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Burma and the Threat of Invasion:
Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?

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'Burma and the Threat of Invasion: Regime Fantasy or Strategic Reality?', Regional Outlook Paper No. 17, 2008

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Executive Summary

Even before 1988, when the armed forces crushed a pro-democracy uprising and took back direct political power, Burma's government feared an invasion of the country. Then, the danger was seen to emanate mainly from China, but over the past 20 years the US and major EU countries have been viewed as Burma's greatest military threat.

In the wake of the 1988 uprising, the new regime feared that the US, or a coalition of countries led by the US, planned to invade Burma and restore democratic rule. Fears of foreign intervention were renewed after the regime's refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990. Perceptions of a significant external threat were strengthened by the measures subsequently taken by the US, EU and a range of other countries. The economic sanctions levelled against Burma, for example, were seen as part of a wider effort to weaken the military government and precipitate its downfall.

Fears of an invasion have fluctuated since 1990, but the regime has remained convinced that the US and some other states are determined to replace it with an elected civilian administration. Strong criticism of the military government, and public references to Burma alongside notorious 'rogue' regimes, has seemed to presage armed intervention. Attempts in the UN Security Council to declare Burma a threat to regional security, open support for opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and aid to dissident groups, have all been interpreted as part of a campaign to subvert the military government. If it could not be brought down by the direct application of military force, it was believed, the US and its allies would try to cause the regime's collapse by fomenting internal unrest.

When the US, UK and France positioned warships off the Burmese coast in May 2008, after Cyclone Nargis struck Lower Burma, the regime was immediately suspicious of those countries' motives. Its fears were greatly strengthened by statements made by senior officials and others about the international community's overriding 'responsibility to protect' the cyclone victims. There were calls for coercive humanitarian intervention and even an invasion of Burma to provide aid to those in need, regardless of the regime's wishes and broader issues relating to national sovereignty. Such statements seem to have hardened the military leadership's conviction that it still faced the possibility of an attack by the US and its allies, against which it must remain vigilant.

Since 1988, there has never been any likelihood that Burma would actually be invaded, by the US or any other country. In international relations, however, threat perceptions are critical. Fears of armed intervention, and of indirect foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs, have been strong influences on Burma's defence planning and foreign policy. In that sense they are a strategic reality, and must be taken into account in the consideration of future approaches towards the military government. Failure to do so will make the continued delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the search for viable long term solutions to Burma's many complex problems, much more difficult.

Note on Nomenclature

After the Burmese armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, Burma's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original Burmese pronunciation. The new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations (UN) and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's continuing human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to the civilian government elected in 1990.

In this paper the better-known names, for example 'Burma' instead of 'Myanmar', 'Rangoon' instead of 'Yangon', and 'Irrawaddy' instead of 'Ayeyarwady', have been retained for ease of recognition. Quotations and references, however, have been cited as they were originally published. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Police Force'.

The armed forces have ruled Burma since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct political power in September 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, apparently on the advice of a US-based public relations firm, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). It still rules by decree, but has announced a seven-step 'roadmap' to a 'discipline-flourishing democracy', the latest step of which was a constitutional referendum held in May 2008.

After the UK sent military forces into the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its conquest of Burma in 1885, Rangoon became the administrative capital of the country. It remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built town of Naypyidaw, 320 kilometres north of Rangoon, as the seat of Burma's government. When they appear in this paper, the terms 'Rangoon regime', or in some cases simply 'Rangoon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was created in 1962 and re-invented in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Burma's armed forces. In recent years this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Burma.

Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
EU	European Union
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
KMT	<i>Kuomintang</i>
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNDO	Karen National Defence Organisation
MPF	Myanmar Police Force
MSF	<i>Medecins Sans Frontieres</i>
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
OSI	Open Society Institute
PLA	Peoples Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RFA	Radio Free Asia
ROC	Republic of China
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA-S	Shan State Army – South
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations (Organisation)
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States (of America)
UWSA	United Wa State Army
VOA	Voice of America
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

1. Introduction

If the country is hit by an earthquake it will not cease to exist. But if the country falls prey to a foreign power, it will be devoured completely.

Burmese government slogan (1978)

Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views

Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation

Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State

Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

Burmese government slogan (2008)

Burma is no stranger to armed invasion, and invasion threats. Shifting geo-political boundaries and name changes aside, it can be argued that since the thirteenth century Burma has suffered multiple invasions by its three largest neighbours, China, India and Thailand.¹ On more than one occasion, Burma has itself launched invasions against India and Thailand. During the nineteenth century, the British Empire invaded Burma in three stages – defeating it in 1826, 1852 and 1885 – eventually toppling the country's hereditary ruler and exiling him to India, where he died in 1916.² Imperial Japan invaded Burma in late 1941 and early 1942, albeit with the backing of a small group of Burmese nationalists, and was only evicted after Allied forces re-invaded Burma in late 1944 and 1945. Barely a year after Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in January 1948, the new Union was invaded by military remnants of the defeated Chinese Nationalist Party (*Kuomintang*, or KMT). Three of these invasions have occurred within living memory.³ Through their schooling, indoctrination programs or direct experience, all have had a profound impact on the thinking of modern Burma's rulers, including those military officers currently holding power in Naypyidaw.

After Burma's armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) crushed a massive pro-democracy uprising in 1988, and took back direct political power, the new military government feared an invasion by the United States (US) to re-introduce democratic rule. Such fears have fluctuated since then, depending on circumstances both inside and outside the country, but they have never disappeared. In 1990, for example, the regime was afraid that it would be forced to acknowledge the results of the general election held that year. In 1991, concerns were raised that a coalition endorsed by the United Nations (UN) might invade Burma in support of the country's oppressed Muslim population. Since then, the conviction has grown that the US and several other Western countries are engaged in a more subtle campaign to topple the regime by supporting Burmese dissident groups and fomenting internal unrest, such as occurred in September 2007. The regime's threat perceptions were dramatically heightened after Cyclone Nargis struck Burma in May 2008 and foreign officials began speaking of coercive humanitarian intervention to provide aid to the cyclone victims. Throughout this period, activists and commentators publicly advocated an invasion of Burma to overthrow the military government.

Over the years, the regime's fears of armed intervention have been dismissed as the paranoid delusions of an isolated group of poorly educated and xenophobic soldiers, jealous of their privileges and afraid of being held to account for their crimes against the Burmese people. Yet, this rather simplistic and self-serving explanation for the regime's siege mentality ignores the evolution of a complex worldview among Burma's military leaders that has important implications for the country's foreign relations. For, if seen from the regime's perspective, it is possible to construct a picture of a genuine threat to the military government that is both internally consistent and supported by hard

evidence. While still deeply flawed, this enduring perception of an external threat to the regime's – and in its view the Union's – continued survival has been an important element in Burma's defence thinking and the formulation of its foreign policies. In this sense, the regime's recurring nightmares of an invasion, and its abiding concerns about other forms of foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs, are strategic realities that need to be taken seriously by the international community.⁴

2. National Security and the 1988 Uprising

Security Threats Before the Uprising

After Independence in 1948, the U Nu Government's immediate security concerns were domestic – to unite and exert control over a country that was gravely weakened by war and in danger of fragmenting under the influence of several armed insurgent groups. Some of the most powerful, like the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), were based on the country's numerous ethnic minorities, but other groups were driven more by partisan political, religious or ideological concerns. Among the latter, the greatest threat to the new Union came from two communist organisations, known as the 'Red Flags' and the 'White Flags'. At one stage, the so-called 'Rangoon government' barely controlled any territory beyond the environs of the capital city. The Tatmadaw gradually won back control of the central Irrawaddy basin, however, and by the mid-1970s had pushed the remaining insurgent groups into the rugged and less populated areas around the country's periphery.⁵ This achievement is still remembered by the Tatmadaw and is used in its propaganda campaigns – not only to demonstrate the special place of the armed forces in modern Burmese history but also to emphasise the continuing need for a strong central government that can keep Burma stable and united.⁶ These campaigns also warn against external threats to the country, applied both directly and indirectly.

A number of Burma's insurgent groups have benefited, to a greater or lesser degree, from some kind of foreign support. For example, the KNDO was assisted by a group of renegade British Second World War veterans.⁷ From the 1950s until the 1990s, Thailand saw ethnic Mon, Karen, Karenni (Kayah) and Shan insurgent groups in eastern Burma as a bulwark against the spread of communism, both from local parties and, at a further remove, the People's Republic of China (PRC). After General Ne Win's coup d'état in Burma in 1962, these groups also constituted a useful buffer against the ideologically suspect government of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP).⁸ After he was released from jail, and permitted to leave Burma in 1969, deposed Prime Minister U Nu was allowed by Bangkok to organise a guerrilla army along the Thai–Burma border. In various ways, China supported the Communist Party of Burma's (CPB) 'White Flag' insurgent army, particularly after 1967. The CPB may have also been secretly assisted by North Korea.⁹ India and Bangladesh have either been unable or unwilling to take strong action against the religious and ethnic separatist guerrillas that operated along Burma's western border and periodically took refuge in their territories. A few Muslim insurgent groups have probably received clandestine support from the Middle East.

Despite all these problems, or perhaps even because of them, Burma adopted a strictly neutral foreign policy. A key factor was the country's sensitive geostrategic position, and the perceived dangers that faced a small, weak country surrounded by much more powerful states. As U Nu famously remarked in 1950:

Take a glance at our geographical position – Thailand in the East, China in the North, India in the West, and stretching southward, Malaya, Singapore and so on. We are hemmed in like a tender gourd among the cactus.¹⁰

Successive governments in Rangoon resisted entanglement in the strategic competition between the superpowers and relied on the UN for protection against external threats. Burma also attempted to maintain good relations with its neighbours. In these aims, it was largely successful, but for more than 10 years relations with the PRC, the US and to

a lesser extent Thailand were complicated by the invasion of Burma by remnants of the defeated KMT army.

After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) marched into Kunming in December 1949, about 1,500 KMT soldiers fled south across the Burmese border. Secretly supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Chiang Kai-shek regime – soon re-established as the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan – these KMT remnants settled in northern Shan State. They intermarried with the local population and grew opium to help sustain themselves. With indigenous recruits and Chinese reinforcements flown in from Taiwan, the KMT army in Burma gradually grew to about 12,000 men.¹¹ They even attempted to establish a base on the Martaban coast, in order to receive heavier supplies by sea. Attempts by the Tatmadaw to dislodge them from Burma were largely unsuccessful. Rangoon's concerns grew dramatically, however, when the KMT began launching armed forays against China. Between 1951 and 1953 at least seven attempts were made to invade the PRC. While in large part an attempt to establish a 'liberated zone' in Yunnan, these activities were encouraged by the KMT's US backers as part of a strategically important 'double envelopment operation' against Beijing, which by then was deeply committed to a war against UN forces in Korea.

The KMT's external support was no secret to the embattled Burmese. In 1953, for example, the Tatmadaw killed three American advisors attached to KMT forces, and it periodically discovered caches of modern US arms and equipment. Initially, Rangoon protested to the US and ROC governments, but both denied any direct involvement.¹² As a result, Burma turned to the UN, asking that the ROC – which had retained its UN seat – be charged with aggression. A resolution was eventually passed insisting that the KMT leave Burma. By mid-1954 more than 6,000 people had been airlifted to Taiwan from airstrips in northern Thailand, but several thousand KMT soldiers remained in Burma. In 1961, the Burma Air Force shot down a transport aircraft en route from Taiwan to resupply the KMT guerrillas, but once again Taipei denied any responsibility. In desperation, Rangoon sought help from Beijing. Later that year, 20,000 soldiers from the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) crossed the frontier and, in cooperation with a 5,000-strong Burmese military force, drove the remaining KMT into northern Thailand and Laos. Neither Rangoon nor Beijing has ever acknowledged China's massive cross-border incursion to help Burma eliminate the KMT forces based there.¹³

China has always been a critical element in Burma's strategic thinking and ever since 1948 Rangoon has taken pains to maintain at least cordial relations with Beijing. Burma was the first non-communist country to recognise the PRC and in 1954 both sides agreed to abide by the 'five principles of co-existence' – which included non-interference in each other's internal affairs. After Ne Win's coup in 1962, China provided aid to the socialist government and the two countries claimed a special *phauk paw* relationship.¹⁴ Yet, Rangoon was always suspicious of Beijing's long term intentions. Before 1961, for example, the U Nu Government was afraid that China might invade Burma to rid itself of the KMT menace. Rangoon also worried that Beijing could use the KMT presence as a pretext to invade Burma in support of local communist insurgents.¹⁵ After 1962, Ne Win became concerned that, even if the giants of China and India did not directly invade Burma, they could eventually overwhelm it simply through their sheer size and strategic weight. He even banned birth control measures on the grounds that, if it had a greater population, Burma would be better able to balance its larger neighbours.¹⁶

At the same time as it maintained formal state-to-state relations with Rangoon, Beijing pursued a separate policy at the party level. After the CPB was driven into Burma's north-eastern hills it began to receive clandestine support from the CCP. At first this was largely ideological, but after the 1967 Cultural Revolution – and a major anti-Chinese riot in Rangoon – Beijing began to provide direct material assistance. This included personnel for the party's guerrilla units and cadres to provide ideological training, as well as large shipments of arms, ammunition and other military equipment. This aid was provided out of party solidarity and to help the CPB destroy a few KMT

intelligence bases that were still secretly operating in Burma. It was also an effective means of putting pressure on Rangoon. Chinese support for the CPB effectively ceased after Deng Xiao-ping was restored to power in 1978. By that stage, however, the CPB had become a powerful, well-armed force of some 23,000, controlling a large slice of Burmese territory along the border with China.¹⁷ To the increasingly weak and isolated BSPP government in Rangoon, the CPB was seen as a foreign-backed military force that posed a serious challenge to Burma's sovereignty and national independence.

To Burma's fledgling political and military leaders, the country's exposure to external aggression had been starkly demonstrated by its invasion and occupation, first by Britain and then by Japan. After 1948, they were sensitised to internal threats by the country's numerous insurgencies, at least one of which almost succeeded in toppling the new government and dividing the Union.¹⁸ Burma's leaders were also reminded of broader security problems, not only by the KMT invasion but also by the support secretly provided to Rangoon's enemies by governments in Washington, Taipei, Beijing, Pyongyang and Bangkok. For many Burmese servicemen, these lessons were brought home by bitter combat operations against ethnic separatists and communist guerrillas. These historical events and personal experiences contributed to a deep sense of national insecurity, a fear of internal 'chaos', a profound distrust of foreign powers and a strong attachment to self reliance, all of which have been incorporated into Tatmadaw ideology. The concept of Burma as a vulnerable country threatened by hostile forces, against which a strong and united Tatmadaw must remain perpetually on guard, became a central theme in Burmese strategic thinking that was constantly reinforced through school curricula, military training programs and propaganda campaigns.

It was against this background that senior members of the Tatmadaw viewed the massive pro-democracy uprising in 1988. Their fears for Burma's national security – both real and imagined – were heightened by the international community's strong reaction to the measures taken by the regime to crush the protests and 'restore order'.

The Uprising and Immediate Responses

The 1988 uprising was the largest and most significant protest against military rule since Ne Win seized power in 1962. It was the culmination of a long series of events, including a sudden demonetisation of the Burmese currency in September 1987 and the harsh treatment of students by police in March 1988, after a brawl in a Rangoon teashop. As the year progressed, there was an increasingly turbulent cycle of public demonstrations and violent responses by the security forces. In August, 26 years of pent-up anger and frustration at the regime's political repression and economic mismanagement exploded, when hundreds of thousands of Burmese from all walks of life began openly marching in protest against the government. At one stage, it appeared that this mass outpouring of popular feeling would bring about the end of Ne Win's brutal and inept socialist administration, and permit a return to democratic rule. On 18 September, however, the armed forces leadership announced the dissolution of the BSPP government, the creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the imposition of martial law. Between three and five thousand people – most of them unarmed protesters – are believed to have been killed during the unrest.¹⁹

The months following the SLORC's takeover were marked by arbitrary arrests, imprisonment without trial and summary executions.²⁰ All ministries, teaching institutions and government bodies were systematically purged to remove 'unreliable' elements. 'Disloyal' servicemen who had supported the demonstrations were weeded out of the armed forces. Thousands of Burmese fled across the country's borders, mainly to Thailand, to escape the crackdown. Due to the lack of hard news – and in particular film footage – from within Burma about all these events, the uprising and its aftermath did not get the international publicity that might have been expected. The Tiananmen Square 'massacre' in China a year later received much greater coverage in the news media, despite the fact that there were only a third of the casualties which

had occurred in Burma.²¹ Even so, the dramatic events of 1988 thrust Burma into the world's headlines and attracted the attention of the international community.

At first, Burma's mounting political crisis was considered by most countries to be an internal problem. However, the increased scale of the violence in early August, in particular the indiscriminate shooting of unarmed men, women and children, forced governments and multilateral organisations to respond. Warnings were issued for tourists not to visit Burma and most foreign missions withdrew non-essential personnel from Rangoon. US military aircraft were denied permission to land, however, on the grounds that this might 'lead to further confusion among the general public' and 'send the wrong signal to regional neighbours'.²² The embassies affected explained that the evacuations were prompted in part by the violence in the streets, but also by the breakdown in normal civic services and the shortage of essential supplies. Many local observers, however, interpreted the reduced diplomatic representation as heralding more active support for the opposition movement, or at least as a demonstration of the international community's disapproval of the regime. This view was encouraged by other responses made by foreign governments at the time.

On 31 August, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) suspended its US\$35.15 million bilateral aid program. On 7 September, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution unanimously calling for democracy in Burma. Japan froze its assistance to Burma after martial law was declared on 18 September. On 23 September, the US cut off official development assistance and imposed an arms embargo against the new military government.²³ The UK and most other European Union (EU) members, Sweden, Norway and Australia all issued strong protests against the regime's brutal treatment of the demonstrators. The World Bank suspended negotiations on new projects. On 28 September, in a speech before the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the UK Foreign Secretary denounced the mass killings in Burma. The following month, moves began to bring Burma before the UN Security Council (UNSC). Other responses were more muted. China expressed its concern at developments in Burma but did not specifically condemn the regime. India issued a vaguely worded diplomatic protest. The then six members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expressed their wish for a peaceful resolution of the unrest in Burma. Like the Soviet Union, however, they felt that the disturbances were basically an internal problem for the Burmese to resolve.

Some official statements were strongly worded but, all things considered, this was a relatively mild response from the international community to what was clearly a ruthless crackdown against enormously popular and largely peaceful demonstrations. Admittedly, the FRG was Burma's second largest aid donor, but the weapons being used against the protesters were German automatic rifles manufactured under licence in Burma, and Bonn had something to prove. In 1986, Japan had accounted for almost 80 per cent of all Burma's aid receipts, but by 1988 annual disbursements had been dramatically reduced. In any case, by October Tokyo was considering the provision of food aid to the SLORC, through the UN.²⁴ The suspended US aid program was barely worth US\$7 million and a military training program, which was also frozen, was valued at a mere US\$260,000.²⁵ Given Burma's parlous economic position – in 1987 the UN had awarded it Least Developed Country status – any reduction in foreign aid had a major impact on the Burmese government, but the measures taken during 1988 were hardly indicative of deep and widespread concern.

Similarly, attempts to isolate the SLORC and deny it international recognition were half-hearted at best. Most diplomatic missions in Rangoon tried to avoid official contacts with the new military regime, but in October US, Canadian, Japanese and Australian officials all made formal calls on the agency appointed to oversee the general elections planned for 1990.²⁶ Around the same time, a Chinese delegation visited Burma to discuss cross-border trade and the sale of railway carriages, Russia made a donation to Burma of some sports equipment, South Korea provided the regime with US\$150,000 worth of medical supplies and Thailand accepted an invitation to send a delegation to Rangoon to discuss fishing rights and the sale of timber. By mid-November, the

Australian ambassador had paid an official call on the SLORC and Australian oil companies were reportedly lining up to take advantage of the regime's more open economic policies.²⁷ In mid-December, Thai army commander General Chaowalit Yongchaiyuth made a well-publicised visit to Burma, the first senior official to do so since the 18 September military takeover.

Needless to say, the SLORC was unhappy about the critical statements issued by most Western governments, and by the foreign radio broadcasts which condemned the regime's brutal handling of the protests. Such 'foreign influences' were blamed for 'hampering restoration of law and order'.²⁸ Considered overall, however, the international reaction to the Tatmadaw's tough measures was relatively mild, and hardly enough to justify the security concerns – even alarm – that was clearly felt by the authorities in Rangoon at the time. Indeed, not long after the military takeover, popular opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi called upon the UN to pressure the new government to negotiate with the pro-democracy movement, but she also warned that the international community should not intervene directly. 'I'm wary of any kind of foreign external intervention in the affairs of the country', she is reported to have said.²⁹ Yet it was precisely such a development that the regime feared. As James Guyot pointed out at the time, past US support for the KMT and even the exploitation of Burma's rich natural resources by the British colonial administration were still live issues in the minds of the Tatmadaw leadership. They contributed directly to renewed fears of external intervention in the country's affairs.³⁰

Fears of External Intervention

During the uprising, there were repeated calls to the international community from pro-democracy activists for help in ending military rule in Burma. In themselves, these requests were not unusual. They had also been made in 1974, for example, when students and Buddhist monks appealed to the UN to help them honour the memory of former Secretary-General U Thant, and to restore democratic rule.³¹ In 1988, however, the demonstrations were much larger, received greater publicity and prompted a higher level of international interest. They also aroused greater concerns on the part of the military government. Some demonstrators seized weapons from the security forces, and others approached foreign embassies requesting arms to fight the regime.³² The SLORC feared an alliance between the pro-democracy movement in the cities and the insurgent groups in Burma's countryside. Such a development would pose major problems for the Tatmadaw, which was already fighting on several fronts. This link would be more problematical if it was encouraged and supported by 'foreign elements'. An even more worrying prospect for the regime was direct intervention by foreign countries in support of the opposition movement. At the time, Burma's military leaders were convinced that they faced threats from all these quarters.

There is little hard evidence available to support regime claims that Burma's armed insurgent groups planned to increase their activities in late 1988, to capitalise on the government's disarray, but the SLORC later went to considerable lengths to try and persuade the Burmese people and international observers that this was the case. The CPB was accused of trying to seize power through both 'above ground' and 'underground' activities.³³ In fact, Burma's insurgent groups were taken completely by surprise by the popular uprising in Rangoon and other population centres. The only real link developed after 18 September, when thousands of pro-democracy activists fled to the border regions to escape the military crackdown. Some students and other exiled Burmese subsequently attempted to form their own anti-regime guerrilla groups, with the help of established forces like the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), but they never became very strong. The CPB staged one major military operation against the Tatmadaw after September 1988, but by March 1989 the CPB had imploded. The ageing communist leadership fled to China, while the rank and file split into a number of ethnic-based armies, the most important of which became the United Wa State Army (UWSA).

The reported upsurge in insurgent activity in 1988 was linked publicly to external influences – although the regime pointedly refrained from blaming China for any of the CPB's activities. SLORC Chairman General Saw Maung claimed that 'ethnic rebels' had 'taken advantage of misunderstandings' between some foreign governments and the new military regime to attack Tatmadaw outposts in Shan State and Karen State 'in an attempt to receive more foreign aid'.³⁴ It is not known precisely what he meant by this, but he may have been referring to the humanitarian aid that was starting to trickle through to the thousands of Burmese refugees who had recently fled across the Burma–Thailand border. Saw Maung's comments took on greater significance in November, however, after comments by US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, a former Reagan Administration staffer whose reported ambition was 'to institutionalise US assistance to freedom fighters around the world'.³⁵ After visiting an insurgent training camp inside Burma, he described the students and others he met there as 'heroes in our time', whose goals he admired. Rohrabacher also said that he would actively lobby for these exiles to receive economic aid, including medical supplies. While it was 'far too soon' to consider other forms of assistance, he reportedly did not rule out the provision of military aid from the US.³⁶

Such a provocative remark would have been enough to set alarm bells ringing in the Defence Ministry in Rangoon. Despite the relatively restrained international response to the events of 1988, however, the regime already feared even stronger foreign action. The deployment of a US naval task force to Burma sparked rumours that an invasion fleet was being sent to help the demonstrators. The regime's fears grew after five US naval vessels, including the aircraft carrier *USS Coral Sea*, were detected off Burma's coast on 12 September.³⁷ According to one well-informed source, the authorities lodged an official complaint with the US and sought an explanation from its embassy in Rangoon. They were reportedly told that the fleet was for the evacuation of embassy staff. This failed to convince the regime, however, as nearly 300 people, including some US embassy staff, had already been evacuated by chartered aircraft.³⁸ The US embassy issued a statement the following day stating that reports of a US fleet in Burmese waters was just a rumour. As the fleet was apparently sighted some 90 nautical miles south of Rangoon, and therefore in international waters, this statement may have been technically correct, but it did not stem the rumours which were then gathering force.

During this period, dissidents distributed leaflets claiming an invasion was imminent, and some even made small pennants printed with 'US Marine Corps', to wave as the foreign troops marched into the city.³⁹ Some people in the capital were sufficiently persuaded of the truth of these rumours that they began to dig air raid shelters. At one stage, it was reported that US paratroopers had already landed in Upper Burma. This prompted a panicky phone call from the Defence Ministry to the US Defence Attache, seeking his reassurance that Burma was not being invaded. (The Attache suggested that the Ministry ring Tatmadaw units in the reported landing zones, and ask them to look out the window).⁴⁰ There is still some confusion surrounding these developments, but it is clear that the regime's concerns about a US invasion were quite genuine. Burma's military leaders remembered the pressure brought to bear against India in 1971, when a US naval task force was sent to the region during Bangladesh's war of independence.⁴¹ Saw Maung was later quoted as saying that 'a superpower country' had sent an aircraft carrier into Burmese waters at the height of Burma's crisis 'causing fears in Rangoon that the city would be attacked'.⁴² Despite official US denials of any hostile intent, and the failure of any attack to eventuate, all these developments made a deep impression on the regime.

There were other indications that the threat of external intervention was taken seriously at the time. Despite the fact that Burma's foreign exchange reserves in 1988 were very low, the SLORC took steps hastily to replenish the Tatmadaw's armouries with weapons and ammunition. In early October, for example, a large consignment of arms was sent to Rangoon from Singapore. There was another shipment from Singapore early the following year.⁴³ Some of the SLORC's arms acquisitions during this period may have been to replenish stocks used in its annual counter-insurgency campaigns, and to

prepare for the increased fighting expected during the 1988–89 dry season. They may have also been in anticipation of further civil unrest. It is understood, however, that the SLORC's first arms orders included search radars and air defence weapons. Neither of these weapon systems is needed to protect a government from unarmed demonstrators in the cities or lightly armed guerrillas in the countryside, either acting independently or together.⁴⁴ The only logical explanation for these acquisitions is that they were purchased to help the regime resist an air attack from an invasion force.

It is possible that the SLORC was not the only government that feared a US invasion of Burma in 1988. In a paper published last year, it was claimed that during the pro-democracy uprising China took measures to invade Burma itself, should the US militarily intervene. According to Maung Aung Myoe:

At the same time, there were movements of troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China along the Myanmar border. Several PLA brigades were deployed along the border and put on alert. The Tatmadaw authorities in Yangon informed the Chinese military attaché that the situation would be under control in a fairly short period of time. They even sent a delegation to the Myanmar border to meet senior PLA officer and to verify the situation and assure that no foreign power would interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs. There had been some reports that the PLA was quite prepared to take the Shan state, by using the [CPB] as a front, if the US fleet or troops landed in Myanmar [sic].⁴⁵

Given the turmoil in Burma at the time, it would not have been surprising for China to increase troop deployments along its shared border, as a precautionary measure. There were also reports of troop and police movements along the Thai and Indian borders, to prevent any spill-over of the unrest and to manage increased refugee flows.⁴⁶ However, this is the first time that anyone has suggested that China actually planned to invade Burma in 1988.

It is conceivable that Beijing gave some thought to the creation of a protective buffer zone along its southern border, using the CPB as proxies, but the threat of an invasion of Shan State probably existed more in the minds of Burma's jittery military leaders, than in China's.

In the years that followed the uprising, the SLORC steadily consolidated its grip on power, changing its name in 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In a major break with past policy, it successfully arranged ceasefires with most major armed insurgent groups. With China's help, it also launched an ambitious program to expand and modernise the Tatmadaw.⁴⁷ As its domestic position grew stronger, the regime appeared to become more confident in its dealings with other countries, and in its belief that it could resist foreign pressures. Yet the fears of invasion and other forms of external intervention, that clearly preoccupied Burma's leaders in 1988, never went away. Indeed, there have been a number of times since then when such an eventuality became a serious concern to the generals in Rangoon.

3. Burma's Strategic Environment, 1989–2007

The Campaign Against the Regime

The 1988 uprising encouraged much greater interest in Burma, but the 1990 elections were perhaps the real defining point in the international community's approach to Burma's new military government. Most of the political parties which sprang up before the poll were harassed and intimidated by the regime, but in some respects the elections proved to be surprisingly free and fair. As a result, they were convincingly won by the main opposition parties, notably the National League for Democracy (NLD). This was despite the fact that the NLD's charismatic General Secretary, Aung San Suu Kyi, was under house arrest at the time.⁴⁸ Yet the SLORC refused to acknowledge the result and transfer power, as it had initially promised – probably on the assumption that its favoured party would win the elections in its own right, or at least control the balance of power. Instead, the regime fell back on a number of statements made before the election that the poll was simply to prepare the way for a new national constitution.⁴⁹ A convention to draft the new government framework formally began work in 1993. Well before then, however, it was clear that the drafting process could only have one outcome, namely a document that effectively endorsed permanent military rule.

The SLORC's refusal to acknowledge the clearly expressed will of the Burmese people deeply divided the international community. Since 1990, policies have been modified and refined, depending on the circumstances, but broadly speaking countries and international organisations have fallen into three main camps. For the sake of argument, these can be called the 'hard liners', the 'soft liners' and the 'allies'.

The 'hard liners', led by the US and to a lesser extent the major EU countries, have favoured repeated public condemnation of the military government and the imposition of tough economic sanctions, including blocks on all forms of international financial assistance. For example, in 1991 the US decided not to renew a bilateral textile agreement which had lapsed the previous December.⁵⁰ President Clinton also banned new investments in Burma and his successor has implemented a total ban on the import of Burmese products. President Bush has also frozen Burmese assets in the US and imposed visa restrictions on members of the regime, their families and close supporters.⁵¹ European sanctions against Burma have been less severe, but they have covered broadly the same areas, including an arms embargo, restrictions on visas and financial transfers, the suspension of non-humanitarian aid, and the removal of formal trade concessions. In 2005 and 2006 the US and UK unsuccessfully attempted to have Burma declared a threat to regional security, by the UNSC.⁵² Milder and more selective sanctions have been imposed from time to time by Australia and Japan.

The declared aim of the hard liners has varied over time and between states. In the 1990s, the US pressed the SLORC to honour the results of the general election and transfer power to a civilian government. After it became apparent that its sanctions policy was not likely to move the regime, Washington seemed a little more prepared to consider measures aimed at constructive political change. In 2002, however, the US reverted to its original uncompromising stance, after Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters were violently attacked by a government mob. In July 2003, President Bush signed into law the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, which was specifically designed to strengthen Burma's 'democratic forces'. It also explicitly recognised the NLD as the country's legitimate government.⁵³ The EU's approach has differed from that of the US, not only in degree but also in its long term aims. As described by Jurgen Haacke:

US sanctions have in practice primarily aimed to isolate Myanmar politically and to cripple it economically in order either to force the regime to stand aside or to create conditions that would lead to its overthrow; European sanctions have aimed to weaken, punish and disgrace the military leadership and to spur a change in its domestic practices.⁵⁴

The US has stated that its sanctions will be maintained until there is significant progress towards democracy, or until a democratic government in Burma requests that they be lifted. The EU's position is more flexible, and allows for a gradual relaxation of sanctions as its various concerns are met by the regime.

In recent years, the hard liners' demands have not referred specifically to the 1990 elections. Rather, they have tended to focus on issues like the release of political prisoners – including Aung San Suu Kyi – 'national reconciliation', and 'dialogue' between the various parties in Burma. With the regime's new national constitution in mind, they have also called for a government that genuinely reflects the will of the Burmese people. Implicit in this slightly more nuanced approach, however, is still a strong demand for regime change. Indeed, whenever the US President has formally renewed sanctions against Burma, as he has done each year for the past six years, he has stated for the record that Burma is considered 'a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States'.⁵⁵ If the most powerful country in the world can feel threatened by a weak and isolated developing country like Burma – or is at least prepared to say so publicly – then it is hardly surprising that the generals in Naypyidaw feel they have some grounds for their own security concerns.

The second group of countries – the so-called 'soft liners' – are represented mainly by the nine other ASEAN countries.⁵⁶ Referring to their founding charter, which stresses non-interference in the internal affairs of fellow members, most ASEAN governments have seen greater value in 'constructively engaging' Burma's military regime. There have clearly been strategic, political and commercial benefits in such an approach, leading to accusations of cynicism and self interest. For many years, however, leading ASEAN politicians have responded that the West's 'megaphone diplomacy' does not work, and a more subtle 'Asian way' was likely to be more successful in encouraging a dialogue with Burma and helping improve the situation there. It was hoped that, through economic growth and greater contact with the outside world, the regime would eventually observe some international norms of behaviour and allow increased space for the development of civil society. ASEAN's patience with Burma has been sorely tested in recent years, and individual members have publicly expressed their frustration with the military regime. Even with a revised charter, however, there is little chance that the Association will join the US and other Western countries in imposing punitive measures against Burma, in an attempt to change its government.

The third group is led by China, Russia and, since the early 1990s, India. These 'allies' have developed close ties with the military government. They would like to see Burma enjoy internal stability and greater prosperity, not so much for reasons directly related to the country's own welfare, but largely in order to promote their own respective interests. Accordingly, they are not prepared to risk their fragile and currently beneficial relations with the SPDC by dwelling on the outcome of the 1990 elections, or by supporting any international initiatives that are ultimately aimed at regime change. All three major powers have participated in discussions about Burma, and at times even agreed to UN statements critical of its government, but these steps seem to be motivated mainly by a wish to see Burma attract less unfavourable attention, which is in turn embarrassing to its friends and supporters. China's carefully worded expressions of concern about occasional outbreaks of domestic unrest, for example, have not been prompted by any particular attachment to democratic reform, but by the need to protect its national interests in Burma and to maintain its diplomatic influence, both in the UN and further afield.⁵⁷

The international community's various approaches to Burma were tested in 2007, as a result of the so-called 'saffron revolution'. After unexpected fuel price rises in August and the mistreatment of some Buddhist monks in early September, a fresh wave of protests swept across the country. Led by large numbers of monks, hundreds of thousands of people marched against the high cost of living, the disrespect shown towards the revered *sangha* (the Buddhist 'clergy') and the lack of political freedoms in Burma. The regime's tough response to these protests prompted a rare consensus among the international community, which was briefly united in calling for change in Burma. Even China joined in a strong statement by the UN Human Rights Council, condemning the latest military crackdown. Yet, once again, agreement could not be reached on the measures which could and should be taken to persuade the SPDC to introduce political and economic reforms. The hard-liners fell back on their policy of strong rhetoric and tight sanctions. Most other countries placed their faith – in public at least – in the regime's promise to hold a constitutional referendum on 10 May 2008, and to introduce a 'discipline-flourishing democracy' following general elections in 2010.

Given the closed nature of Burma's government, and the unreliability of the available data, it is difficult to say precisely what the hard liners and soft liners have achieved over the past 20 years. The measures taken by the US to block international financial assistance to Burma – the only country in the region to suffer such a prohibition – and the steps by the US and EU to restrict Burmese imports, have clearly had an impact on the country's economic development.⁵⁸ Without much wider application, however, no sanctions regime can be very effective as a political tool and, as Burma has clearly demonstrated, it has several alternative sources of capital, arms and diplomatic support. Indeed, it has been argued that economic sanctions have hurt the general population much more than the armed forces, which enjoy a privileged position within Burmese society.⁵⁹ That said, it must be acknowledged that the soft liners have been equally unsuccessful in encouraging the regime to reconsider its current policies. The SLORC and SPDC appear to have brushed off any criticisms made to them in private, pocketed the concessions offered by these countries, and continued to operate much as before.

Whatever the practical outcomes of all these measures, it is self evident that none of them have persuaded the regime to shift from its core position – a strong central government dominated by the armed forces – nor to introduce any meaningful political, economic or social reforms. Nor has there been any sign that the regime feels the need to improve its human rights record, as a result of the pressures it has faced since 1988. Indeed, it has been argued that the punitive measures levelled against the regime – including the new measures imposed after the 2007 unrest – have simply aroused strong nationalist sentiments among the generals and made them even more resistant to external pressures. These measures have, however, added to the regime's abiding sense of threat, and made it even more fearful of foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs.⁶⁰

The Regime's Threat Perceptions

Burma's strategic environment has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Before 1988, the BSPP government was recognised as a thinly disguised military dictatorship, but it was accepted in world councils and – notwithstanding its autarkic socialist ideology – given considerable development assistance by the international community. As noted above, the regime saw Burma's security in terms of local insurgencies, pressure from its larger and more powerful neighbours and, at a further remove, entanglement in the strategic competition between the superpowers.⁶¹ China and India were managed through tactful diplomacy, while a neutral foreign policy, reliance on the UN and a broad focus on global disarmament helped Burma avoid Cold War rivalries. Internal unrest of different kinds clearly still worries the military leadership but, since 1988, Burma's external threat perceptions have been turned on their head. China, India and Russia are among the regime's closest supporters. The US and UK, once seen as friends, if not potential allies, are considered serious threats to Burma's sovereignty and the continued existence of the military government.⁶² Even the UN is now regarded with suspicion.

In addition, global developments over the past few decades have sharpened Burma's concern that it might fall victim to a larger, more powerful state. In the past, this fear was focussed on China but the worry is now that, in a post-Cold War world dominated by the US, the Western democracies will attempt to impose their liberal, democratic and humanitarian agenda on Burma. As one government publication has warned:

The West Bloc countries, in waging its Cold War against its adversary the East Bloc, had adopted a pattern of democratic warfare. The grand strategy of the West Bloc is to eliminate dictatorial systems and establish democratic states. Some countries in the West Bloc consider Myanmar a dictatorial regime.⁶³

The armed interventions in Panama (1989), Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (1991 and 2003) are all viewed by the Burmese leadership as examples of the US's determination, unilaterally if necessary, to intervene in the affairs of other states – including the overthrow of governments whose policies are inimical to Washington.⁶⁴ The 1999 multinational operation in East Timor, where a separatist movement was able to win independence from its parent state, is cited by members of Burma's military hierarchy as another example of the way in which the US and its allies are forcibly reshaping the world order.⁶⁵ Even the UK's rescue mission to Sierra Leone in 2000 has been seen as unacceptable interference in another country's internal affairs. In this process, the UN is seen as unwilling or unable to defend the interests of its smaller and weaker members, including their sovereign rights.

Throughout this period, the regime's threat perceptions have been heightened by consistent criticism from Western leaders. Implicit in these comments has been a strong demand for regime change. In 1991, for example, the US Undersecretary of State described Burma as a 'cancer of instability'.⁶⁶ In 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to 'the thugs who now rule Burma' and in 2005 his successor labelled Burma 'an outpost of tyranny' to which the US must help bring freedom.⁶⁷ In President Bush's 2006 State of the Union speech, immediately after references to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, Burma was ranked alongside Syria, Iran and North Korea as places where 'the demands of justice, and the peace of the world, require their freedom'.⁶⁸ In the UK, then Prime Minister Blair was reported as saying that the SPDC was a 'loathsome regime' that he would 'love to destroy', and his Foreign Secretary declared that it was 'grotesque' the military government in Burma should spend so much money on arms.⁶⁹ Senior parliamentarians from a range of Western countries have repeatedly characterised the SPDC as 'repressive and illegitimate' and described Burma as a 'pariah state' ruled by 'a wicked regime'.⁷⁰

Since 1988, Burma has been a popular target for the international news media. Also, activists have become adept at using the internet to spread their views and encourage opposition to the military government. There have been calls for Burma to be included in President Bush's 'axis of evil', and few years have gone by without some popular pundit asking why the UN or the US does not invade Burma 'for the good of its people'.⁷¹ Even more cautious commentators have recommended 'limited military actions, overt or covert, against the regime's infrastructure'.⁷² Many of these reports and op-ed pieces have suffered from factual inaccuracies or obvious political biases, and those people calling for an invasion of Burma have often displayed a rather superficial understanding of the country's complex problems. Yet, this background chorus of criticism has added to the regime's sense of insecurity, and confirmed the view that it faces a very hostile international political environment. It has shown particular sensitivity when critical radio and television broadcasts have been directed at the Burmese population, in the Burmese language. In terms reminiscent of statements by the SLORC in the 1980s, the SPDC has issued dire warnings against a 'skyful of lies' and 'killers in the air waves'.⁷³

In stark contrast, comments about Burma's opposition movement have invariably been complimentary and supportive. Aung San Suu Kyi has been awarded numerous honours, including the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize.⁷⁴ More to the point, aid has been provided by numerous governments and non-government organisations (NGO) to a wide range of

activist groups, including the exiled National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).⁷⁵ Official assistance has usually been earmarked for humanitarian projects, but NGOs like the Open Society Institute (OSI) have together provided about US\$10 million a year for courses on democracy, human rights and non-violent resistance. They have also given funds to maintain communication links between activists inside and outside Burma.⁷⁶ As seen during the 2007 saffron revolution, dissidents inside Burma now have the expertise and the means to disseminate news and images of important events directly to the foreign news media, ensuring a much greater public impact. Thanks to this external support, including grants made by US Congress through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Burmese activists now operate a satellite television station, a shortwave radio station and numerous Burmese language journals and newspapers. Other news outlets such as *The Irrawaddy* (based in Thailand), *Mizzima News* (based in India) and the *Democratic Voice of Burma* (based in Norway) have proven effective in spreading dissident views in English.⁷⁷

The NGOs providing such assistance usually claim that they are merely educating Burmese groups – including Buddhist monks inside Burma – about democracy, and mobilising support for the opposition movement. They speak in general terms of ‘promoting political capacity building’ and ‘strengthening civil society’ – this in anticipation of a time when exiled Burmese will be able to return and help rebuild Burma under an elected civilian government. Yet, most of these organisations directly promote regime change, for example by providing funds to support the activities of pro-democracy groups in Burma, helping the clandestine distribution of human rights literature, and by training activists outside Burma.⁷⁸ It is emphasised that these diverse programs are aimed at a peaceful political transition – and this is true – but they are still viewed by the regime as elements in a sophisticated clandestine campaign to subvert Burma’s military government.⁷⁹ The claims made by some activist groups, that they helped encourage, organise and publicise the demonstrations in September 2007, may be exaggerated, but they helped strengthen the SPDC’s conviction that foreign governments, through Burmese exiles and domestic activist groups, are attempting to destabilise the Union, in an effort to bring down the military regime.⁸⁰

The SPDC also seems to believe that some countries are directly arming and training ethnic insurgent groups and dissident organisations, with the aim of over-throwing the regime by force.⁸¹ While hard information on this subject is scarce, some ethnic groups have appealed for foreign military assistance and a few foreign politicians, like Dana Rohrabacher in 1988, have hinted that they may receive it.⁸² It is widely believed, for example, that the Shan State Army – South (SSA-S) is currently supported by the Thai government, which uses the group as a proxy force to combat Burmese drug smugglers. Yet the SSA-S also fights the Tatmadaw and its proxies, like the UWSA. Also, there are occasionally reports of foreign mercenaries and other soldiers of fortune fighting with the ethnic insurgents, primarily the KNLA. NGOs like Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) have occasionally crossed over the Thai–Burma border to provide aid to local villagers, including some insurgents.⁸³ Not only are these actions seen by the regime as openly hostile, but it is believed that the individuals and groups concerned are acting with the full knowledge – and possibly even active support – of their home governments. To the SPDC, such activities give substance to periodic, albeit often far-fetched, rumours that its enemies are secretly receiving foreign arms shipments and military training.⁸⁴

To an isolated, insecure and fearful group of military officers in Naypyidaw, all these developments have been seen as threatening, and interpreted as evidence of a sustained campaign to impose regime change on Burma, against which they need to prepare.⁸⁵ The SLORC, and after 1997 the SPDC, have maintained a steady drumbeat of claims that ‘foreign powers’, ‘a notorious power’, or at times even the US specifically, is determined to overthrow the regime using ‘axe handles’, ‘stooges’ and ‘terrorist groups in exile’.⁸⁶ Regime spokesmen have repeatedly pointed to the aid provided to dissident groups, and accused at least one foreign government of complicity in ‘terrorist acts’. The regime has also invoked historical examples of involvement by the CIA (usually referred to in the state-run news media as ‘a notorious organisation’) in clandestine

operations elsewhere in the world. For example, it has cited the fall of the Allende Government in Chile in 1973 as an example of the US's willingness to overthrow governments deemed unacceptable. In 2006, after Condoleeza Rice permitted Karen guerrillas – technically terrorists under US law – to emigrate to the US, the SPDC's Information Minister suggested that the US was planning to train an army of Karen exiles to overthrow the Burmese government, along the lines of the 1961 invasion of Cuba by US-backed Cuban exiles.⁸⁷

It is tempting to dismiss such outlandish claims, the accusations levelled against activist and insurgent groups in official news outlets like the *New Light of Myanmar*, and the ubiquitous billboards denouncing 'foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State', simply as rhetoric aimed at denigrating the regime's opponents. Yet, repeated calls to 'crush all internal and external destructive elements' are not just part of a self-serving propaganda campaign. The weight of evidence suggests that they reflect genuine fears of an existential threat to the regime and the country, fears which have been heightened by periodic invasion scares.

Continuing Fears of Invasion

The SLORC's fears of an invasion by the US in 1988 were ultimately proved groundless, but this did not persuade the regime that it was immune from possible future armed intervention by foreign powers, either acting alone or as part of a larger coalition. For example, the regime took careful note of the multilateral military operation against Iraq in 1990–91, and even placed anti-aircraft guns around Rangoon in case a similar effort was made against Burma.⁸⁸ In 1991, the Tatmadaw was reportedly placed on alert against a possible invasion when a large US amphibious task force returning from the Gulf War diverted to Bangladesh, to assist in recovery efforts after a powerful cyclone devastated that country. There were other indications that Burma remained fearful of attack by a multilateral coalition. Following the UN-sponsored landings of US troops in Haiti in 1994, to restore the country's democratically elected leader, there were rumours in Rangoon that an attempt would be made by the US or a coalition of UN members to force the SLORC's hand, and make it accept the results of the 1990 general election.⁸⁹ There were unconfirmed reports at the time that China had pledged its support for Burma in the event of any international intervention. Despite its defiant rhetoric at the time, the regime continued to feel insecure and vulnerable.⁹⁰

There were concerns too that Burma might be a target for Islamic countries angered by the regime's harsh treatment of the Rohingyas, Muslims of South Asian extraction who lived in Arakan State. In 1991, over 250,000 Rohingyas fled across the border into Bangladesh to escape the depredations of the Burma Army.⁹¹ In New York, the UNGA adopted a resolution expressing concern at the 'grave human rights situation in Burma' and lobbying began for the UNSC to authorise UN intervention.⁹² In April 1992, the regime was alarmed by remarks made by Prince Khaled Bin Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz, the commander of the Saudi Arabian forces during the first Gulf War. During a visit to Bangladesh, the Prince called on the UN to do for the Rohingyas 'just what it did to liberate Kuwait'.⁹³ Most observers – including strategic analysts in Burma – interpreted this to be a call for another 'Operation Desert Storm', directed this time against the SLORC. Later, there were reports that Rohingya insurgent groups were being provided with funds from the Middle East to buy arms from the Cambodia–Thailand and Afghanistan–Pakistan borders.⁹⁴ There were also rumours that Burmese Muslims had declared a jihad or 'holy war' against the Rangoon regime and were being assisted by Islamic fundamentalists from abroad, some of whom had been trained by the US for service against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.⁹⁵

By 2000, the military government seemed to have become more confident of its ability to resist international pressures, but it was still highly sensitive to calls for regime change, and to other perceived threats to Burma's independence and national sovereignty. For example, there is some evidence that, after Condoleeza Rice declared Burma 'an outpost of tyranny' – along with such notorious 'rogue states' as Iran, North

Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe and Belarus – the SPDC gave renewed attention to ways in which it might resist US intervention in Burma's internal affairs. According to the *Asia Times*, a secret Tatmadaw document dated October 2005 identified three ways in which the US might 'invade' Burma:

through agitating its citizens, in an alliance with insurgents and ceasefire groups or through a multinational coalition-led invasion.⁹⁶

The document reportedly identified Thailand – named by President Bush in 2003 a 'major non-NATO ally' – as Burma's 'nearest enemy'. The regime has long been worried that the US could use its annual 'Cobra Gold' military exercises with Thailand as cover for an attack against Burma. In recent years these exercises, sometimes involving up to 13,000 US personnel from all three Services, have included narcotics interdiction operations near the Burmese border. They have consistently attracted expressions of concern from the SLORC and, after 1997, from the SPDC.⁹⁷

There have been other straws in the wind suggesting that the regime's worries about armed intervention are still alive. It is difficult to identify the thinking behind the move of the capital from Rangoon to Naypyidaw in 2005, but one explanation consistently advanced by observers is that a new city further inland was considered more secure from sea-borne attack. As Saddam Hussain discovered, a few hundred kilometres makes little difference to a modern force armed with missiles and long range aircraft, but this could have been an element in the SPDC's thinking.⁹⁸ Similar considerations apparently prompted the Tatmadaw's decision in 2002 to move the headquarters of its Western Command from Sittwe (on the Arakan coast) to Ann, further inland.⁹⁹ Also, in 2006 The Irrawaddy claimed to have in its possession a secret document confirming that the regime still feared a US invasion. According to the journal, SPDC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe had instructed his military commanders 'to prepare for the worst and hope for the best'. He warned in particular against a 'destruction plan' being implemented by the CIA. The document reportedly quoted a senior military officer saying that, if the US bombed Rangoon or Mandalay, all members of the NLD would need to be killed, to prevent them being used as 'stooges' by an occupying military force.¹⁰⁰

Many of these concerns arose again in September 2007, during the saffron revolution. The widespread protests that month were largely spontaneous reactions to unexpected events, but the SPDC immediately suspected the hand of 'internal and external destructionists', and behind them 'foreign powers' determined to install a 'puppet government' in Burma.¹⁰¹ In support of this claim, the regime cited the training given by expatriate groups in Thailand to more than 3,000 Burmese – including several hundred Buddhist monks – in strategies of non-violent resistance and community mobilisation.¹⁰² Rather than acknowledge the largely unplanned nature of the popular unrest, and its root causes, Burma's police chief claimed that it was the result of months of systematic planning.¹⁰³ It is possible that the regime painted the disturbances as a foreign-instigated plot in order to quell unease within the armed forces, particularly after they were ordered to take tough action against Buddhist monks and other demonstrators. There is little doubt, however, that the regime genuinely feared the disturbances were inspired – if not actively assisted – by the US and other Western countries.¹⁰⁴

It was largely in response to these perceived threats that, since 1988, the regime has undertaken an ambitious program to expand and modernise Burma's armed forces, consistently reserving about 35 per cent of the national budget to this end. After decades of being essentially a small, lightly armed infantry force geared to regime protection and counter-insurgency, Burma now boasts a very large, reasonably well-integrated, well-armed, tri-service defence force increasingly capable of conventional military operations.¹⁰⁵ A particular effort has been made to improve the Tatmadaw's armour, artillery and air defence capabilities, all areas where it suffered serious weaknesses, and all critical for any response to an invasion. The Tatmadaw still has no power projection capabilities, but it is now able to mount a much stronger defence of

Burmese territory. Since 1988, the regime has also made a major effort to improve Burma's transport and communications infrastructure, in part to give its armed forces greater mobility. In addition, most civil servants have received paramilitary training, specifically to help resist an invading force until aid can arrive from Burma's allies.¹⁰⁶ The Tatmadaw still faces a number of serious problems, but its enhanced military capabilities greatly raise the stakes faced by a hostile neighbour and help act as a deterrent against invasion.

Thus, for the past 20 years, Burma's generals have faced the – to them – real possibility of armed intervention by foreign powers. Added to that was a long history – going back well before 1988 – of external support for insurgent groups and dissidents, dedicated to the overthrow of the military government. It was in this atmosphere of fear and suspicion, and against a background of persistent security threats – both real and imagined – that the SPDC faced the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008.

4. The Impact of Cyclone Nargis

The Regime's Reaction

Nargis was the most powerful cyclone to strike Burma within living memory. On the night of 2–3 May, torrential rain and winds exceeding 190 kilometres per hour swept across the fertile Irrawaddy delta and other parts of Lower Burma, at one stage crossing directly over Rangoon. The cyclone was accompanied by a 3.5 metre tidal surge, and left devastation in its wake. The coastal areas of low-lying Irrawaddy Division were the hardest hit. Entire villages were destroyed, crops were flattened, paddy fields were flooded with salt water and tens of thousands of farm animals were killed. The final number of casualties is still unknown, but by the end of June estimates of the dead and missing had passed 138,000. Some 40 per cent of those were children. More than two million other people were affected by the storm.¹⁰⁷ The SPDC declared an emergency across five administrative regions: Rangoon, Irrawaddy and Pegu Divisions, and Karen and Mon States. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, 65 per cent of Burma's rice, 80 per cent of its aquaculture, 50 per cent of its poultry and 40 per cent of its pig production came from these five regions.¹⁰⁸ It was immediately apparent that a large scale and long term relief effort was needed, along the lines of the response to the tsunami that struck South and Southeast Asia in 2004.¹⁰⁹

The international community was quick to offer its sympathy and support, but it was also quick to state its high expectations of the military regime. In the circumstances, some of these were quite unrealistic. Despite its natural riches, Burma is in many ways an undeveloped country, with few modern facilities, particularly outside the main population centres. Despite a major construction program by the regime since 1988, the country's transport and communications infrastructure is still very weak. In addition, while it exercises enormous power, the military government is not quite the efficient and well-resourced war machine that is sometimes portrayed. All major decisions must be referred to the senior leadership in Naypyidaw, which is often shielded from real conditions in the country. In any case, any Burmese government, democratically elected or not, would have found it very difficult to cope with the massive human suffering, property damage and economic problems caused by the cyclone. As seen after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, far richer, technologically more advanced and socially more cohesive countries have experienced difficulties in responding to natural disasters.¹¹⁰

Yet, by any measure, the SPDC's response to Cyclone Nargis was sadly wanting, particularly when it had the means at hand to take immediate action. The Tatmadaw is the only organisation in Burma with the command structure, internal communications, manpower, resources and expertise to respond quickly to such a catastrophic event. From all accounts, however, the armed forces were not called out – as occurred in China after the 12 May 2008 Sichuan earthquake, for example – and they did not make a real contribution to relief efforts until some days had passed. Even then, the response was patchy and weak.¹¹¹ It is not known exactly why the regime's response was so slow, but it was probably due – at least in part – to Naypyidaw's preoccupation with the nation-wide constitutional referendum, scheduled for 10 May. It was later announced that the referendum would be postponed for two weeks in the worst cyclone-affected areas, but arrangements for the poll in all other parts of the country went ahead, despite the national emergency. This decision prompted widespread criticism, but it was the SPDC's initial refusal to accept aid donations and to allow foreign aid workers into the country, which caused the greatest concern.

Immediately after the cyclone struck, a massive international relief effort began. Within a week, 24 countries had pledged financial support totalling US\$30 million.¹¹² It was not until 6 May, however, that the regime agreed to accept foreign assistance, and only on the basis that it would control aid distribution. Even then, the SPDC was slow to issue visas to foreign specialists and to allow aid into Burma. Food and other essential supplies piled up in neighbouring countries as UN agencies, NGOs and others waited for the necessary clearances. It was only days later, and after considerable international pressure, that the regime relaxed its position and made it easier for aid workers and supplies to enter Burma. The regime still insisted, however, that all foreign governments and NGOs 'negotiate' access. It was also made clear that only 'friendly' countries would be allowed into Burma. Military forces were specifically excluded – although some US and Indian transport aircraft were later permitted to land in Rangoon. The US, UK and France sent naval vessels loaded with aid supplies, but they were denied permission to land in Burma, or to deliver any supplies by helicopter.¹¹³ Inside the country, the movement of foreign aid workers was severely restricted and the relief distribution was tightly controlled by the authorities. As Brian McCartan observed, the regime seemed to view the natural disaster 'more as a national security issue than a humanitarian operation'.¹¹⁴

The regime's resistance to international aid and the entry of foreign aid workers attracted widespread criticism. On 9 May, for example, a spokesman for the World Food Programme described the SPDC's attitude as 'unprecedented in modern humanitarian relief efforts'.¹¹⁵ On 12 May, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon registered his 'deep concern and immense frustration at the unacceptably slow response to this grave humanitarian crisis'.¹¹⁶ On 16 May, UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke for many when he said that:

A natural disaster is being made into a man-made catastrophe by the neglect and the inhuman treatment of the Burmese people by a regime that is failing to act.¹¹⁷

Other world leaders and senior officials expressed similar sentiments. There were also accusations – including by US First Lady Laura Bush – that the regime had failed to forewarn Burma's citizens about the cyclone.¹¹⁸ This was later shown to be incorrect, but some conspiracy theorists have claimed that the regime deliberately withheld details of the storm to weaken the opposition movement's support in the Irrawaddy delta. Others have suggested that the regime wished to punish the large ethnic Karen community in the region, because of its suspected sympathies for Karen insurgent groups.¹¹⁹

Some of these accusations are easily dismissed, but there was no doubting the regime's stubborn refusal to permit the free flow of aid and expertise into Burma, and its determination to play down the full extent of the disaster. On 7 May, for example, Senior General Than Shwe stated that the situation was 'returning to normal'. Barely three weeks after the cyclone, when bloated bodies were still lying in ditches and tens of thousands of victims were still waiting for assistance, Than Shwe declared that relief efforts had ended and the second phase – reconstruction – had begun.¹²⁰ Aid agencies greeted these statements with disbelief, and there followed further criticism of the regime's indifference to the suffering of its own people. Following a visit to Naypyidaw in late May by Ban Ki-moon, and the organisation of an international relief effort coordinated by ASEAN, supplies began to flow more freely and foreign aid workers were allowed greater access. Even so, aid delivery to Burma was still hampered by restrictive government regulations, interference from local officials and a refusal to allow foreign personnel and aircraft into the cyclone affected areas except under strict conditions.¹²¹ The US, UK and French naval vessels deployed to Burmese waters left in early June, after failing to get permission from the regime to unload any aid supplies.¹²²

Such was the level of frustration over the situation in the Irrawaddy delta, and the regime's unhelpful attitude, that some members of the international community began

to consider extraordinary measures to deliver aid to the cyclone victims. While they were well meant, even discussion of these measures had the potential to make the situation in Burma much worse.

Aid and the 'Responsibility to Protect'

After the 1988 takeover, aid to Burma – including humanitarian assistance – was drastically reduced by donor countries, in the belief that this would help put pressure on the new military government.¹²³ Some is still provided, mainly through NGOs, but the regime has put numerous obstacles in the way. This seems to be due to a reluctance to expose Burma's weaknesses, and concerns about the spread of foreign influences. Following the 2004 tsunami the SPDC declined international assistance, claiming that fewer than 100 Burmese had been killed and property damage was slight. This may have been true, but in the same year the Geneva-based Global Fund, in Burma to combat the growing problems of tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS, withdrew from the country citing new regulations which made aid delivery very difficult. These regulations were further tightened in February 2006, forcing the International Committee of the Red Cross to close two of its five field offices in Burma, and MSF to suspend its Burmese operations.¹²⁴ All these restrictions caused widespread concern, but were reluctantly accepted by NGOs and others as the price of doing business in Burma. The regime's resistance to international aid efforts after Cyclone Nargis, however, so outraged some countries that they began to consider ways of helping the cyclone victims regardless of the regime's regulations and stated wishes.

The most outspoken proponent of coercive humanitarian intervention was the French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Bernard Kouchner, also a co-founder of MSF. On 7 May he announced that:

We are seeing at the United Nations whether we can implement the Responsibility to Protect [principle], given that food, boats and relief teams are there, and obtain a United Nations [Security Council] resolution which authorizes the delivery [of aid] and imposes this on the Burmese government.¹²⁵

The 'responsibility to protect' principle (R2P) had been unanimously endorsed by 150 heads of government and state at the 2005 UN World Summit. According to a UN General Assembly resolution later that year, the principle was established to help protect vulnerable populations from 'genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity'.¹²⁶ It offered the beginning of a legal basis for countries to act collectively, if such action was endorsed by the UNSC, and to consider the question of when atrocities inflicted by governments should justify overriding the rights of sovereignty, which had been increasingly invoked by states since the collapse of old Cold War alignments.¹²⁷

The R2P doctrine did not specifically address responses to natural disasters like Cyclone Nargis, but the French proposal initially found guarded support. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana agreed that the UN should use 'all means necessary' to ensure that aid reached those who needed it most.¹²⁸ Germany indicated that it might consider some kind of forced delivery of assistance if the SPDC continued to reject help from foreign aid workers.¹²⁹ The Director of the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance revealed that an air drop of aid supplies was one of the options being considered by the US government. The proposal reportedly enjoyed support among the US armed forces deployed to the Bay of Bengal.¹³⁰ The UK initially dismissed the French approach as 'incendiary' and likely to be entirely counter-productive but, according to later news reports, London did not take it off the negotiating table.¹³¹ Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said the world needed to 'bash the doors down in Burma', a statement some interpreted as support for an R2P intervention.¹³² A number of other politicians in the US, UK and Canada strongly endorsed the idea of unilateral action to deliver aid to the cyclone victims.

There was never any real likelihood, however, that this initiative would get far. The French proposal was immediately rejected by China and Russia, which as permanent members of the UNSC effectively exercised their veto. Supported by some ASEAN countries, these two major powers stated that the UNSC was not the proper forum for consideration of issues like disaster relief. No doubt with their own interests in mind, they also felt that an intervention under R2P was a gross violation of Burma's sovereignty. Predictably, this was the strong view of the SPDC itself, which has always been very sensitive to any perceived violation of its national rights. After Bernard Kouchner stated, on 10 May, that Paris could not wait any longer for UN approval and would send a naval vessel to deliver aid directly to the Burmese, the SPDC reacted very angrily. Burma's UN Representative strenuously objected to the despatch of a French warship and rejected the claim that, under international law, foreign aid could be delivered to the cyclone victims without Naypyidaw's permission.¹³³ The French government later denied – rather disingenuously – that the amphibious assault ship *Mistral* was in fact a 'warship', but it quickly backed down and 'clarified' the Minister's remarks.¹³⁴

In any event, it was apparent that an R2P intervention was highly impractical and most unlikely to succeed in achieving its aims. This was certainly the view of the UN's Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, one shared by the US Defence Secretary.¹³⁵ Indeed, arguments for and against the application of the R2P principle in Burma's case were dismissed by many observers as a distraction from the central issue, which was not whether or not such intervention was legal, but whether or not it would improve the situation on the ground. In that regard, most aid agencies were quick to point out that simply dropping supplies would be of little assistance without a structured long term plan for aid delivery and the presence on the ground of specialists – like doctors – and other aid workers trained to manage such a massive relief effort.¹³⁶ More to the point, without the active support of the Burmese government, such a proposal was simply not feasible. There was even the possibility that unauthorised boat landings, or flights into Burma, would be actively opposed by the Burmese armed forces, making the situation far worse for the cyclone victims. It did not take very long for the US, France and other EU countries to rule out coercive humanitarian intervention.

Any idea that foreign countries were entitled under international law to force their way into Burma, under whatever circumstances and for whatever reasons, doubtless caused consternation in Naypyidaw. As this debate unfolded at the UN, there was also a high level of background chatter in the news media, on internet blog sites and among activist groups, discussing whether such action was justified. Some activists and commentators saw the cyclone as an opportunity for even more drastic action, and canvassed the option of getting rid of the military regime once and for all. The regime's nightmare of a foreign invasion seemed to have returned.¹³⁷

Renewed Fears of Invasion

Most public commentary about the SPDC's reaction to Cyclone Nargis has emphasised the regime's poor human rights record, its lack of concern for the victims and blatant disregard for world opinion. A few observers, however, did make an effort to try and understand why the regime took the unusual approach it did. Once again, it is difficult to know why particular policies are adopted by the generals in Naypyidaw, but a number of issues present themselves as likely factors in the regime's thinking.

Faced with the prospect of a sudden influx of foreigners, in a devastated rural area where its own resources were very limited, the regime seems to have been worried that its normally tight grip on the population would be loosened. The presence of large numbers of foreign aid workers, officials and journalists – the latter often travelling incognito to unearth the most sensational stories – would be very difficult to monitor. Assisted by the international news media, through radio and television broadcasts beamed back into Burma, they would undermine the regime's efforts strictly to control what its citizens see, hear and, as far as possible, think. Millions of people could be

exposed to what the regime calls 'alien cultural influences', leading in turn to 'social instability'. In addition, the provision of clearly identifiable foreign aid packages would emphasise the regime's own failure to provide assistance, and the country's relative lack of development.¹³⁸ To the regime's way of thinking, such factors have the potential to encourage renewed political unrest, perhaps along the lines of the 2007 disturbances. This was a development that was already threatened by the sudden increases in the price of fuel, food and other staples following the cyclone.

There were other concerns as well. According to Josef Silverstein, the regime was convinced that foreign aid workers would smuggle in weapons to arm the civilian population, and precipitate a revolt against military rule.¹³⁹ In any case, such unrest could be encouraged simply by the presence of large numbers of foreigners, regardless of whether or not they were willing and able to assist the locals to challenge the government.¹⁴⁰ Also, the SPDC probably realised at an early stage that any significant aid effort would need to be sustained over a very long period, as occurred after the 2004 tsunami. There was thus the prospect of a large foreign presence in Burma well after the cyclone had passed, with all its attendant problems of surveillance and control. This would disrupt the regime's carefully laid plans to implement a 'discipline-flourishing democracy' by 2010. The SPDC's greatest concern, however, was the possibility of the US and its Western allies using disaster relief efforts as cover for an invasion of Burma, either in support of a popular uprising or to overthrow the regime themselves.

There is little doubt that such fears contributed to the regime's stubborn refusal to permit US and other Western military forces to enter Burma. The regime eventually explained that the 'strings attached to the relief supplies carried by the warships and military helicopters are not acceptable to the Myanmar people'.¹⁴¹ It was not explained precisely what these 'strings' were, but the state-run news media hinted that the US could use the disaster as a pretext to invade Burma and take control of its oil reserves. This was despite the fact that the Commander in Chief of US Pacific Forces, Admiral Timothy J. Keating, repeatedly assured the regime that the US 'had no military intentions' and would leave Burma as soon as it was told to do so.¹⁴² He also gave an undertaking that no US military personnel or aircraft would stay on Burmese soil overnight, unless requested to do so. At one stage, the US Navy invited Burmese civilian or military officials to inspect the aid supplies on its warships and even to ride in the helicopters or landing craft delivering these supplies. In the circumstances, however, no assurances offered by the US or its allies were likely to allay the regime's suspicions of a secret agenda.

Referring to this problem on 8 May, the US Secretary of State said that 'It is not a matter of politics, it's a matter of a humanitarian crisis'.¹⁴³ Yet, on 1 May, just one day before the cyclone struck, President Bush had renewed US sanctions against Burma for another year and expanded the authorities that allowed the US government to target those who supported a regime 'that exploits and oppresses the people of Burma'. At the same time, the President condemned the SPDC's proposed new constitution as 'dangerously flawed', and re-stated his commitment to help the Burmese people 'in their struggle to free themselves from the regime's tyranny'.¹⁴⁴ On 5 May, Mrs Bush was also highly critical of the regime.¹⁴⁵ In addition, it would not have escaped Naypyidaw's notice that on 6 May, the same day that the President called for US access to the cyclone affected areas, he signed a law awarding Aung San Suu Kyi the US Congressional Gold Medal, its highest civilian honour.¹⁴⁶ The White House's press release pointedly referred to 'the junta' of 'Burma', not the government of Myanmar.¹⁴⁷ In these circumstances, there was little chance that the SPDC would feel inclined to divorce politics from other factors.

As David Steinberg has pointed out, in trying to win the SPDC's trust Washington had to overcome the accumulated effects of two decades of aggressive rhetoric, an increasingly harsh sanctions regime and consistent support for the military government's opponents, most of who were dedicated to its overthrow.¹⁴⁸ This was never likely.

No-one knows what might have happened, had the international community attempted to deliver aid supplies without the full agreement and cooperation of the Burmese authorities. It is probable, however, that the Tatmadaw would have resisted any incursions into Burmese air space and any unauthorised landings on Burmese territory. This may have even taken the form of military action against the foreign forces, leading to an exchange of fire and possible casualties. Some activists have questioned the loyalty of Burma's armed forces in such circumstances, but there would have been enough Burmese servicemen prepared to resist such a blatant challenge to Burma's independence and sovereignty. If past history is any guide, such an incursion would also be portrayed as foreign support to an uprising that threatened the Union. It would only have taken one Burmese soldier prepared to fire a surface to air missile at a foreign helicopter to spark a much wider conflict. Robert Kaplan argued in the *New York Times* on 14 May that armed humanitarian intervention in Burma was 'militarily doable', but so was the initial conquest of Iraq in 2003.¹⁴⁹ The consequences of any such action would have been severe – and made the situation far worse than that already faced by the Burmese population.

In the event, no forcible action was taken, but as long as a fleet of warships loitered off Burma's coast the SPDC felt that it faced the possibility of an armed incursion. Its fears were probably heightened by the emotive rhetoric that was being published in the news media and on blog sites. On 10 May, for example, the *Asia Times* argued:

Many have speculated that Myanmar's notoriously paranoid junta abruptly moved the national capital 400 kilometers north from Yangon to its mountain-rung redoubt at Naypyidaw in November 2005 due to fears of a possible pre-emptive US invasion, similar to the action against Iraq. Now Cyclone Nargis and the government's woeful response to the disaster have suddenly made that once paranoid delusion into a strong pre-emptive possibility, one that Bush's lame-duck presidency desperately needs.¹⁵⁰

The author claimed that China could not resist such an invasion, which would put the 'globally respected and once democratically elected' Aung San Suu Kyi into power to lead a transitional government to full democracy.¹⁵¹ The conservative broadsheet *The Australian* claimed 'It's time for an aid intervention' and even the mainstream news magazine *Time* wrote that 'it's time to consider a more serious option: invading Burma'.¹⁵² Such stories were often notable for their factual inaccuracies, weak strategic analysis and inability to look beyond an assumed military victory, but to the generals in Naypyidaw these reports would have been seen as further evidence that their suspicions about the West's evil intentions were fully justified.

Cyclone Nargis was thus a major challenge to the SPDC, not just in terms of cyclone relief, reconstruction and economic recovery, but also in relation to the regime's deeply-rooted beliefs in Burma's independence, national sovereignty and self-reliance. The international community was quick to respond to Burma's plight and generous in the aid that was offered. Paradoxically, however, its high level of interest also reawakened the regime's fears – never very far below the surface – of external intervention in the country's internal affairs. Such fears encompassed not just a loss of control over the civilian population and a popular uprising, but even an invasion of Burma by the US and its Western allies. Ironically, many of the factors which contributed to the regime's fears, and its uncooperative attitude to foreign aid stemmed – at least in part – from the uncompromising policies adopted by the same countries 20 years before, and periodically reinforced since. Whether or not this latest episode persuades the US and other 'hard line' countries to change their approach to Burma remains to be seen, but this stark demonstration of the regime's peculiar worldview must now warrant closer examination.

5. The Regime's Worldview

Burma's Strategic Thinking

Before 1988, perceptions of security in Burma were predicated upon the belief that 'the greatest threat to the continuity and independence of the state came from internal sources'.¹⁵³ After 1988, external threats became more important, but opinions on their significance have been mixed. In 1998, for example, Tin Maung Maung Than wrote that:

Myanmar does not perceive external threats in the form of hostile states bent on conflict and conquest. Yangon's primary concern is with external actors who seek to intervene in the internal affairs of the state to influence the way in which Yangon deals with its domestic problems.¹⁵⁴

Others have agreed that, after the uprising, the regime's security concerns remained primarily domestic, but suggested that external threats began to loom larger around 2000. Samuel Blyth, for example, has claimed that Burma's defence orientation clearly shifted that year, and external threats 'took on new significance' as a result of clashes with Thailand on the border – including reported incursions by Thai fighters into Burmese airspace.¹⁵⁵ Since Cyclone Nargis, a broad consensus seems to have developed that external threats now play a significant role in the regime's strategic thinking.

As the survey above illustrates, however, over the past 20 years external threats – including the fear of an invasion by foreign forces – have always been important elements in the worldview of Burma's military leaders and the strategic calculations of the country's defence planners. This fear may have fluctuated over the years, but it has never gone away.

To most observers, the idea that Burma might be invaded by the US or a UN-led multinational force seems bizarre. Such a dramatic step has never seriously been contemplated, nor is it ever likely to be. As long as Burma enjoys the support of China and Russia, the UNSC is not going to endorse an attack against Burma, either by the US or a coalition of 'willing' countries. The likelihood of ASEAN endorsing armed intervention against one of its members is equally remote, and there are other countries that would see UN military action against the SPDC as creating an undesirable precedent. The US could go it alone, but its armed forces are already over-stretched. Also, it needs China's support in its dealings with North Korea, and Beijing's restraint is important in the Taiwan Straits. Given the examples provided by Iraq and Afghanistan, few other countries would wish to become embroiled in a difficult and potentially drawn-out conflict. An invasion of Burma is simply not on the cards. Viewed from the perspective of Burma's embattled military leadership, however, it is not difficult to see why the SPDC is nervous about the possibility of external intervention. As Golda Meir is said to have remarked to Henry Kissinger after the 1973 Sinai campaign, 'even paranoids have enemies', and Burma has ample evidence of hostile states and extant security threats.

Over the past 20 years, the world's foremost superpower, with a long record of both clandestine and open interventions in the internal affairs of other countries, has made no secret that it would like to see the military regime replaced with a government more to its liking. To this end, Burma has suffered a range of sanctions aimed at weakening the country's economy and its prospects for development. In addition, numerous countries and NGOs have provided recognition and support to a range of activist groups around the world, most of which have as their clearly stated aim the downfall of the regime. There is clear evidence too that activists have returned to Burma from other countries in order to organise protests and publicise the regime's failings to the world. Armed

insurgent groups, some of which may have received foreign training and support, openly challenge the regime's authority in rural areas. In addition, bombs have been planted in Burma's population centres. These have sometimes been aimed at regime officials and infrastructure targets, but they have also been left in public places like railway stations, movie theatres and shopping centres. While the term has been rejected by Burmese activists, in most countries such actions would be viewed as the work of terrorists.¹⁵⁶

Few on either side of the current political divide would dispute these facts. The opposition movement offers its own interpretation of these developments but, to the regime, they are evidence of a consistent and serious threat to the military government and even to Burma itself. This assessment can be supported by reference to the aggressive rhetoric that has been levelled against the military regime ever since 1988. Burmese exiles, foreign activists and other commentators have repeatedly called for foreign intervention including, at times, an invasion of the country. These groups wield little real power or influence, and in other circumstances their statements could be dismissed by the regime as inconsequential chatter. However, some of the world's most powerful countries have lent these groups moral, financial and practical support. A few states have referred themselves to the need directly to intervene in Burma's internal affairs, or in other ways made clear that they consider the fall of the regime necessary. The US, for example, has repeatedly grouped Burma with other so-called 'rogue states' against which it has already taken, or contemplated, military action. The French government's comments after Cyclone Nargis were simply the latest in a long series of statements by foreign countries which clearly want to see the destruction of the regime.

Public statements by Burma's military leadership need to be weighed carefully, to isolate serious expressions of concern from political rhetoric, self-serving excuses and outright propaganda, but the SPDC seems to believe that the US and its allies wish to replace it largely for strategic reasons. The regime rejects the claims of its critics that they simply wish to see the Burmese people enjoy democratic rights. As stated in one state-run news outlet, 'A certain Western power has been raising and using the expatriates and fugitives with the cloak-and-dagger political aim to install a puppet government under its control in Myanmar'.¹⁵⁷ The 'puppet government' to which the regime refers is clearly a NLD administration led by Aung San Suu Kyi. To the SPDC's way of thinking, such a government would be friendly to the West – to the extent of selling out Burma's independence and its rich natural resources. More importantly, as a US ally – or 'puppet' – such a government would help to 'contain' China, a strategic competitor of the US with the potential to dominate the Asia-Pacific region. According to this scenario, the US already has allies or potential allies in the Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and India, so Burma would help complete the encirclement of China. This assessment may strike some observers as rather far-fetched, but it is shared by credible analysts outside Burma, including in Southeast Asia, China and Russia.¹⁵⁸

Presented with a strategic assessment along these lines, there are few governments around the world that would not feel obliged to take its conclusions seriously. If the traditional measure of an external security threat is the combination of capability and intent, then Burma's enemies appear to have demonstrated enough in both categories for the regime to pay them close attention. As seen in the responses made to the threat of Islamic terrorism since 2001, other governments have implemented major policy changes and introduced far-reaching security measures on the basis of much less hard evidence. Indeed, the regime's interpretation of the available data and its analysis of local and international developments over the past 20 years have had a major impact on its strategic calculations and prompted new thinking about Burma's security policies. For example, it has encouraged Burma's close relationship with China, and other countries such as Russia. It is not known precisely why the usually cautious and introverted regime agreed to join ASEAN in 1997, but it is likely that one factor was the continued hostility shown towards Burma by the US and other major Western countries.

As noted above, such concerns also encouraged the regime to increase Burma's military capabilities, and guided its arms acquisition programs, the better to mount territorial defence operations. Despite all the improvements in the Tatmadaw over the past 20 years, however, defence analysts in Burma have noted trends in modern warfare with growing concern.¹⁵⁹ Even with a new command structure, fresh recruits and more modern weapon systems, Burma's armed forces are unlikely to be able to withstand a major assault by the US, or a multinational coalition led by the UN. It is in these circumstances that an even stronger deterrent capability may have some appeal to Burma's leaders.

Despite the rather breathless claims of some activist groups, Burma is not likely to acquire a nuclear weapon for decades, if at all.¹⁶⁰ Of concern to some countries, however, is the possibility that the SPDC may have drawn the same conclusions from the 2003 invasion of Iraq that North Korea seems to have done, and will seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as a bargaining chip to protect itself against the US and its allies. According to one report, some Burmese generals 'admire the North Koreans for standing up to the United States and wish they could do the same'.¹⁶¹ The SPDC could argue that North Korea's possession of a nuclear retaliatory capability has been the main reason why the US and its allies, or the UN, have not taken tougher action against Pyongyang, despite its long record of provocative behaviour. Viewed from this perspective, the possession of WMD has given North Korea a higher international profile, a stronger position at the negotiating table and the proven ability to win concessions from the international community. Possession of WMD might in fact invite a military response, but there are reportedly a few generals in Burma who feel that, given the apparent US threat, the SPDC should consider the benefits of such an approach.¹⁶²

In light of the regime's heightened threat perceptions, and consequent actions, carefully considered and far-sighted policy formulation by other countries would seem to be essential, particularly if any progress is to be made in breaking the current diplomatic impasse and improving the lot of the Burmese people. Yet it would appear that, on both sides, policies have been based on an imperfect understanding of the other's views and a misreading of the current strategic circumstances.

Implications for Policy Makers

It is axiomatic in the conduct of international relations that, before introducing any policy, an assessment needs to be made of the ways such a policy will be viewed and its likely impact. As Robert Jervis has written:

If a policy is to have the desired impact on its target, it must be perceived as it is intended; if the other's behaviour is to be anticipated and the state's policy is a major influence on it, then the state must try to determine how its actions are being perceived.¹⁶³

Yet in the case of Burma, this practice seems to have been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. If such issues have been considered, then the resulting analysis seems to have been flawed, or possibly even ignored – governments do not always take the advice of their intelligence analysts or strategic advisors. Clearly, humanitarian concerns have been a high priority for many countries, and broad international factors have played a part in determining certain policy settings. Yet the Burma policies of some countries appear to be driven more by ideology, moral outrage, domestic political pressures and an unrealistic hope for the collapse of the military regime, than a careful and objective assessment of what such policies might actually achieve, given the nature of Burma's current rulers and the way they interpret the world around them.

Activists are fond of portraying Burma's military leaders as oafs in uniform, unschooled in international diplomacy and determined to cling to power by any means to safeguard their ill-gotten gains and escape retribution for past actions.¹⁶⁴ Journalists too are quick

to describe the regime as 'ridiculously paranoid', and consisting of 'reclusive, xenophobic generals who despise the western world'.¹⁶⁵ There may be some grounds for such a view, but these caricatures ignore the fact that the regime contains intelligent officers who are close observers of the international scene. As Joshua Kurlantzick has recently pointed out, since 1988 the generals have been very successful in manipulating the various forces arrayed against them.¹⁶⁶ Also, the Tatmadaw includes many genuinely committed individuals who have thought carefully about Burma's security interests. While outsiders – and many within Burma – may see them as misguided, even deluded, they consider themselves patriots, charged with preventing national instability and disunity, and with protecting the country from internal and external enemies. These views are strengthened by military indoctrination programs and, at times, personal experience in the field.

Attempts to describe a country's political values and strategic culture are always risky, and in this regard Burma is no exception.¹⁶⁷ As far as can be determined, however, and legitimately made subject to broad generalisations, the military regime's mindset seems to be a complex amalgam of personal, professional, historical and cultural influences.¹⁶⁸ To varying degrees, all seem to play a role in determining the attitudes and priorities of key members of the regime, both as individuals and as a ruling group. Such factors also help shape their worldview, and thus their responses to specific developments, both within Burma and further afield. Critical among these issues is their perception of threats to the country, dating back at least to the KMT invasion. In the minds of the generals, these threats have been conflated with threats to the regime itself.¹⁶⁹ As Morten Pedersen has written, 'It would be a mistake ... to underestimate the continuity in military thinking since the immediate post-independence period and the deep sense of insecurity that continues to drive the current government's priorities and behaviour'.¹⁷⁰ Even if they ignored historical events and confined themselves to developments since 1988, it would not be difficult for them to construct a coherent, internally consistent picture of an existential threat that was supported by considerable empirical evidence.

Such an analytical construction would still be deeply flawed, but in international relations perceptions are usually more important than the objective facts. To most observers, an invasion of Burma has always been a fantasy, but the regime's continuing fear of such an event makes it a strategic reality. Unless this reality is acknowledged, there is the danger that any policies adopted toward the regime will be misdirected, and possibly even be counter-productive.

As David Steinberg has pointed out, aggressive rhetoric and the imposition of punitive measures against a regime like the SPDC can have the opposite effect to that intended.

... if there is one approach that would unite the peoples of Myanmar in a close authoritarian bond and justify this continuation of the garrison state it would be the threat of physical foreign intervention into Burmese affairs. There is always the danger, as we have seen in typical garrison state situations, that a regime may invoke, erroneously believe, or create the impression of external threats justifying continuity of power and repression in the interests of the national security – foreign powers aligning with minorities or opposition elements.¹⁷¹

This has happened in the past in Burma and it can be argued that, since 1988, Professor Steinberg's prediction has already come to pass. Burma would not be alone in responding to external pressures by bunkering down and becoming even more determined to survive. While South Africa is often invoked by activists advocating stronger sanctions against Burma, Cuba would be a more apposite example. Another danger is that, notwithstanding Aung San Suu Kyi's emphasis on peaceful political change, some activist groups might be persuaded by the strength of the rhetoric employed by a few countries that support would be forthcoming for an attempt to overthrow the regime by force. As David Steinberg has also warned, however, this could only have tragic consequences.¹⁷²

6. Conclusion

The SPDC's responses to the demands of the international community have been influenced by many complex factors. One has been self-interest but, if it is accepted that the regime sees its existence as threatened by a powerful coalition of Western countries, then its defensiveness is less surprising. Add the fact that, rightly or wrongly, the regime has conflated its own security with that of Burma itself, and make due allowance for the Tatmadaw's intense nationalism, and the SPDC's determination to resist external pressures seems even more predictable. Indeed, the greater the pressures applied, the more obdurate the regime seems to have become, and the less likelihood there is that there will be any appreciable movement toward political, economic or social reform.

In these circumstances, it is curious that some countries have continued to pursue policies towards Burma that have demonstrably failed to achieve their key objectives. Given Burma's relative isolation and poverty 20 years ago, there were few costs in taking a hard line against the new military government – although that is now much harder to argue. There is a strong moral and humanitarian imperative behind some approaches, and the US has made a public commitment to spread democracy across the globe. Also, democratic governments usually wish to be responsive to domestic political opinion and Burma's military government has few supporters in Western countries. For various reasons, other countries have taken a much softer line, but they have been equally unsuccessful in persuading Burma's generals to be more responsive to international concerns. The SPDC can rely on the support of major powers like China, India and Russia, but this is not the main reason why the regime has been so resistant to change. Given its assessment of the international scene, it would be prepared to pay a very high price to retain what it sees as Burma's independence and national sovereignty, including, *in extremis*, a return to the isolation and economic difficulties of the Ne Win era.

One reason why the same broad policies have been pursued for so long, however, may be simply that no country or international organisation has yet found a more effective way of influencing a government that puts its own survival before accepted norms of behaviour and the welfare of its people. Even so, the belief which prevailed in some countries after the 1990 elections, that international pressure would precipitate the collapse – or at least the surrender – of the new military regime is weakening. Despite predictions by journalists and activists, the regime is not going to implode. Nor are Burma's generals simply going to walk away from government and commit political suicide. There are still occasional calls for armed intervention, but any visions that exiled dissidents may have had after the 1988 uprising, of returning to Burma at the head of an invading army, have long since faded.¹⁷³ Some politicians and activists still cling to the hope that tough public statements, economic sanctions and moral suasion will force the Tatmadaw to return to the barracks. The more hard-headed among them privately acknowledge, however, that this approach has failed to shift the generals from their entrenched positions over the past 20 years, and is still unlikely to do so. A few are even prepared to state that international pressure has made the regime more difficult to deal with.

Trying to understand the regime's peculiar worldview is not the same as sharing it, and taking it into account when formulating policies towards Burma does not mean condoning the regime's brutal behaviour. Yet, unless the generals' perspective – and in particular their fears of external intervention – are included in the consideration of future policies towards the military government, then the continued delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the search for viable long term solutions to Burma's complex problems, will be much more difficult.

Notes

- 1 In strict historical terms, the use of modern names for these countries is misleading, as they imply the existence at the time of unified, centrally governed states occupying the same geographical areas as those currently delineated by international boundaries. In this context, however, 'Burma' is taken to represent the dominant geo-political entity prevailing at the time described. See Michael Aung-Thwin, 'Mranma Prant: when context encounters notion', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2008), pp. 193–217.
- 2 There is a certain irony here. In 1858, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor of India, was exiled to Burma, where he died in 1862.
- 3 For example, the Chairman of Burma's ruling council since April 1992, Senior General Than Shwe, was born on 2 February 1933. His predecessor, General Saw Maung, was born in December 1928.
- 4 Andrew Selth, 'Burma's continuing fear of invasion', *The Interpreter*, web log of the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 28 May 2008, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org:80/post/2008/05/Burma's-continuing-fear-of-invasion.aspx>>.
- 5 This turbulent period is covered in Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed, 1999).
- 6 M.P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).
- 7 R.J. Aldrich, 'Legacies of secret service: renegade SOE and the Karen struggle in Burma, 1948–50', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1999), pp. 130–48.
- 8 Bertil Lintner, 'Building bridges with a former foe', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 9 September 1995, pp. 46–7. See also Paul Battersby, 'Border politics and the broader politics of Thailand's international relations in the 1990s: from Communism to capitalism', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 4 (Winter 1998), pp. 473–88.
- 9 J.S. Bermudez, *Terrorism: The North Korean Connection* (New York: Crane Russak, 1990), p. 139. See also Andrew Selth, *Burma's North Korean Gambit: A Challenge to Regional Security?*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 154 (Canberra: Australian National University, 2004), pp. 5–6.
- 10 U Nu, speech delivered in Parliament, 5 September 1950, in U Nu, *From peace to stability: selected speeches* (Rangoon: Government of Burma, 1951), pp. 95–105.
- 11 Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Chieng Mai: Silkwood, 1999), p. 139.
- 12 Even the US ambassador in Rangoon was denied knowledge of the CIA's secret support for the KMT in Burma. See, for example, David Wise and T.B. Ross, *The Invisible Government* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), pp. 129–35.
- 13 Bertil Lintner, 'The CIA's first secret war', *Far Eastern Economic Review* (16 September 1993), pp. 56–8.
- 14 This term has been translated in several ways, but is most often given as 'kinship', or 'distant cousins'.
- 15 On several occasions, PLA troops entered Burma in pursuit of the KMT. These incursions were explained as 'technical errors' by local PLA commanders, but sometimes PLA units remained in Burma for lengthy periods. See, for example, R.H. Taylor, *Foreign and domestic consequences of the KMT intervention in Burma*, Southeast Asia Program, Data Paper No. 93 (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1973), p. 29.
- 16 David Steinberg, 'Myanmar as nexus: Sino-Indian rivalries on the frontier', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1993), pp. 1–8.

- 17 Bertil Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)*, Southeast Asia Program (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1990), p. 37.
- 18 No ethnic insurgent group has specifically aimed to overthrow the central government – unlike the communist groups – but the KNDO came close to doing so in its effort to create a separate Karen state.
- 19 These events are described from two different perspectives in Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (London: White Lotus, 1990); and Dr Maung Maung, *The 1988 uprising in Burma*, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Monograph No. 49 (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1999).
- 20 *Burma: the 18 September 1988 military takeover and its aftermath*, Report ASA 16/00/88 (London: Amnesty International, 1988).
- 21 Between 400 and 800 people are thought to have died during the Tiananmen Square demonstration and its aftermath. The Chinese protesters benefited from the presence in Beijing of the international press corps, which had gathered for Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to China. See N.D. Kristof, 'A reassessment of how many died in the military crackdown in Beijing', *New York Times*, 21 June 1989.
- 22 Maung Aung Myoe, *A historical overview of political transition in Myanmar since 1988*, Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series No. 95 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2007), p. 9.
- 23 This reportedly included a scheduled delivery of ammunition for the Burma Army's US-made M-1 carbines and M-79 grenade launchers.
- 24 'A very foreign affair', *The Economist*, 8 October 1988, p. 30.
- 25 'Burma', *Asia 1988 Yearbook* (Hong Kong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1989), p. 95. See also Bertil Lintner, 'Using the aid weapon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 November 1988, p. 34.
- 26 These calls were justified on the grounds that the five Electoral Commission members were appointed by parliament the week before the SLORC was created. Jacques-Michel Tondre, 'Burma's junta breaking out of isolation', *Agence France Presse*, 30 October 1988.
- 27 'State Law and Order Restoration Council Secretary receives Australian Ambassador', *Working Peoples' Daily*, 19 November 1988. See also Michael Byrnes, 'Aust businesses queuing to get into "free" Burma', *Australian Financial Review*, 22 November 1988.
- 28 See, for example, *Skyful of Lies: BBC, VOA, Their Broadcasts and Rebuttals to Disinformation* (Yangon: News and Periodicals Enterprise, 1989); and 'Rangoon regime raps foreign influence', *Bangkok Post*, 29 October 1988.
- 29 'Interview with Aung San Suu Kyi', *Bangkok Post*, 23 September 1988.
- 30 J.F. Guyot, 'Burma in 1988: *Perestroika* with a military face', in *Southeast Asian Affairs* (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1989), p. 131.
- 31 Andrew Selth, *Death of a hero: the U Thant disturbances in Burma, December 1974*, Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations, Research Paper No. 49 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 1989).
- 32 Sein Win, 'Militant students ask American Embassy for arms', *Associated Press*, 15 September 1988.
- 33 *Burma Communist Party's Conspiracy to take over State Power* (Yangon: News and Periodicals Enterprise, 1989). See also Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the CPB*, pp. 44–54.
- 34 'Foreign influences hampering restoration of order: junta leader', *Agence France Presse*, 29 October 1988.
- 35 K.E. Grubbs, 'A Reaganite finds new freedom fighters', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 November 1988.
- 36 'US Congressman-elect urges aid for Burmese students', *Agence France Presse*, 16 November 1988.
- 37 The US fleet was detected in the Andaman Sea, when a local vessel happened to pass through the area and reported the sighting. Interview, Washington, October 1995.
- 38 Maung Aung Myoe, *A Historical Overview of Political Transition in Myanmar Since 1988*, p. 9.

- 39 Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, p. 226.
- 40 Interview, Canberra, July 1997.
- 41 Interview, New Delhi, May 1995. The US sent Task Force 74, consisting of the nuclear aircraft carrier *Enterprise* and supporting warships, into the Indian Ocean to show its support for Pakistan in the war over East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). The official reason given for the deployment was to cover the evacuation of American civilians from Bangladesh. See also E.R. Zumwalt, *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York: New York Times, 1976), pp. 361–9.
- 42 Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Myanmar: preoccupation with regime survival, national unity, and stability', in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 730, note 27. See also Yindee Lertcharoenchok, 'Burmese leader calls Thailand a "true friend"', *The Nation*, 13 April 1989.
- 43 Bertil Lintner, 'Passing in the dark', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 November 1988, p. 17. See also 'Singapore-made arms for Rangoon', *Agence France Presse*, 26 October 1988. South Korea and Israel were also accused of supplying the SLORC with arms in 1988, and there were rumours of Soviet military advisors being sent to Rangoon. All these governments, however, issued strong denials.
- 44 Bertil Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', *International Defense Review*, vol. 27, no. 11 (November 1994), p. 12. See also Andrew Selth, *Burma's Arms Procurement Programme*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Working Paper No. 289 (Canberra: Australian National University, 1995).
- 45 Maung Aung Myoe, *A Historical Overview of Political Transition in Myanmar Since 1988*, p. 9. See also Aung Zaw, 'The longest coup: did China plan to invade Burma in 1988?', *The Irrawaddy*, 18 September 2007.
- 46 See, for example, 'Burma's neighbours assess situation', *Radio Moscow*, 28 October 1988; 'Indian forces on Burmese border put on alert', *Agence France Presse*, 24 October 1988; and 'Burmese combatants warned against border spillover', *The Nation*, 4 October 1988.
- 47 This military expansion program is described in detail in Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2002).
- 48 It is commonly – but mistakenly – believed that Aung San Suu Kyi stood as a candidate in the 1990 elections, won a parliamentary seat and was only arrested afterwards. For example, in the House of Representatives on 28 May 2008 the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Stephen Smith, erroneously described Aung San Suu Kyi as 'the last democratically elected Burmese leader'. In fact, she was placed under house arrest 10 months before the elections and has never been elected to any political office, other than as General Secretary of the NLD.
- 49 The exact nature of the regime's commitment to these elections has been the subject of considerable, and often acrimonious, debate. See, for example, Derek Tonkin, 'The 1990 elections in Myanmar: broken promises or a failure of communication?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2007), pp. 33–54.
- 50 In 1990, textiles had accounted for US\$9 million of Burma's US\$22 million of exports to the US. John Bray, 'Burma: resisting the international community', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1992), p. 292.
- 51 See, for example, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung and Paul Sarno, 'Myanmar impasses: Alternatives to isolation and engagement?', *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 14, no. 1 (September 2006), p. 44.
- 52 This move seems to have been prompted in part by the publication of *Threat to the Peace: A Call for the UN Security Council to Act in Burma*, Report commissioned by The Hon. Vaclav Havel and Bishop Desmond M. Tutu, 2005 (DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, Washington, DC, 2005). None of Burma's immediate or regional neighbours, however, shared the US and UK view.
- 53 *Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act of 2003*, Public Law 108–61, 108th Congress – 28 July 2003.

- 54 Jurgen Haacke, *Myanmar's Foreign Policy: domestic influences and international implications*, Adelphi Paper No. 381 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006), p. 62.
- 55 The White House, 'Message to the Congress of the United States', 17 May 2007, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/05/print/20070517-8.html>>.
- 56 Vietnam joined the original six members in 1995. Laos and Burma joined in 1997. Cambodia joined in 1999, making the current total of 10 ASEAN members.
- 57 Burma has reciprocated by expressing its 'understanding' about the 1989 Tiananmen Square 'incident' and the recent unrest in Tibet.
- 58 See, for example, Matthew P. Daley, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State, 'Update on Burma Situation', Testimony before the Subcommittees on International Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Human Rights and Asia and the Pacific, House International Relations Committee, Washington, DC, 2 October 2003.
- 59 See, for example, J.H. Badgley, 'Reconciling Burma/Myanmar: essays on US relations with Burma', National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Analysis, vol. 15, no. 1 (March 2004); Toshihiro Kudo, *The impact of United States sanctions on the Myanmar garment industry*, Discussion Paper No. 42 (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, December 2005); and Morten Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).
- 60 Andrew Selth, 'Burma's "Saffron Revolution" and the limits of international influence', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 3 (September 2008), pp. 281–97.
- 61 See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Burma: a strategic perspective*, Working Paper No. 13 (San Francisco, CA: Asia Foundation, 2001).
- 62 See, for example, D.I. Steinberg, 'Defending Burma, protecting Myanmar', *The Irrawaddy*, May 2006, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=5737>.
- 63 Nawrahta, *Destiny of the Nation* (Yangon: News and Periodicals Enterprise, 1995), p. 152.
- 64 Interviews, Rangoon, 1995, 1999 and 2008. See also 'Burma "regrets" US intervention in Panama', *Reuters News*, 22 December 1989; 'Myanmar paper condemns NATO's barbaric acts', *Xinhua News Agency*, 21 May 1999; and 'Iraq: US-led invasion raises tough questions for Burma', *Global Information Network*, New York, 11 April 2003, p. 1.
- 65 In the minds of the SPDC, there are clear parallels between the demands of the East Timorese and those of several ethnic separatist groups in Burma, notably the Karen.
- 66 Quoted in Bray, 'Burma: resisting the international community', p. 292.
- 67 'Time to turn up the pressure on the Burma regime, Powell says', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2003; and 'Rice names "outposts of tyranny"', *BBC News*, 19 January 2005.
- 68 Address before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 31 January 2006, <http://www.c-span.org/executive/transcript.asp?cat=current_event&code=bush_admin&year=2006>. See also Ian Bremmer, 'Is Burma the next Iran?', *Slate Magazine*, 15 February 2006, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2135925/?nav=fo%22>>.
- 69 Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'Saddam was a despot. True. This justifies the war. False', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2003. See also Bray, 'Burma: resisting the international community', p. 292.
- 70 See, for example, 'McConnell says Burma's ambassador to US should be sent home: Senator's remarks at press briefing', 18 June 2003, <<http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive/2004/Jun/30-782132.html>>; and 'British MP tells junta minister: "you're a wicked regime"', *The Irrawaddy*, 7 March 2007.
- 71 See, for example, Andrew Chang, 'Access to evil? Burma: a potential, but unlikely, partner for Iran, Iraq and North Korea', *abcNews.com*, 22 October 2002, <<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/burma021022.html>>;

- Joshua Kurlantzick, 'Ran-goons: Why isn't Burma on Bush's "Axis of Evil"', *Washington Monthly Online*, April 2002, <<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0204.kurlantzick.html>>; 'Burma and its place in the New World Order', *The Independent*, 7 June 2003; 'A moral foreign policy', *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 13 June 2003; and R.S. Ehrlich, 'Myanmar Times says Burmese want US invasion', *Scoop Independent News*, 30 September 2003, <<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/print.html?path=HL0309/S00252.htm>>.
- 72 William Kristol, 'Talk is cheap', *Weekly Standard*, 7 October 2007.
- 73 See, for example, 'RFA, VOA and BBC airing skyful of lies', *New Light of Myanmar*, 7 March 2008.
- 74 *Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: Needed Now More Than Ever* (Bangkok: ALTSEAN Burma, 19 June 2008), pp. 9–10.
- 75 The NCGUB, formed by exiled MPs after the 1990 elections, is only one of many Burmese political groups operating outside Burma today, but it has been recognised by a number of governments and international institutions as representing the broad expatriate community and those inside Burma who favour political change. See <<http://www.ncgub.net/>>.
- 76 Amy Kazmin, 'Defiance undeterred: Burmese activists seek ways to oust the junta', *Financial Times*, 7 December 2007.
- 77 See, for example, the list of grants provided by the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute, <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/bpsai/focus_areas/burma/grantees?&sort_on=sort_title&sort_desc=0&start:int=0>. Details of the NED's grants can be found at <<http://www.ned.org/grants/06programs/grants-asia06.html>>.
- 78 Two books secretly distributed by dissident groups are Burmese translations of Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (Boston, MA: Albert Einstein Institution, 1993) and Robert Helvey, *On Strategic Non-Violent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals* (Boston, MA: Albert Einstein Institution, 2004). Helvey was US Defence Attache in Rangoon from 1983–85. The regime has imprisoned people simply for possessing these primers on non-violent resistance to oppression.
- 79 See, for example, 'Expatriates, terrorist insurgents sending group to cause terror, destruction and unrest in Myanmar', *New Light of Myanmar*, 30 June 2006.
- 80 See, for example, Wai Moe, 'Activist leaders say Maung Maung not "Mastermind" of uprising', *The Irrawaddy*, 13 December 2007; and *Burma/Myanmar: after the crackdown*, Asia Report No. 144 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 31 January 2008).
- 81 See, for example, Amy Kazmin, 'Burma says Thais are aiding rebels', *Financial Times*, 15 February 2001.
- 82 D.I. Steinberg, *Turmoil in Burma: Contested Legitimacies in Myanmar* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2006), p. 258. See also Doug Bandow, 'Forgotten war in a forgotten country', Cato Institute, 12 August 2000, <http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=4622>.
- 83 See, for example, Frank Smith, 'The forgotten war', *BBC News*, 26 July 2002. A number of foreigners involved in the Karen struggle aired their views in 'Volunteering to fight in Burma', *New Mandala*, June 2008, <<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2007/01/30/volunteering-to-fight-in-burma/>>.
- 84 See, for example, Sithu Aung, 'Mischief-makers, provocateurs and rabble-rousers', *New Light of Myanmar*, 3–5 August 1993; and 'Myanmar charges superpower with being behind bomb attacks', *Xinhua*, 15 May 2005.
- 85 See, for example, Andrew Selth, 'Burma in a changing world: through a glass darkly', *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, vol. 75, no. 4 (July–August 2003), pp. 15–21; and Samuel Blythe, 'Myanmar's junta fears US invasion', *Asia Times*, 28 April 2006.
- 86 See, for example, Aung Ze Min, 'Wipe out interference and invasion using force', *New Light of Myanmar*, 9 November 2005; Zaw Bo, 'We are masters', *New Light of Myanmar*, 30 April 2006; and Chan Mya Thaw, 'Prosperous new nation should not be far-off', *New Light of Myanmar*, 25 June 2006. 'Axe handles' is a

favourite term of abuse by the regime, and refers to people who act as dupes and tools of more powerful countries (the 'axe heads').

- 87 'Myanmar junta wonders about US invasion', *Reuters News*, 14 May 2006. See also 'Bay of Burmese Pigs?', *AsiaInt.com*, 19 May 2006, <<http://www.asiaint.com/>>; and Clifford McCoy, 'US terror laws stymie SE Asia's refugees', *Asia Times*, 30 June 2007, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IF30Ae01.html>.
- 88 Terry McCarthy, 'Paranoia time for Burma's generals', *The Independent*, 3 April 1991.
- 89 Interview, Rangoon, April 1995.
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