in 2011, such contacts still attracted strong criticism from activist and exile groups. As these groups were quick to point out, there were no guarantees that any assistance provided to Myanmar would result in significant changes in either the ethos or the behaviour of the security forces.*

The initiatives for closer ties between the West and Burma's police and armed forces, summarised in the previous post,<sup>1</sup> have aroused the ire of the activist community, which has been quick to remind everyone that the armed forces still dominate politics in Burma. The *Tatmadaw* is also engaged in counterinsurgency campaigns against armed ethnic groups and has been guilty of crimes against Muslim Rohingyas. The MPF, too, has been accused of corruption and human rights abuses.

Another criticism has been that assistance to Burma's security forces helps them maintain their grip on Burmese society by increasing their coercive capabilities. Also, formal recognition is seen as giving them a legitimacy

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Selth, 'West Reaches Out to Burma's Security Sector', *The Interpreter*, 26 July 2013, [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/west-reaches-out-burmas-security-sector](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/west-reaches-out-burmas-security-sector).

they do not deserve.<sup>2</sup> Even the US Senate has warned that there is the potential for ‘well-intended engagement [to be] misdirected towards a negative result’.<sup>3</sup>

Some observers sceptical of Thein Sein’s reform agenda, and international engagement more generally, believe the real aim of closer relations with Burma’s security forces is to outflank China.<sup>4</sup>

Such links can have strategic implications, but these should not be overstated. The aid programs proposed to date are quite modest and seem to be prompted largely by concerns about Burma’s domestic situation. In any case, it would take considerable time and effort for the US and its allies to match China’s current relationships with the *Tatmadaw* and MPF.<sup>5</sup> And Burma will always try to balance its foreign relations to protect its independence. With the chairmanship of ASEAN next year in mind, Naypyidaw has already asked Beijing for advice on a range of public security issues.

The risks associated with closer ties to the *Tatmadaw* and MPF have clearly been taken into account by the Western democracies. Yet the prevailing view remains that ‘positive reinforcement for meaningful reforms’ is the best policy, and that such an approach is more likely to change the mindset and behaviour of the Burmese authorities than a return to sanctions and other punitive measures.<sup>6</sup>

This is a persuasive argument, but it must be kept in perspective. The scope for foreign governments and international organisations to change the nature of Burma’s security forces is limited.

Outsiders can provide specialist advice, technical assistance and modern equipment. They can help lift the professionalism of the *Tatmadaw* and MPF and encourage the adoption of internationally accepted standards. Such measures can facilitate changes in the character and effectiveness of the country’s security forces. But they cannot determine them.

2 Saw Yan Naing and Andrew D. Kaspar, ‘UK to Resume Military Ties with Burma’, *The Irrawaddy*, 16 July 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/archives/40175](http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives/40175).

3 Walter Lohman, ‘Hill Concern Over US–Burma Military Engagement Grows’, *The Daily Signal*, 27 June 2013, [blog.heritage.org/2013/06/27/hill-concern-over-u-s-burma-military-engagement-grows/](http://blog.heritage.org/2013/06/27/hill-concern-over-u-s-burma-military-engagement-grows/).

4 Bertil Lintner, ‘Myanmar Morphs to US–China Battlefield’, *Asia Times Online*, [Hong Kong], 2 May 2013, [www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/SEA-01-020513.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/SEA-01-020513.html) [page discontinued].

5 Xinhua, ‘Chinese Senior Military Official Begins Visit to Myanmar’, *Global Times*, [Beijing], 20 July 2013, [www.globaltimes.cn/content/798139.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/798139.shtml).

6 Lohman, ‘Hill Concern Over US–Burma Military Engagement Grows’.

Fundamental reforms will depend on a completely new political dynamic in Burma, a shift in the professional culture of the armed forces and police and the development of a genuine relationship of trust with the community. These changes will be difficult and will take a long time. More to the point, they will ultimately depend on the Burmese themselves.

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.