

Should Burma participate in UN peacekeeping?

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In March 2014, it was widely reported that Myanmar had been invited to participate in UN peacekeeping operations. These reports were inaccurate but provoked an outcry from activist groups. This was a little surprising, as there were good arguments for permitting Myanmar's police and armed forces to get the international exposure and experience that UN peacekeeping operations usually provide.

A few months ago, several activist organisations expressed outrage at reports that the UN had invited Burma (Myanmar) to participate in peacekeeping operations (PKO). The furore has since died down, but Naypyidaw's critics are reasserting themselves in a number of ways and the question will doubtless arise again.

With that in mind, it is helpful to look more closely at Burma's fluctuating relationship with the UN, the reported PKO invitation and recent moves to curb engagement with Burma.

After it regained its independence in 1948, Burma was a strong supporter of the UN. Between 1961 and 1971, a Burmese statesman, U Thant, was twice elected secretary-general. In 1958, Burma participated in the UN Observation Group in the Lebanon (UNOGIL) and, in 1961, it provided a small contingent for the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC).

After Ne Win's coup in 1962, Burma steered clear of PKO, but it continued to enjoy a good relationship with the UN. Indeed, as it retreated into economic and political isolation, Burma came to rely on the UN for development aid and the ultimate guarantee of its sovereignty.

The 1988 prodemocracy uprising marked a turning point in the relationship. Burma's new military government increasingly saw the UN as a threat, aligned with its Western critics.

Over the past 25 years, four special envoys and five rapporteurs have been appointed by the UN to carry out fact-finding missions in Burma or to facilitate dialogue between the government and opposition movement. Between them, these officials visited Burma about 60 times. The current UN Secretary-General has himself visited Burma three times.¹

The UN can claim a few modest successes in Burma, but it is difficult to identify any significant policy changes made by the military regime between 1988 and 2011 that were the result of approaches made by UN representatives.²

Since the advent of Thein Sein's mixed civilian–military government, there has been an effort on both sides to improve the relationship. The UN is still critical of Burma's human rights record,³ but it is assisting with development programs and important initiatives such as the reform of the Myanmar Police Force.

Then in March this year, there were news media reports that UN Special Envoy Vijay Nambiar had 'invited' Burma to contribute to PKO.

A UN spokesman later explained that Nambiar had told Burmese Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing that, like any member state, Burma was 'invited to discuss its interest in specific terms with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations which would consider such a request in accordance with its regular parameters'.⁴

1 *Chronology of Visits and Reports* (Bangkok: ALTSEAN-Burma, 2013), www.altsean.org/Research/UN%20Dossier/EnvoysandRapporteurs.htm [page discontinued].

2 Anna Magnusson and Morten B. Pedersen, *A Good Office? Twenty Years of UN Mediation in Myanmar* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2012), www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/ipi_ebook_good_offices.pdf.

3 'Myanmar Homepage', Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, www.ohchr.org/en/countries/asiaregion/pages/mmindex.aspx.

4 Matthew Russell Lee, 'Myanmar Invited for UN Peacekeeping by Vijay Nambiar, Ban Ki-moon No Comment on Anti-Muslim Marriage Law', *Inner City Press*, [New York], 27 February 2014, innercitypress.blogspot.com.au/2014/02/myanmar-invited-for-un-peacekeeping-by.html.

This suggests that it was in fact the Burmese side that raised the issue. Nambiar did not 'invite' Burma to participate in PKO, as claimed, nor did he respond positively to any Burmese request. However, he left the door open for the UN to consider Burmese participation in a UN peacekeeping force, should Naypyidaw make a formal approach.

The UN's clarification of Nambiar's remarks did not prevent a strong reaction. Human Rights Watch and other activist organisations were quick to point out that Burma's armed forces (*Tatmadaw*) have a poor human rights record and that efforts to demobilise Burma's child soldiers were incomplete.⁵

Other critics reminded the UN that Burma had an undemocratic constitution, a peace settlement with the country's ethnic armed groups was still a long way off and Rohingya Muslims suffer from official discrimination.⁶ Also, Burma maintains military ties with North Korea, in violation of UNSC resolutions.

Despite several countries with dubious human rights records already providing soldiers for PKO, these activist groups felt that any Burmese participation would be incompatible with the high standards the UN was expected to uphold.

There is no question that there are serious problems in Burma. Unsurprisingly, the reform process is proving difficult and there are deep-seated communal tensions that were always going to prove problematic. Indeed, given the scope and nature of the challenges Naypyidaw faces, it is remarkable what has already been achieved.

While it is true that the *Tatmadaw* remains the most powerful institution in Burma, this should not be seen just in negative terms. As a recent International Crisis Group report stated, the *Tatmadaw's* guaranteed position at the centre of Burma's government has given it the confidence to allow, and in many cases support, a major liberalisation of politics and

5 'UN: Request for Burmese Peacekeepers Misguided', *News* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 13 March 2014), www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/13/un-request-burmese-peacekeepers-misguided.

6 'Mixed Messages from the UN in Burma', *US Campaign for Burma*, 20 March 2014, uscampaignforburma.wordpress.com/2014/03/20/mixed-messages-from-the-un-in-burma/.

the economy.⁷ Yet in public commentary, such factors are not always taken into account. Immediate concerns usually overshadow longer-term strategic considerations.

Another problem is that the atmosphere surrounding cooperation with Burma's security forces is changing. In the euphoria that followed the launch of Thein Sein's reform program and the international community's rush to restore relations with Burma, Naypyidaw's critics found it hard to get a hearing. They have now seized on Burma's latest problems and continuing crises to try to wind back the level of foreign contact.

In the US, for example, the Obama administration is in danger of losing control of its Burma policy.⁸ There is a Bill before Congress that makes such unrealistic demands that, if passed, it would undercut US goals and reduce US influence in Burma.⁹ Indeed, it would strengthen the hand of those elements still opposed to reform.

In such an atmosphere, the likelihood of Burma being invited to participate in UN PKO must be considered slight. Yet it can be argued that now more than ever such a step would be beneficial.

If Burma's security forces are to learn about international norms of behaviour, devise better ways of doing things and be exposed to issues beyond their narrow experience, participation in UN operations offers a way ahead. The alternative is to deny them such opportunities and perpetuate the blinkered thinking that has contributed to Burma's current problems.

There could be other benefits, too. A major reform program has been launched in the MPF, which is rapidly expanding and assuming greater responsibility for internal security. The *Tatmadaw*, too, is rewriting its doctrine to meet changing domestic and strategic circumstances. International training and experience could assist such processes.

7 *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks?*, Asia Briefing No.143 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 22 April 2014), www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/b143-myanmar-s-military-back-to-the-barracks.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-s-military-back-barracks/].

8 Steve Hirsch, 'Cracks Appear in US Myanmar Rapprochement', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 30 April 2014, thediplomat.com/2014/04/cracks-appear-in-us-myanmar-rapprochement/.

9 David I. Steinberg, 'The Problem with H.R. 4377, the Burma Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2014', *cogitASIA* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 7 May 2014), cogitasia.com/the-problem-with-h-r-4377-the-burma-human-rights-and-democracy-act-of-2014/.

Although activists remain sceptical, there are many within Burma's police and armed forces who wish to see democratic reform. Members of both institutions want to be better trained, better equipped, more professional and more respected. Participation in PKO would assist in this process and give them a greater investment in positive change.

Burma will continue to experience serious problems for years to come. It would be naive to expect otherwise. The international community thus continues to face the same question it has struggled with since 1988: is progress more likely by isolating and punishing Naypyidaw or by trying to encourage reform through constructive dialogue and positive action?¹⁰

If the answer is the latter, inviting Burmese soldiers and police to participate in UN PKO would seem an option worth taking seriously.

10 Andrew Selth, 'Defence Relations with Burma: Our Future Past', *The Interpreter*, 4 March 2013, www.lowyinterpreter.com.au/post/2013/03/04/Australian-defence-relations-with-Burma-our-future-past.aspx [page discontinued] [now at www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/defence-relations-burma-our-future-past].

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