

# Introduction

When Sam Roggeveen invited me to contribute an article to the Lowy Institute's new digital magazine in late 2007, I had no idea that it would be the first step in a long and mutually profitable association. *The Interpreter* soon established itself as a consistently timely, thoughtful and innovative forum for the discussion of a wide range of subjects covering domestic and international politics and economics, foreign policy issues and developments in the broader security sphere. It was not long before it had acquired a global audience and was influencing senior policymakers, both in Australia and abroad. It was thus an ideal outlet for my research and comments on contemporary Myanmar.

The main focus of my articles for the blog was on developments in Myanmar's politics, security and foreign affairs. However, they occasionally ranged more broadly and delved into historical, social and economic matters. Some were purely descriptive, such as my 2013 primer on Myanmar's Muslim communities, but most surveyed current views on breaking stories, including my own observations. A couple of posts, such as the one about Major General John Hartley's 1994 visit to Three Pagodas Pass on the Thailand–Myanmar border, were based on personal experiences.<sup>1</sup> Most pieces stood alone, but a number of issues remained topical throughout the period under review and were the subject of several posts, written as events unfolded and situations developed.

Looking back through all these articles, I have been struck by the way in which they trace the history of Myanmar from the days of the military regime, through president Thein Sein's civilian–military administration, to Aung San Suu Kyi's current coalition government. Indeed, it could be claimed that, during the 12 years covered by this book, Myanmar

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1 Although not identified in the article, I was the civilian intelligence analyst in the general's party who had a diplomatic posting to the Australian Embassy in Rangoon.

experienced more momentous changes than at any time since the 1962 coup, when the armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*) first seized power and established the modern world's most durable military dictatorship. The wider strategic environment also underwent a dramatic transformation, affecting not only internal developments, but also Myanmar's place in international affairs.

For example, during this period, Myanmar made the difficult transition from an authoritarian military regime to a hybrid government consisting of both elected civilians and appointed military officers. This process, which began with the announcement on 30 August 2003 of a 'seven-point roadmap to a discipline-flourishing democracy', broadly unfolded according to the armed forces' stated blueprint.<sup>2</sup> One critical step was the drafting of a new constitution, which was adopted after a nationwide referendum in 2008.<sup>3</sup> This carefully crafted charter allowed the armed forces to step back from direct power in 2011 and paved the way for the election of a National League for Democracy (NLD) government under opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 2015.

Aung San Suu Kyi's personal road to power was another subject of continuing interest. For years an internationally admired symbol of democratic change (she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991), she went from being a political prisoner to de facto leader of a government in partnership with the same institution that had kept her under house arrest for nearly 15 years. She was never going to meet all the expectations of her followers, which were quite unrealistic, but, as State Counsellor (she was denied the presidency by the 2008 constitution), her reputation suffered as she proved unable to rise to the challenges of her new position. More shocking to international observers, however, was her failure to maintain the high moral and ethical principles she had espoused as a prisoner of conscience.<sup>4</sup>

During Aung San Suu Kyi's early days in office, there was growing disquiet in many circles about her apparent lack of support for the universal human rights that were once her mantra. Some observers even claimed that her

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2 Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt, Press conference, Naypyidaw, 30 August 2003. See also Andrew Selth, 'All Going According to Plan? The Armed Forces and Government in Myanmar', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.40, No.1, April 2018, pp.1–26, doi.org/10.1355/cs40-1a.

3 *Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)*.

4 See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Aung San Suu Kyi and the Politics of Personality*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.55 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2017).

government was just as repressive as the former military regime.<sup>5</sup> Even then, no one was prepared for her refusal to condemn the excesses of the armed forces, particularly following their brutal ‘clearance operations’ against the Muslim Rohingyas in Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017. The final straw for her foreign admirers was her clumsy attempt in December 2019 to defend Myanmar against charges of genocide in the International Court of Justice.<sup>6</sup> If it had not been obvious before, Aung San Suu Kyi’s appearance at The Hague demonstrated that she was, as she had always claimed to be, a politician, rather than an icon of democracy.

Another issue that continued to attract the attention of foreign observers between 2008 and 2019 was Myanmar’s internal security. There were several outbreaks of civil and religious unrest, fanned by political repression, economic hardship, religious extremism and racial prejudice. Also, Myanmar was home to some of the world’s longest-running civil wars, as ethnic minority groups struggled to carve out a place in Myanmar’s ethnic Bamar Buddhist-dominated society. Aung San Suu Kyi’s promise before taking office to give the highest priority to a nationwide ceasefire and peace settlement was never likely to be fulfilled. In any case, these conflicts remained hostage to the armed forces, which strongly resisted the creation of any kind of federal state and always had the power to disrupt negotiations.

Indeed, the *Tatmadaw* remained central to all these questions. Despite Myanmar’s transition to a ‘disciplined democracy’ in 2011, the *Tatmadaw* arguably remained the country’s most powerful political institution and, in various ways, its leadership was able to exercise considerable influence over the central government. In military affairs, including operations, it operated completely independently.<sup>7</sup> Also, over the past decade, the *Tatmadaw*’s order of battle has benefited from a series of major arms acquisitions. Despite some notable intelligence failures in recent years, it now appears more capable of fighting both conventional and

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5 See, for example, Jonathan T. Chow and Leif-Eric Easley, ‘Myanmar’s Democratic Backsliding in the Struggle for National Identity and Independence’, *The ASAN Forum*, 25 June 2019, [www.theasanforum.org/myanmars-democratic-backsliding-in-the-struggle-for-national-identity-and-independence/](http://www.theasanforum.org/myanmars-democratic-backsliding-in-the-struggle-for-national-identity-and-independence/).

6 ‘Transcript: Aung San Suu Kyi’s Speech at the ICJ in Full’, *Online Burma/Myanmar Library*, 13 December 2019, [www.burmalibrary.org/en/transcript-aung-san-suu-kyis-speech-at-the-icj-in-full](http://www.burmalibrary.org/en/transcript-aung-san-suu-kyis-speech-at-the-icj-in-full).

7 See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Myanmar’s Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis*, Peaceworks Paper No.140 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018).

unconventional wars. At one stage there were even fears—later proven unfounded—that Myanmar was developing a nuclear weapon, with North Korean help.<sup>8</sup>

Myanmar's international relations were a source of perennial interest. There were heated debates in the news media and academic literature over the military regime's ties with countries such as North Korea and China. Relations with the West were strained until US president Barack Obama cautiously introduced a policy of 'practical engagement'. This, and the NLD's assumption of office under Aung San Suu Kyi in 2016, led to the removal of most political and economic sanctions. Following the *Tatmadaw's* operations against the Rohingyas—described by the UN as 'ethnic cleansing'—foreign contacts were once again reviewed.<sup>9</sup> However, this did not seem to worry the Naypyidaw government, which enjoyed close ties with its larger neighbours and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). More importantly, China and Russia continued to protect Myanmar on the UN Security Council (UNSC).

All these and other issues periodically prompted short updates, comments and, at times, deeper analyses on *The Interpreter*. If there was one thing that tied them all together, however, it was the dearth of reliable information. Little scholarly attention had been paid to Myanmar before 1988 and most of the writings that followed the prodemocracy uprising that year were by politicians, journalists and activists with agendas to pursue. Adding to this problem were the efforts of successive military regimes to hide what was really happening in the country and the opposition movement's attempts to win international support for their cause. There was the constant danger of foreign observers falling victim to what Jean Baudrillard once termed 'a vertigo of interpretations'.<sup>10</sup>

*The Interpreter* proved an excellent vehicle through which to tackle such problems and to raise subjects for wider discussion. Inevitably, some articles have since been overtaken by events and now have value mainly as part of the historical record. However, others have retained their salience and

8 See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Burma and North Korea: Conventional Allies or Nuclear Partners?*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.22 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2009).

9 United Nations Human Rights Office, Office of the High Commissioner, 'Myanmar: Senior UN Human Rights Official Decries Continued Ethnic Cleansing in Rakhine State', 6 March 2018, [ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22761&LangID=E](http://ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22761&LangID=E).

10 Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.178.

can still help inform the public debate on a range of contemporary issues. Either way, it is hoped that the blog posts reproduced herein will interest, inform and, perhaps in a few cases, amuse anyone who is interested in modern Myanmar and, for one reason or another, is following the long and difficult journey being taken by the members of its diverse population to reach their respective goals.

With hindsight, the blogs hold up reasonably well. My dismissal of claims by journalists, academics and others that China had established military bases in Myanmar was later vindicated by the Indian Government's admission that there was no evidence of any such facilities.<sup>11</sup> My scepticism about repeated reports of clandestine nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs, submarine purchases and a number of other security matters was justified by subsequent developments.<sup>12</sup> My doubts about the scope and level of North Korea's activities in Myanmar still seem reasonable. Like many others, I expected that the country's many civil wars would continue and I held out little hope for a nationwide ceasefire and peace agreement under the NLD Government. As expected, the international community found it very difficult to influence official thinking in Myanmar.

However, I underestimated both the pace and the extent of president Thein Sein's reform program after 2011 and the size of Aung San Suu Kyi's electoral victory in 2015. The creation of the position of state counsellor was as much of a surprise to me as it appears to have been to the generals. Also, I did not fully appreciate how much the armed forces would continue to influence Aung San Suu Kyi's government after 2016, nor did I anticipate the extent of the NLD's inability, or unwillingness, to overcome the legacies of 50 years of military rule. Like everyone else, I failed to foresee the Rohingya crisis of 2016–17. I was surprised not only by the scale of the *Tatmadaw's* response, but also by the refusal of Aung

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11 This was after the Indian foreign minister had himself made such claims. See Andrew Selth, 'Burma, China and the Myth of Military Bases', *Asian Security*, Vol.3, No.3, 2007, pp.279–307, doi.org/10.1080/14799850701568929.

12 The Myanmar Navy did eventually acquire a secondhand Russian submarine from India, but only five years after my article recommending caution about reports of such a purchase. See Andrew Selth, 'Is Burma Really Buying Submarines?', *The Interpreter*, 29 January 2014, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-really-buying-submarines; and Anthony Davis, 'Ships Ahoy for Myanmar's New Blue-Water Navy', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 23 December 2019, www.asiatimes.com/2019/12/article/ships-ahoy-for-myanmars-new-blue-water-navy/.

San Suu Kyi and her government to publicly acknowledge the human rights abuses that occurred, including in forums such as the International Court of Justice.

Over the past 12 years, I wrote articles for the blog with three main aims in mind. First, I wanted to provide background information on, and insights into, developments in Myanmar—a country that even now is little known and poorly understood. In the words of two well-known observers, it has long been considered an ‘exotic unknowable’<sup>13</sup> with ‘fiendishly complex’<sup>14</sup> problems. Second, I was keen to correct various reports by politicians, officials, journalists, activists and others that I felt were factually inaccurate, incomplete or in other ways misleading.<sup>15</sup> My third aim was to provide objective, evidence-based analyses of developments, public assessments of which were often clouded by political, moral and emotional considerations.

My goal was always to contribute to an informed and balanced public debate on a country that was increasingly capturing the headlines, often in rather sensational ways. This work has been produced with the same intentions.

The book collects 97 articles written for *The Interpreter* between 2008 and 2019 that relate primarily to Myanmar (a post relating to the possibility of a new war on the Korean Peninsula has not been included).<sup>16</sup> Each one is introduced by a short note outlining the circumstances in which the piece was written or the key developments that prompted me to put pen to paper. They have been reproduced almost exactly as they appeared online. No attempt has been made to further edit them or update them in the light of subsequent information and more recent events.

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13 Chao-Tzang Yawngnhe, ‘The Political Economy of the Opium Trade: Implications for Shan State’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.23, No.3, 1993, pp.306–326, doi.org/10.1080/00472339380000181.

14 Timothy Garton-Ash, ‘Beauty and the Beast in Burma’, *The New York Times*, 25 May 2000, www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/05/25/beauty-and-the-beast-in-burma/.

15 For some of the ‘political myths’ about Myanmar current at the time, see, for example, Derek Tonkin, ‘Political Myths’, *Network Myanmar*, 2016, web.archive.org/web/20160825030911/http://www.networkmyanmar.org/89-Political-Myths.

16 Andrew Selth, ‘Australia and Korea’s Wars’, *The Interpreter*, 29 November 2010, [Reposted on 14 August 2017], www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-and-koreas-wars.

That said, I have made a few minor changes.

1. Occasionally, I have restored my original paragraph breaks, which seemed better suited to reproduction of the articles in a book.
2. In a few places, I have restored my original wording, where minor editorial amendments inadvertently changed my precise meaning or slightly altered the nuance of the original text.
3. Where any typographical errors or ambiguities survived the original editing process, they have been removed and the text corrected.
4. As far as possible, all the electronic links given in the original articles have been included as footnotes, even if the relevant web pages have since disappeared. In a couple of cases, where that was not possible, I have given new references.
5. I have added a small number of new references, usually to books, to help identify quotations used in the blogs, where no electronic source was available at the time of writing.
6. I have removed a number of electronic links to my own publications, which in the early days of the blog were given at the head of articles to help readers identify the author and outline his/her qualifications to write about certain matters.

As explained in the ‘Protocols and Politics’ section above, and discussed in several *Interpreter* articles, the name ‘Burma’ was officially changed to ‘Myanmar’ in 1989. Like many other Western commentators, I continued to use the old name until around 2016, by which time the new name had become widely accepted and the perceived benefits of using the old name had largely passed. Aung San Suu Kyi had lifted her objection to the new name, ‘Myanmar’ had become much better known and ways had been found around the problem posed by the fact that ‘Myanmar’ had no adjective in the way that ‘Burma’ had ‘Burmese’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Another reason I continued to use ‘Burma’ was that I lived there in the 1970s and had become accustomed to the old name. I explained this once to a senior member of Myanmar’s Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence. He said he understood but could not say so in public, as the military regime was firmly attached to the new name and disliked the continued use of the old name, particularly by governments and international organisations.

After appearing on *The Interpreter*, several of the articles reproduced in this book were published (usually with the editor's permission) in various media outlets in Myanmar, such as the *Myanmar Times*, *The Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima News*. They were occasionally picked up by other websites and cited by news services. Later versions of these articles were often given different titles, and in a few cases were subject to further editing.<sup>18</sup>

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18 For example, blog 65 (originally posted on 29 January 2014) was republished as 'Myanmar's Aquatic Ambitions', in the *Myanmar Times*, 29 January 2014, [www.mmmtimes.com/in-depth/9397-myanmar-s-aquatic-ambitions.html](http://www.mmmtimes.com/in-depth/9397-myanmar-s-aquatic-ambitions.html).

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