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FOREIGN POLICY AND  
POLITICAL CHANGES IN  
POST-JUNTA MYANMAR*Renaud Egreteau***Introduction**

Because of its geostrategic position and whatever the system of government in place, Myanmar must cope with a series of key security challenges.<sup>1</sup> The country is sandwiched between two emerging giants with global ambitions, China and India. It boasts a 2,000km-long coastline opened to the Indian Ocean, through which a large part of the world's seaborne commerce transit. It offers a gateway to, and from, continental Southeast Asia. In the twenty-first century, this peculiar geographical situation may present considerable opportunities for regional growth and future development in a country long kept away from global flows and Asia's economic boom.<sup>2</sup> But it can also contribute to increased concerns among Burmese ruling elites, starting with the armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*), over the potential sway neighbouring states, global powers and international institutions may seek to gain in a region known for its abundance of underexploited natural resources.<sup>3</sup>

In March 2011, the junta formed after the last coup d'état staged by the Tatmadaw in 1988 was disbanded. A startling transition to a semi-civilian administration followed.<sup>4</sup> The five-year presidency of ex-general Thein Sein (2011–2016) marked a first phase in this post-junta transitional moment. Under the impetus of a handful of retired high-ranking military officers, Myanmar started to liberalise its polity, returned to a parliamentary form of elected government, allowed its pro-democracy opposition forces to join the political game, and gradually re-engaged with the world, particularly the West. After years of diplomatic isolation and international condemnations led by the United States and the European Union, most sanctions imposed against the country since the 1990s were suspended, then lifted, between 2012 and 2016. Even more, the landslide victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in the legislative polls held in November 2015 and the subsequent formation of an NLD government further rekindled hopes for a gradual, yet palpable, democratisation.

But if dramatic changes surprisingly unfolded in the early 2010s, the country still faces key enduring regional and transnational strategic stakes, as this chapter shows. First, post-junta Myanmar under Thein Sein presidency painstakingly attempted to re-join the world and burnish its international image. For the new government this meant moving away from the unapologetically authoritarian military rule, designing a set of progressive reforms, while negotiating with all key opposition actors of the domestic political landscape. In doing so, Thein Sein's administration

allowed the removal of most policies of international sanctions against Myanmar. The NLD government inherited the difficult task of consolidating, and furthering, the good will already showed. Second, Thein Sein and his NLD successors since 2016 have demonstrated that, despite the willingness to open-up to the world, and in particular the West, the successive post-junta leaderships have shared a common reluctance to see Myanmar being dragged into great power politics. Rebalancing the Sino–Myanmar partnerships without becoming a stake in the rising contention between the U.S. and China in Southeast Asia has proved an essential and enduring foreign policy goal of the country. Myanmar's strategic thinkers have recently shown their eagerness to revert to a traditional policy of diplomatic equidistance between India and China.

Third, the country in a post-junta era still needs to pacify its domestic politics in order to restore comity with its immediate neighbours. To bring about stability and enable a pacified development of its national economy, Myanmar must put an end to its multiple, decade-long insurgencies and communal tensions, which have all been fuelled, if not supported, by sympathies found across borders with China, Thailand, India, and Bangladesh. Lastly, the government formed by Aung San Suu Kyi in March 2016 – and its future successors – will have to increasingly deal with a state within a state. The Burmese armed forces, through constitutional prerogatives and a lingering, if not decisive, control over policymaking, remains a key government actor with essential strategic and foreign policy views not necessarily aligned with that of the new, and future, civilian leaderships. A fine balance will have to be found, thanks to a constant civil-military dialogue to avoid having the Tatmadaw going its way and define a parallel diplomacy for the late 2010s and beyond.

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### Opening doors

In March 2011, the military regime that had ruled Myanmar for twenty-three years was dissolved, and a new state leadership was sworn in. The semi civilian administration that took power after the elections controversially held in November 2010 soon initiated a startling, yet partial, liberalisation of Myanmar's socio-economic and political spheres. The impetus came from the former prime minister of the junta himself, ex-general Thein Sein, as well as a few other retired Tatmadaw officers such as Thura Shwe Mann, the former Joint-Chief of Staff of the armed forces. Thein Sein was elected president of the Union in February 2011 and tasked to lead the republic into its first five years of "post-junta" political order, as defined by the Constitution written by military thinkers and adopted in 2008.<sup>5</sup> His government soon outlined reformist pieces of legislation and abolished state censorship, while reaching out to the ethnic armed and pro-democracy oppositions, including Aung San Suu Kyi herself. International and domestic observers alike have since been puzzled by the rapid transformations taking place in the country.<sup>6</sup>

Most startlingly, after having spent some fifteen years under house arrest in Yangon since 1989, the Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi could return to the forefront of politics and was elected to parliament in April 2012. This sparked a fundamental change in the foreign policy approach towards Myanmar of key regional states, global powers as well as international organisations. The international diplomatic community gradually reopened its doors to a Burmese state long treated as a pariah. Western governments, starting with the United States under the Obama Administration, began to review their policy of sanctions designed against the country after the 1998 coup. Liberalisation initiatives long promised during the military regime (1988–2011) but never fulfilled, were finally decided upon in the early 2010s.

Major international financial institutions thereafter progressively re-entered the country in an attempt to reintegrate Myanmar's economy, still underdeveloped, into world trade and global flows. In June 2013, the country welcomed a thousand international delegates of the World Economic

Forum (WEF). In December the same year, the organisation of the 27th Southeast Asian Games in Naypyitaw, Myanmar's national capital since 2005, offered the new government another opportunity to show its ability to hold prestigious international events.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, Myanmar finally presided over the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the midst of renewed sanctions eight years before, the former military regime had been obliged to forgo its turn for chairmanship. But the good faith demonstrated by Thein Sein's administration and the electoral victory of the NLD in the by-elections held in April 2012 encouraged the other ASEAN members and their international partners to offer Myanmar the rotating chairmanship of the association. For a full year as ASEAN Chair, Naypyitaw succeeded in conducting a tactful regional diplomacy, avoiding in particular the regional association to be dragged into the South China Sea conundrum.<sup>8</sup>

Under the first post-junta administration, Myanmar thus appeared eager to finally normalise its international relations. A global euphoria even emerged, not only among Yangon's political and diplomatic community, but also among potential foreign investors. Many an observer has argued that the swift political mutations at work during Thein Sein's presidency were motivated by strategic motivations, particularly the urge to back away from China's waxing sphere of influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest decisions marking a fundamental foreign policy rethinking in Naypyitaw was indeed the suspension in September 2011 of a massive Chinese-funded dam project. Located in Myanmar's northern Kachin State, at the start of the Irrawaddy River that both economically and symbolically nourishes the country, the multi-billion dollar Myitsone project has generated a strong local resistance since it was inked between the junta and the China Power Investment Corporation in 2006.

In face of the many relocations of Kachin villagers living on the land where the dam was to be constructed and the direct environmental threats to a region treasured by Burmese culture, various Kachin, Burmese and transnational organisations started to mobilise against it. They were encouraged by lingering popular anti-Chinese sentiments widespread throughout Myanmar.<sup>10</sup> Departing from his former mentors, President Thein Sein decided in September 2011 to suspend the construction for the duration of his five-year presidency. At the same time, Myanmar's growing ties in the early 2010s with Japan and its attempt to restore comity with the West, and notably the United States, soon gave the impression that China was rapidly losing its dominance over its southern neighbour after two decades of close, yet unbalanced, relationship.<sup>11</sup> Beijing seemed visibly unprepared for this type of policy change in Naypyitaw and has since struggled to rebuild confidence with Thein Sein's administration.<sup>12</sup>

Many a foreign dignitary, including U.S. President Barack Obama and the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, paid landmark official visits to Myanmar to congratulate the new leadership in 2012 and 2013; and at the same time express their support to the iconic opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The American government in particular, long openly hostile to Myanmar's military establishment, has launched a multi-faceted rapprochement with Thein Sein's government, although the first diplomatic move had been initiated during the late junta rule in 2009.<sup>13</sup> The subsequent reversal of U.S. policy approach under the Obama Administration has proved a catalyst for the improvement of Myanmar's international standing.<sup>14</sup> It opened the door to the gradual lifting of U.S. and international sanctions from April 2012, and allowed the return of international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank.<sup>15</sup> Along with Japanese, Indian, and South Korean firms, European companies soon re-entered into the Burmese market following the suspension, and then lifting, of EU sanctions in April 2013. Myanmar's political elites have found themselves increasingly talking about territorial connectivity, cross-border commerce initiatives, in a clear attempt to position the country not only as a new economic frontier for distant foreign investors, but also a geo-economic crossroads at the heart of Asia.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, by the end of Thein Sein's five-year presidency, the euphoric moment seemed to have promptly died out. Rising communal tensions between Burmese Muslim and Buddhist mobs, enduring obstacles in the internal peace process aimed at securing new agreements between the post-junta central government and several ethnic armed groups, as well as continuing human rights abuses in the country's conflict-ridden areas all have illustrated how intricate, and above all incomplete, the transitional process has proved since 2011. The probability of a government change after the elections scheduled for November 2015 and rising expectations about the possibility of Aung San Suu Kyi taking power in 2016 pushed foreign investors, international donors, and the diplomatic community to adopt a more prudent approach as early as 2014. All remained expectant until the NLD effectively won the second post-junta polls held in November 2015.

### Avoiding great power politics

Three months after the resounding electoral victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the second post-junta Union legislature convened in Naypyitaw in February 2016. The new bicameral parliament picked its two new speakers from the ranks of the NLD and in March elected as president of the Union, and successor to Thein Sein, a confidant to Aung San Suu Kyi, Htin Kyaw.<sup>17</sup> With 58 percent of the seats in the two houses, the NLD has discovered the benefits of being in position to ram legislation through – with the exception of constitutional reforms where a supermajority of more than 75 percent of the Union legislators is needed. Since the 2008 Constitution reserves a quarter of all parliamentary seats to the armed forces, the latter hold a decisive veto. However, the military representatives cannot block basic legislation, where a simple majority is required. This relative marginality of the armed forces in parliament was best illustrated in March 2016 when the NLD submitted the State Counsellor Bill. The bill, opposed by the military legislators, created a special governmental position, that of “state counsellor”, not envisioned by the constitution. Designed for Aung San Suu Kyi, the new position has bestowed upon her a series of key policy powers.

Furthermore, Aung San Suu has also taken the new government's foreign affairs portfolio. This second ministerial position has allowed her to take a seat at the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), an 11-member council outlined by the constitution – six of its members are high-ranking serving military officers. Aung San Suu Kyi has gradually tested her newly acquired powers through a careful dialogue with the Tatmadaw leadership, especially the army supremo since 2011, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing. Six months after having formed her governmental team, officially led by President Htin Kyaw, Aung San Suu Kyi was however acknowledged, at home and abroad, as Myanmar's core leader responsible for the day-to-day administration of the country.

There have thus been massive expectations of her as the new top policymaker from the Burmese people and international community. Not only has she been expected to boost democratisation domestically and expand a liberalisation process initiated by her predecessor, Thein Sein – a process, which was increasingly perceived as burdened by vested interests and the continuing influence of the old military guard during the second half of his presidency. But Aung San Suu Kyi also has been expected to address daunting foreign policy challenges. The main one has remained the pursuit of a policy of non-alignment to avoid being dragged into great power politics – be it in a resurgent Cold War context or a rising Sino-Indian regional rivalry. Tactfully positioning Myanmar between regional and world powers vying for influence has been a constant foreign policy postures of the country's successive post-independence governments.<sup>18</sup> Only the military junta borne out of the 1988 coup d'état had strategically moved towards China in the 1990s to counter the international isolation imposed by Western and regional powers after the military's crackdown on the Burmese pro-democracy movement in 1988.<sup>19</sup>

Thein Sein's presidency (2011–2016) was characterised by a visible attempt to move away from this two decade-long Chinese dependence and get closer to the United States in order to lift most international sanctions against Myanmar. Surfing on anti-Chinese popular feelings, the government led by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) not only began to review China's policy of investments in the country but also started to court potential foreign investors in position to balance China's economic, but also strategic, dominance in Myanmar. This raised increased concerns in Beijing.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, through twenty years of pro-democracy and human rights struggle publicly supported by Western governments, as well as a personal story much linked to Western Europe (educated at Oxford, she was married to a British scholar and lived in London), Aung San Suu Kyi has long been perceived by most Chinese observers as a "Darling of the West".<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, with an increased probability of seeing the Nobel laureate take power after the 2015 polls and with the continuing difficulties faced in the restoration of cordiality in the Sino–Myanmar relationship during the second half of Thein Sein's presidency, Beijing initiated a successful rapprochement with the NLD leader. After Aung San Suu Kyi took the foreign affairs portfolio in 2016, her first major diplomatic trip abroad was to China in August 2016, then to Washington a month later.

She was welcomed with open arms in Beijing by the Chinese president, Xi Jinping. Her main objective, since her inaugural China visit as opposition leader in June 2015, was to reassure Beijing that the latter's core economic interests in her country would not be threatened further.<sup>22</sup> The suspension of the Myitsone dam project in 2011 had indeed left deep scars and the Chinese government has since the advent of the NLD administration pushed for a resumption of negotiations in order to either resume the construction, relocate the dam, or be compensated if the project was to be definitely cancelled by the NLD. A study commission to assess all dam projects set up in Myanmar since the 2000s was formed under Aung San Suu Kyi's supervision in July 2016.

The NLD leader has also taken great care, either by shrewdness or basic diplomatic necessity, of not offending Beijing by publicly supporting the "One China Policy", dodging the Tibetan and Taiwanese issues, and tactfully avoiding taking a partisan stance in the South China Sea conundrum or supporting her fellow Nobel Laureate, Liu Xiaobo. Moreover, reassurance was given to the Chinese authorities about the viability of the oil and gas pipelines built by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) between Yunnan and the deep-sea port of Kyaukphyu, on Myanmar's Rakhine coast. Yet, if Aung San Suu Kyi's initial diplomatic moves signalled that the second post-junta civilian government led by the NLD was willing to restore ties with China, the Nobel Laureate also indicated early on that the strengthening of the bilateral relationship would not be made at the detriment of other strategic interactions with the NLD, such as the ones established with India, Japan, and the West.<sup>23</sup> Neither would Myanmar's growing ties with Washington be aimed at countering China's influence and morph the country under the NLD into another strategic ally, if not "Trojan Horse", of the U.S. in Southeast Asia.<sup>24</sup> China has remained Myanmar's largest trade partner even after the lifting of most international sanctions and Aung San Suu Kyi has not proved inclined to welcome U.S. strategic interests with open arms. Unlike the Tatmadaw leadership and various American military circles since the restoration of diplomatic dialogue between Washington and Naypyitaw in 2012, she has for instance proved quite reluctant to embrace a return to closer military-to-military cooperation between the two countries.

Her prestige and the admiration she has aroused in America has nonetheless given her the key to a complete lifting of U.S. sanctions against her country.<sup>25</sup> Her election to parliament in 2012 and then the outstanding victory of her party in the general polls held in 2015 were catalysts to Washington's reversal of policy approach.<sup>26</sup> But the U.S. have long favoured an ambiguous policy towards Myanmar and there seems to be a rising consensus among Burmese civilian and military



elites that post-junta Myanmar should avoid becoming too decisively aligned towards Washington, where the Congress and the White House have often been at odds in diplomatic matters.<sup>27</sup> In the past, whether under Premier U Nu or General Ne Win's socialist regime, Myanmar has kept on playing the neutrality card in a Cold War context. This is the stance Aung San Suu Kyi appears to be willing to defend on the regional and international scenes during the second half of the 2010s. The NLD government has clearly stated it needed to bring the community of international and regional donors as well as foreign investors back in, whoever they are, for long-term engagement, so that, it is argued, growth and development foster stability and peace in Myanmar.<sup>28</sup> But this must not be traded with a loss of sovereignty and independence towards any regional or global power.

### Internal issues, regional stakes

The matter of sharing Myanmar's political power and economic resources between a myriad of ethno-linguistic minority groups (about one third of the 52-odd million strong Burmese population in 2016) and the ethnic Bamar majority (the remaining third) has been the source of violent conflicts unresolved since independence was won from the British in 1948. Most rebel groups fighting against Myanmar's successive central governments have benefited from Myanmar's neighbouring states' financial support, political sympathies, and tacit acceptance of their cross-border and underground activities.<sup>29</sup> China, Thailand, and to a lesser degree India and Bangladesh, have indeed long had a stake in these interethnic disputes and the transborder instability and opportunities they have generated since the 1940s. Naga, Kachin, and Chin insurgents have found political support across the border with India; Shan, Wa, and Kokang armed outfits have long used the Sino-Myanmar borderlands as a safe haven; Karen, Shan, and Mon insurgents groups have established crucial connections with the Thai military and border forces throughout decades of rebellion.

Both the government headed by Thein Sein from 2011 and its NLD successor since 2016 have considered the resumption and consolidation of inter-ethnic peace parleys as a testimony that a post-junta regime could bring about peace in a country plagued by an endless civil war. Critical ceasefire talks with insurgent groups were promoted by a team of negotiators chosen by Thein Sein himself as soon as 2011. A series of historical ceasefires were thereafter signed between his government and various Karen, Shan, Mon, Naga, and Chin ethnic rebel groups. However, no agreement could be reached with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and a low-intensity guerrilla insurgency was revived near the Chinese borders in June 2011. Palaung, Shan, and Kokang militias also continued their armed struggle against the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's northern territories. This led to the forced displacement of about 140,000 Kachin and Shan refugees in the borderlands of China's Yunnan province.

After four years of peace parleys however, a nationwide ceasefire accord was reached in October 2015, at the end of President Thein Sein's tenure. The agreement remained partial, with only eight signatories, although an earlier draft prepared in March had gathered the approval of 16 armed groups – including the KIO. Thein Sein needed to have Myanmar's neighbours on board for these peace negotiations, Thailand and China in particular. Several rounds of talks were therefore held under the mediation of both countries, either in the cities of Chiang Mai and Mae Sot (Thailand) or Ruili in Yunnan. Despite a long-standing official rhetoric based on a non-interference policy in the internal affairs of their neighbours, China and Thailand have openly displayed their support to Myanmar's internal peace process. Beijing even publicly encouraged the Wa and Kokang militias to join a new round of talks held under the aegis of Aung San Suu Kyi in September 2016 – the “21st century Panglong Conference” – as the NLD leader continued the negotiation process initiated by Thein Sein five years earlier.

The relative pacification of Myanmar's eastern borders engaged in 2011 with new cease-fires signed between Naypyitaw and the Karen National Union (KNU) or the Shan State Army – South (SSA-S) especially has helped smoothen the Thai–Myanmar bilateral relationship. Military relations have particularly improved between the two countries since the early 2010s.<sup>30</sup> Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing visited Bangkok thrice, in January 2012, July 2014, and May 2016. The Royal Thai Army has long been concerned with the regular incursions into and shelling of Thai territory by Tatmadaw troops hunting down Karen, Mon, and Shan insurgents. But the last border clashes between Myanmar and Thai armed forces date back to 2001. But still, several unresolved issues remain, starting with unbalanced economic relations and the presence in Thailand of some 120,000 political refugees from Myanmar – mostly ethnic Karen (Kayin) and Karenni (Kayah).<sup>31</sup>

India has also tentatively grabbed the opportunity to strengthen its relations with the first post-junta administration. President Thein Sein visited Delhi as early as October 2011 and the bilateral interactions soon grew richer and more diversified. In May 2014, the advent of a regionally-oriented government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi further boosted India's presence in Myanmar.<sup>32</sup> Lauding the potential benefits for Myanmar of India's revamped “look east, act east” policy under his aegis, Premier Modi has failed to consolidate a credible security partnership with the Tatmadaw. Indian armed forces and intelligence units have indeed continued to hunt Naga and Manipuri rebels on their own, sometimes even on Myanmar soil, without much cooperation from local Burmese authorities. Besides, when compared to China, Thailand, and even Japan, India still appeared to lag behind in Myanmar in terms of trade and foreign investments. Bilateral commerce, still heavily dominated by agricultural products, has only reached \$2 billion in the 2015–16 fiscal year. On her side, Aung San Suu Kyi returned to India for the first time in 25 years in November 2012, but it was President Htin Kyaw and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing who made the most commanded official visits to India after Myanmar's governmental change in 2016.

Domestic communal tensions and Buddhist-Muslim social conflicts have offered a different geopolitical challenge for Myanmar than cross-border insurgency. But these tensions have become a source of much concern inside the country as well as in neighbouring capitals. Since 2012, several riots have broken out between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar's western territories bordering Bangladesh and in the country's central plains. Tensions have flared up in particular between the Rakhine Buddhist ethnic population and the one-million strong Muslim minority known since the 1950s as Rohingya.<sup>33</sup> The violence has spread eastward to the country's interior, and in the mid-2010s affected other Muslim communities, including those of Chinese origins. Bangladesh, but also the countries bordering the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea such as Indonesia, Thailand, and India, have received thousands of Rohingya boat people since the early 2010s.

The Muslim world and the international community, particularly in the West, have been dismayed by the appalling treatment this minority has been the object of in Myanmar. Considered outsiders by the authorities, but also the country's Buddhist-dominated society, the Rohingya have faced decades of administrative segregation, political discrimination, and cultural alienation from Myanmar's society. Two massive exoduses to Bangladesh occurred in 1978 and 1991, and since 2012, renewed waves of forced displacement have been observed. The relative passivity of Thein Sein's government and the predicament the latter found itself in since 2011, wishing to break with old despotic habits and brutal repressive tools to make a good impression on the international community, have perhaps contributed to the resumption of communal unrest. President Thein Sein himself was once allegedly quoted in favour of the United Nations' resettlement of the Rohingya populations outside Myanmar. A government-appointed commission of experts

was nevertheless tasked to shed light on the reasons for the violence and assign responsibilities for the 2012 riots in Rakhine State.<sup>34</sup> The report was however much criticized at home and abroad for its allegedly biased analysis of the unrest.

The NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi have shown themselves reluctant to tackle head-on the conundrum, including once in power. The party did not present any Muslim candidate to the 2015 legislative elections, a strategy condemned worldwide. Aung San Suu Kyi herself has been regularly criticized for delaying her government's involvement in the matter since 2016. Frequently accused of not living up to her democratic credentials, as Nobel Peace Laureate and long-standing champion of civil liberties and human rights in Myanmar, she however formed in August 2016 an advisory commission tasked with proposing concrete measures to prevent communal violence, secure peace and development and bring about reconciliation in Rakhine State, the most affected region. A former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, was appointed as the commission's chair – signalling the NLD's acceptance of international voices on the Rohingya question.

Yet, the continuing discontent expressed by Rakhine Buddhist politicians and various civil society groups, as well as the reluctance of the Tatmadaw leadership to see further unrest unfold in a region bordering Bangladesh, Myanmar's only Muslim neighbour, have all pointed to the difficulties the NLD will encounter in its dealing with the issue, both internally and on the regional scene. Furthermore, if the ASEAN has welcomed a new, more liberal Myanmar under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership, most diplomats in the region seem convinced that the pro-democracy icon will not push for a broader democratisation beyond Myanmar, having too much to deal with at home.<sup>35</sup>

### Dealing with a state within a state

There is another great unknown in the definition of Myanmar's relations with the outside world in a post-junta context, particularly under a NLD-led government: the trajectory of its civil-military relations. The 2008 Constitution has bestowed upon the Tatmadaw a guardianship role, and a full autonomy vis-à-vis the civilian governmental power. While the NLD has clearly been allowed by the Tatmadaw to oversee the day-to-day administration since 2016, neither the government, nor the legislature or the judiciary can be in position to check and oversight the military's activities. A civilian control remains not only impractical but also unthinkable under the 2008 Constitution. A closer look at the constitutional text also reveals that the Tatmadaw can still influence much of the foreign policy decision. Three significant ministries in the Union cabinet are left under its sole authority (Home Affairs, Defence, and Border Affairs) and all are essential to the definition of any type of foreign relations. In that respect, the Tatmadaw can not only keep an eye on Myanmar's foreign policymaking, but also formulate independently its own diplomatic and strategic objectives. Whether the NLD and the Tatmadaw leadership can reach common strategic goals for the late 2010s, and beyond, will thus indicate whether Myanmar can establish pacified relations with its neighbours and the global powers.

Indeed, the Tatmadaw leadership continues to insist – and this is a key element of every official speeches, statements, or pamphlets released by the military institution – on the multifaceted threats to the “state security” and “national security” of the country that still exist, well into the 2010s.<sup>36</sup> Thorny decolonisation processes and the emergence in the 1950s and 1960s of ethnic and communist insurrections, more or less linked to the country's immediate neighbours or the United States, have strongly influenced the Tatmadaw's early strategic perceptions.<sup>37</sup> The latter often differed from that of the civilian administration in the 1950s, and can potentially remain at odds with the diplomatic views of the post-junta governments of the 2010s.



Regular military-cum-diplomatic trips carried out by General Ne Win in the 1950s and all his successors until Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing in the early 2010s, have consolidated the Tatmadaw's sway over the definition of Myanmar's postcolonial foreign affairs, and helped the institution build its own international security partnerships. Commander-in-Chief since 2011, Min Aung Hlaing, has asserted himself as a free electron in the post-junta political scene. In 2016, he remained at his post despite having reached the official age of retirement, fixed at 60 years old. He has accumulated an impressive number of foreign trips, traveling to Russia, Belarus, Israel, Thailand, Germany, and India, among others, to acquire new weaponry for the three forces of the Tatmadaw and secure novel military support and training for the troops.<sup>38</sup> The strategic partnership with Moscow in particular, built in the heydays of Western sanctions against Myanmar, has been visibly strengthened under his leadership.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, since 2016 and the swearing of Htin Kyaw's government, Min Aung Hlaing has systematically received all foreign dignitaries, whether civilian or military, visiting Naypyitaw. One full page of Myanmar's main state-run newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*, has detailed on a daily basis all his domestic and international activities ever since.

The traditionally highly nationalist Tatmadaw remains an opaque institution with its own vested economic and strategic interests built through decades in power. Its handling of ethnic conflicts along the Sino-Myanmar borders responds to its own interests and has frequently angered Beijing. To correct this, Aung San Suu Kyi has sought to restore comity with China since 2015. But despite regular dialogue and meetings, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership have too little access to a Tatmadaw establishment they cannot hope to seriously influence. Likewise, the armed forces have clearly sought to build confidence with the United States to recover an international reputation long lost. The senior officer corps of the Tatmadaw is keen on having all U.S. sanctions and arms embargoes removed. But the Burmese military establishment may soon prove at odds with an NLD leadership quite reluctant to see military-to-military interactions growing without its consent, while former top junta leaders are being "absolved" by the West after years of ostracisation.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Myanmar has startlingly re-entered regional and global politics since the junta was disbanded in March 2011. Under the first post-junta government headed by President Thein Sein until March 2016, the country chaired the ASEAN, saw most international sanctions imposed against it twenty years earlier being removed while foreign, including Western, investors piled in. Five years after the start of the transition, the new administration led by Aung San Suu Kyi's party seemed bound to continue to cautiously broaden Myanmar's international ties, albeit still selectively. The need to work on restoring ties with the United States but also China, upset at seeing its influence in Myanmar being challenged during Thein Sein's presidency, while coping with a fully autonomous military institution which still has its own strategic goals, will dominate the foreign policy agenda of the second post-junta administration. But getting international donors and financial institutions more efficiently involved inside the country, while dealing with neighbours and having them involved in Myanmar's inter-ethnic conflict resolution process will also be major foreign policy imperatives. Yet, beside a legacy of distrust of the outside world traditionally promoted by Myanmar's ruling political and military elites since the country won independence from Britain seventy years ago, the country's geographical situation at the crossroads of emerging Asian giants and a still volatile Southeast Asian region might in the end prove a commanding obstacle to more openness and liberalisation in Myanmar in the 2010s and beyond.

## Notes

- 1 Myanmar is the country's post-1989 official appellation. However, for linguistic simplicity, the adjective "Burmese", instead of the vernacular and less inclusive "Myanmar", refers in this chapter to the citizenship and common language of the people of present-day Myanmar, while "Burman" more specifically designates the ethnic *Bamar* majority of the country, where non-Burman ethnic minorities, such as the Karens and Kachins, also dwell.
- 2 Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012).
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- 4 M. Bunte, "Myanmar's Protracted Transition: Arenas, Actors and Outcomes", *Asian Survey* Vol. 56, no. 2 (2016), pp. 369–391, and R. Egretreau, *Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 D. I. Steinberg (ed.), *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, 2014).
- 7 S. Creak, "National Restoration, Regional Prestige: The Southeast Asian Games in Myanmar, 2013", *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 73, no. 4 (2014), pp. 853–877.
- 8 T. Wilson, "Strategic Choices in Myanmar's Transition and Myanmar's National Security Policies", *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* Vol. 3, no. 1 (2016), p. 61.
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