
Myanmar: Time for Australian Defence Cooperation

John Blaxland

Change is coming quickly in Myanmar and countries like the United States and Australia are edging towards closer and more meaningful engagement. A key institution needing reform is the Burmese military, the Tatmadaw, but to date this has been off-limits. To affect reform in Myanmar requires engagement with and understanding of the Tatmadaw. Where such engagement has been tried elsewhere in South East Asia through the Defence Cooperation Program it has produced modest and positive results. Meanwhile, other regional powers are recognising the geo-strategic significance of Myanmar, astride India and China, and are engaging the Tatmadaw accordingly. Australia is not so distant either and likewise has a vested interest in some modest and discrete engagement with the Tatmadaw.¹

Burma, or Myanmar,² is at a crossroads and significant change is afoot. Since the 2010 elections and the implementation of a new constitution, political and economic developments in Myanmar have outpaced the West's ability to respond as the new government seeks to shed its status as an international pariah. But even in the case of significant and sustained reform, the example of other Southeast Asian countries demonstrates that the military's significant influence is not going to disappear. This article argues that Australia should therefore support change in Myanmar by directly engaging with the Burmese military, the Tatmadaw.

Fast Paced Change in Myanmar

At the time of writing, Myanmar's new upper and lower houses of parliament are surprising even die-hard sceptics with the quality and candour of debates, much of which is reported in detail in the establishment's own newspaper, the *New Light of Myanmar*.³ Myanmar has launched a range of economic reforms, freed hundreds of political prisoners and spurned China over the construction of a hydro-electric dam project on the upper reaches of

¹ The perspectives are informed by the fact that the author visited Naypyitaw on a number of occasions over three years from 2008 to 2010 and had the chance to speak with a number of well placed individuals within the Tatmadaw and within the diplomatic community based in Rangoon or Yangon, as it has become known.

² The usage of Burma and Myanmar alternates throughout the article based on the historical context of the remarks.

³ See *New Light of Myanmar*, <<http://www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/index.html>> [Accessed 28 October 2011].

the Irrawaddy River.⁴ The move to block further dam construction was particularly significant as it followed a number of conciliatory gestures that have left some suggesting that Myanmar may at last be at a real point of transformation.⁵

The signs of reform do not end there. Democracy icon, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, has been released from detention and met with the new president, Thein Sein, apparently in recognition of her de facto political leadership role. As *The Economist* put it, “the government, desperate to appear more than old military wine in new bottles, would like her to persuade Western governments to lift sanctions against Myanmar”.⁶

The International Crisis Group, in its September 2011 Update Briefing, also spoke about major political and economic reform underway and suggested that Thein Sein has given every indication of having the political will to put Myanmar on a new path.⁷ In a move that appears to burnish Thein Sein’s credentials, new legislation signed in October allows Burmese workers to form unions and go on strike.⁸

ANU’s Burma watcher, Trevor Wilson, has highlighted some of the salient points. He observed that in March 2011, the military regime handed control to a new government some, but not all, of whose members were in the previous government or former military officers. By mid-2011, more public discussion of policy issues was occurring through question time and committees in parliament, through slightly reduced censorship in the media, and through the activities of elected representatives as well as of Aung San Suu Kyi (no longer in detention) and of the National League for Democracy. The new president, a former general but now elected, has called for reforms and appointed experts from outside the government as advisors. These changes are incomplete, very imperfect, not necessarily permanent, and quite a long way from what would be regarded as a functioning democracy, but they hold the promise of further change for the first time in decades.⁹

⁴ ‘Burma Suspends Dam Project After Rare Outcry’, *Bangkok Post*, 30 September 2011, <<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/259117/burma-suspends-dam-project-after-rare-outcry>> [Accessed 4 October 2011].

⁵ Asia, ‘Politics in Myanmar: A Change to Believe In?’, *The Economist*, 8 October 2011, p. 37.

⁶ Banyan, ‘New Light in Myanmar?’, *The Economist*, 17 September 2011, p. 30.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Myanmar: Major Reform Underway*, Crisis Group Asia Briefing No 127, 22 September 2011, p. 15.

⁸ ‘Burma Law To Allow Labour Unions and Strikes’, BBC News Asia-Pacific, 14 October 2011, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15303968>> [Accessed 14 October 2011].

⁹ Trevor Wilson, ‘The Costs, Achievements and Collateral Effects of Australia’s Financial Sanctions Against Burma (Myanmar)’, *Asia Rights*, Monday 4 July 2011, <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/blogs/asiarights/2011/07/04/the-costs-achievements-and-collateral-effects-of-australia%e2%80%99s-financial-sanctions-against-burma-myanmar/>> [Accessed 4 July 2011].

Wilson makes the point that the time has come to adjust our strategy to improve the prospects of promoting reform and protecting the changes already achieved.¹⁰ Similarly, renowned author and Burma commentator, Thant Myunt-U, said at the Australian National University Burma Update in May 2011 that it is time to agree to seek to engage with Burma. He went on to say that the lifting of sanctions is appropriate.¹¹

In contrast, many in the West are struggling to understand the meaning of these signs. Some say it is all a plot just to ensure that Myanmar takes over the rotating chair of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2014.¹² But the growing momentum suggests that this reform is a more significant and genuine endeavour than just one aimed at 2014.

One of the most articulate proponents of the argument that the West should engage more closely now to capitalise on the emerging opportunity to encourage reform and a rapprochement with the West is David Steinberg, a noted Burma watcher and author of *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Steinberg observed recently that calls for isolation seem patently counterproductive to the reality of the present and the prognosis for the future.¹³

Edging Towards Engagement

Reflecting the changing dynamics, the United States and Australia, amongst others, have sent diplomatic delegations which have tentatively acknowledged the progress so far. Their initiatives appear to reflect a growing recognition of what Thant Myunt-U, describes as the new strategic centrality of Burma, where Asia's two rising giant powers, India and China, appear to be vying for supremacy.¹⁴ Thant-Myunt-U's work speaks to the importance for Australia and other Western countries of paying increased attention to, and interest in, the affairs of this significant member of ASEAN.

The United States' Special Representative and Policy Coordinator for Burma, Ambassador Derek Mitchell, for instance, visited Burma in September 2011. Mitchell encouraged engagement in dialogue rather than armed conflict with ethnic groups and affirmed the importance of legitimate and credible mechanisms for investigating reported abuses in ethnic areas to

¹⁰ Trevor Wilson, 'Hard Job to Argue for Continuing Sanction against Burma', *The Canberra Times*, 28 June 2011, p. 11.

¹¹ Thant Myunt U, Keynote Address, 2011 ANU Myanmar/Burma Update Conference, 16 May 2011.

¹² See for instance the accounts reported in Linda Quayle, 'SEAvie: A Pragmatic Look at Southeast Asian Regional Politics', <<http://southeastasiaview.blogspot.com/2011/09/burmamyanmar-round-up.html>> [Accessed 9 October 2011].

¹³ David I. Steinberg, 'Burma/Myanmar: The Triangulation of Strategic Interests', *PacNet*, No. 53, Pacific Forum CSIOS, Honolulu, Hawaii, 15 September 2011.

¹⁴ See Thant Myunt-U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*, (Washington, DC: SAIS, 2011).

build trust and promote national reconciliation.¹⁵ Mitchell said Burma had “opened a new chapter to a civilian-led democratic governing structure” suggesting they were “sincerely committed to reform in the interests of human rights, democracy, development, and national reconciliation”.¹⁶ Mitchell's concern about the detention of political prisoners was met shortly after by an announced release of over 6000 prisoners (although the number of political prisoners was not specified).¹⁷ This gesture points to Thein Sein's apparent determination to prove his bona fides.

Australia's Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, visited from 30 June to 2 July 2011 but avoided making any bold policy statements out of step with key partners in the West. Then, in October, he stressed three new developments: First, on 5 September, Burma announced the establishment of a new National Human Rights Commission, which Rudd described as “a welcome first step”. Second, the parliament passed new labour laws in September 2011 to bring Burma more closely into line with international norms. Finally, Rudd highlighted the marked relaxation of restrictions on access to international media websites within Burma, allowing the media to report more freely, including on Suu Kyi.¹⁸

Rudd described this time as “a critical juncture for Burma”. He said:

Australia urges a re-commitment of all sides to existing ceasefires, to provide space for peaceful negotiated settlement of Burma's longstanding ethnic conflicts, with the Burmese government working closely with UN and humanitarian organisations to meet the needs of displaced and vulnerable populations, particularly in the southeast border areas.¹⁹

Reflecting on the significance to Australia and the region of ensuring further reform is ensured, Rudd said:

It is in our collective interests to work with those who want reform in Burma. A stable, more democratic and more prosperous Burma is clearly in the interests of the Burmese people. It is also in Australia's and the region's strategic interests. For these reasons we will do all that is in our power to press for the change the people of Burma so desperately deserve. We dare to hope, but the jury is still out.²⁰

Rudd's opinion piece suggested a desire to do more, but also reflected a reticence to go too far beyond what other Western leaders are prepared for. That reticence may well lift soon, particularly in light of subsequent developments.

¹⁵ US Embassy Rangoon, Press Statement, Special Representative and Policy Coordinator, Ambassador Derek J. Mitchell, 14 September 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Stratfor, 'Myanmar: Over 6,000 Prisoners To Be Released', 11 October 2011.

¹⁸ Kevin Rudd, 'First Signs that Burma will Improve Human Rights', *The Australian*, 14 October 2011.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

On 18 November 2011, the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, announced it had decided to rejoin the political process, even being prepared to run for office under the National League for Democracy. In addition, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, visited in December 2011, meeting with Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi. This was the first such visit in more than half a century.²¹ These changes mark a significant departure and portend significant additional engagement. As the International Crisis Group reported, key benchmarks set by Western countries imposing sanctions appear well on their way to being met.²²

To date, arguments about engagement have focused on strengthening economic and cultural relations and support for the democratisation process in order to cement Burma's recent development. But no one has broached the topic of what to do about the country's most significant and powerful institution, the Tatmadaw.

The Armed Forces and Reform

Consistent with its newfound reformist inclinations, the new government has reached out to ethnic groups to a certain extent. But in the face of a resurgence of armed resistance the Tatmadaw has responded in what is arguably the only way it knows: by wielding a predictably heavy hand. This heavy-handedness has left the Tatmadaw with growing difficulties in the face of mounting armed resistance from ethnic groups eager to exploit the apparent moment of weakness associated with the constitutional change.

Visiting the country in August 2011, the United Nation's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Thomas Quintana expressed concern over "continuing allegations of torture and ill-treatment during interrogation, the use of prisoners as porters for the military".²³ Quintana's comments reflect a widely held concern about the odious nature of the regime's actions against its own people. It would appear Thein Sein understands this and has sought to reinvigorate momentum behind a new peace initiative, planning to stage an unprecedented national conference to address the entrenched ethnic divisions. The International Crisis Group observed that the country needs an honest reckoning with the failures of the past and a fundamental rethinking of how the nation handles its multi-ethnic make up, seeing a positive role for outsiders to play.²⁴ But for change to come about there may need to be

²¹ Banyan, 'Reform in Thailand: Give-and-Take All Round', *The Economist*, 18 November 2011, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/11/reform-myanmar?fsrc=nlw%7Cnewe%7C11-18-2011%7Cnew_on_the_economist> [Accessed 20 November 2011].

²² Asia Report No 214, *Myanmar: A New Peace Initiative*, International Crisis Group, Jakarta/Brussels, 30 November 2011 at <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/burma-myanmar/214-myan...>> [Accessed 9 December 2011].

²³ Cited in Greg Sheridan, 'West Must Ask Itself How To Engage with the Dilemma that is Burma', *The Australian*, 13 September 2011, p. 9.

²⁴ Asia Report No 214, *Myanmar: A New Peace Initiative*.

some outside assistance focused on engaging the military leadership, much as Australia has offered to other South East Asian states in recent decades.

Meanwhile, there are considerable risks of a reverse in the country's direction. With the release of political prisoners and the opening up to the political opposition, significant elements in the government worry about social stability and their fears are exacerbated by the surge in ethnic-based conflicts. The conservative inertia comes not just from military ranks but from government ministries as well, with many nervous about losing their grip on the control levers or uncertain about whether this Burmese 'spring' is a temporary lull before the return to repression and tight centralised control. Arguably the parallels are less with the Arab Spring than with democratising Indonesia in 1999—a country with many disparate linguistic and cultural groups which faced significant short-term turmoil before the democratic institutions settled into place.

Following decades of inaction and unresponsiveness, the evidence had become clear that shunning the regime has achieved little so far and more extreme measures of intervention were too horrific to contemplate. Indeed, the prospect of seeking forceful regime change by undermining the state authorities—in a manner approximating what happened in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans or Libya has simply been out of the question. Even if support for it could be mustered, such a course of action likely would open a Pandora's box of problems that would be far greater than the alternatives. What is more, in the post-GFC world, with the so-called 'Arab Spring' proving so problematic, and the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions proving to have been so costly and fraught, there is even less appetite for such expensive military interventions.

In the absence of any prospect of forcing change from outside, there is a remarkable dearth of proposals to engage the Tatmadaw peacefully from the inside. Neither Rudd or Mitchell or any other prominent Western leader has yet to seriously weigh up the costs and benefits of gradual military engagement to prevent an implosion of the Burmese state, to encourage the Tatmadaw to stop fighting armed ethnic groups, and to assist the authorities to improve their standards in terms of respect for human rights and adherence to the principles of the laws of armed conflict. Yet arguably the institution most in need of reform is the Tatmadaw. However, the subject of possible bilateral links between the Tatmadaw and Western armed forces has been considered off limits. In the sensitive and highly-charged political context of Burmese affairs, wherein orthodoxy prescribes a highly critical stance towards the military, it has been too controversial to be discussed openly. Indeed, with the rare exception of some works such as Andrew

Selth's *Burmese Armed Forces*,²⁵ the Tatmadaw has been an intelligence black hole.

Engaging Militarised States

Robert Taylor has made the point that much as in the constitutions of Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Thailand, the Tatmadaw, remains central to the new order.²⁶ Yet significant military relationships are maintained by the West with most if not all of these countries with little international opprobrium heaped on those so engaged. This speaks to the inconsistency in the international community's approach, and particularly the West's approach to engagement with Myanmar and the Tatmadaw. Looking at it from a slightly different angle, Anthony Ware pointed out at the Burma Update held in Canberra in May 2011 that Myanmar's apparent low geo-strategic importance has meant that the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western countries have been able to afford to pick on Myanmar when it is arguably no less democratic than a number of other closer countries.²⁷ Yet the striking geostrategic significance of Myanmar cannot be lightly dismissed. What is more, with the United States viewing Asia primarily as being about China, the Chinese dimension to the situation in Myanmar seems to have been overlooked in the calculus of American strategists—even though the same calculus has been recognised in terms of the United States' relationship with Vietnam. Arguably, Australia has greater freedom of action in engaging with Myanmar on such issues as it is already more closely tied in with ASEAN and less constrained than the United States by institutional inertia and lobby interests.

THE NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING

Arguably, for the West to make a significant contribution to reform, it is imperative to try to understand how the Tatmadaw works, what forms their strategic perceptions and what factors influence their policy decisions. That means getting involved with the Tatmadaw and learning something about their history, their culture and their languages. This is what Australia has done with every other country in ASEAN, no matter how dissimilar their forms of government have been or their adherence to democratic and human rights principles to that in Australia. Australia has done this for practical reasons and invariably so far the effects have been positive.

THE NEED FOR ENGAGEMENT

Anthony Ware spoke recently about rights based advocacy and the need to engage on a no blame basis to avoid having the door closed.²⁸ Australian Army Brigadier Gavan Reynolds in a recent paper entitled *Burma in*

²⁵ Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (Norwalk, CT: Eastbridge, 2003).

²⁶ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), p. 488.

²⁷ Anthony Ware, 'Contextualisation of INGO Development Approaches to Myanmar', presentation at 2011 ANU Myanmar/Burma Update Conference, 17 May 2011.

²⁸ Ware, 'Contextualisation of INGO Development Approaches to Myanmar'.

Transition made the point that ultimately, continued engagement with whatever regime is in power will enable interested parties to influence the government which, in turn, will give the most valuable assistance to the people of Burma. This is the way forward, he said.²⁹ It would appear that there is scope for Australia to play a role in reforming the Tatmadaw as well. In addition, with many active military officers having been sidelined from economic roles, it would appear a window of opportunity has opened to engage the military on reform-related issues.

Impact of Australian Engagement Elsewhere in South East Asia

Australia's military engagement in South East Asia for the last few decades has been primarily through the multi-million dollar Defence Co-operation Program (DCP). For a relatively minor investment, this program has generated enormous goodwill towards Australia. It is instructive to compare the relationships developed by Australia's military with other Southeast Asian states that are struggling to come to grips with the concept of democracy and the rule of law—for instance, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. In many of these countries specific training has been conducted to educate military practitioners in the laws of armed conflict, civil society, and in the application of human rights in a military setting. The term used is 'law and leadership': a cover-all term to make an otherwise relatively controversial topic more palatable in the target countries. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that this training program has borne significant positive fruit in a number of South East Asian countries. Those fruits include an improved consciousness of human rights and humanitarian law as well as a surprisingly high level of good will towards Australia for having the foresight and generosity to engage in this program.³⁰ Indeed, Australia's track record of engagement in a manner conducive to military reform is quietly given high marks by military interlocutors across the region. Australia's Defence Cooperation Program has been warmly received across ASEAN with even the militaries of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam benefiting from Australia's expertise and largesse, focused in most cases on building confidence and trust and on facilitating incremental reform. In fact, numerous officers from these countries' armed forces have been glowing in their praise of Australia and the educational and training opportunities provided to by the Australian Defence Force.³¹

In a country like Thailand for instance, there are hundreds of graduates of Australian military courses and universities trained in Australian techniques

²⁹ Gavan Reynolds, *Burma in Transition: An Analysis*, Shedden Papers, Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, Weston Creek, March 2011, p. 24.

³⁰ In Thailand, for instance, a humanitarian law program has been incorporated into pre-deployment training for soldiers about to deploy on military operations. Australia's contribution has directly and positively contributed to improved standards.

³¹ Author's discussions with DCP students.

and procedures for restrained use of force in accordance with the principles of human rights and the laws of armed conflict. These people are overwhelmingly well disposed to Australia. The utility and effectiveness of this program in terms of leavening regional security and stability and raising standards of proficiency and understanding on human rights and the laws of armed conflict is hard to measure, but anecdotal evidence suggests this has been a low-key but invaluable investment in regional security. The example of the success story of the DCP in other ASEAN countries is perhaps the most compelling reason for direct and constructive engagement with the Tatmadaw.

Regional and Great Power Military Engagement

Before considering further what Australia might propose, it is worth considering how the armed forces of regional powers have engaged and likely will continue to engage with the Tatmadaw in the coming years.

MILITARY ATTACHES

Military engagement is perhaps most visibly demonstrated by the presence in the country of a military attaché. Countries with military attaches in Myanmar include China, India, Russia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Republic of Korea, Japan and a range of ASEAN countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. There are no accredited military attaches from the European Union. The United States also maintains a fully fledged defence attaché office in the country even though the US State Department has only had a charge de affairs rather than an accredited ambassador. Each of these countries mentioned has vested interests at stake which they are seeking to protect and advance.

CHINA

The busiest of them all are the Chinese. With oil and gas pipelines under construction and access to the Indian Ocean through the port at Kyaukphyu, on the north-western coastline of Myanmar, China has a lot riding on maintaining stability within and access to and through Myanmar. Not surprisingly therefore, China is regarded as the principal arms and military equipment supplier to the Tatmadaw. The facilities at Kyaukphyu also effectively look set to give China a port in the Indian Ocean adjacent to India and not that far from the US base at Diego Garcia. It would appear that neither India nor the United States would see this as being in their interests.

But the events surrounding the decision concerning the Irrawadi River's Myitsone Dam tend to suggest that, while the Chinese are useful to Myanmar, they are by no means universally popular. Indeed, as *The Economist* explained, "the nation's leaders also may want the West to come

back in order to balance the influence of China which has had virtually free reign to exploit Myanmar's vast natural resources".³²

INDIA

India has maintained an extensive military and civil scholarship program in order to at least partly counter China's influence and to gain access to the upper echelons of the Tatmadaw and the bureaucracy. To date, however, their investment appears to have yielded few tangible benefits, with most graduates reluctant to maintain direct contact with their Indian benefactors once they have returned home from their studies. Still, the graduates have returned to Myanmar with sound English language skills and key exposure to the workings of a military within a democracy. Beyond the scholarship program, India has struggled to achieve a proportionate level of access and influence as a counterweight to that of China. But India has been relatively pragmatic about this—seeing their interests largely in terms of a counterweight and as an important point of collaboration in case of border flare-ups. With this in mind, India recently vowed US\$ 500 million credit to improve Myanmar's infrastructure. The boost came shortly after the Burmese president met with the Indian prime minister during a four-day state visit in New Delhi where the two leaders agreed to expand trade operations and oil and gas exploration activities. India arguably has a vested interest in seeing an effective counterbalance to China in Myanmar and likely would welcome greater Australian engagement.

RUSSIA

Russia has sought to maintain access especially for its arms manufacturers. It has sold Russian fighter jets and helicopters and has maintained scholarship programs for bright students—notably in the field of nuclear science—although Russian interlocutors have claimed this program is in abeyance. The Russians have not appeared overly concerned about the democratic credentials or otherwise of the government, so long as they remain interested in procuring Russian arms.

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has a vested interest in maintaining stable relations due to a contested maritime boundary—where lucrative oil and gas reserves are found—and due to the ongoing challenge of unregulated border people movements—most notably in recent times, the Rohingya. But Bangladesh struggles to gain appropriate engagement from the Tatmadaw.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea does not maintain a declared military attaché office but maintains an active embassy in Yangon—a source of considerable interest to the South Koreans, for instance. The ANU's Professor Desmond Ball has

³² Asia, 'Politics in Myanmar: A Change to Believe In?', *The Economist*, 8 October 2011, p. 38.

identified that the Burmese have invested considerably in developing a nuclear industry with the potential for it to be used as the basis for developing or acquiring and eventually being able to use nuclear weapons. Not all consider the tell-tale signs of such a plan to be credible, but most consider the level of technical capacity and capability in Myanmar is so low that even if all the tell-tale signs are to be believed, it would take many years for the Tatmadaw to successfully acquire and operate nuclear weapons.³³

THAILAND

Thailand has a long history of conflict with Burma but in recent years has placed greater priority on managing its economic relationship, with considerable gas resources piped across to Thailand from around the Dawei deep sea port being developed in the Bay of Bengal. Militarily, however, its relationship is limited primarily to border committees established to resolve local tensions. Beyond that there are no significant bilateral military activities. At the same time, Thailand has a vested interest in bolstering the utility of ASEAN, headed by Thailand's former foreign minister, Surin Pitsuwan. To that end, the emergence of Myanmar as a constructive contributor to ASEAN and a supporter of rather than hindrance to greater Western engagement in the region would be seen by Thai authorities as in their interests.

JAPAN

Since the ignominious withdrawal of Japanese forces at the end of World War II, Japanese military engagement in Burma has been very low key with a modest defence attaché office facilitating minimal engagement. On the other hand, Japan's Foreign Minister, Koichiro Gemba, has recently called for strengthening of economic and cultural relations with Myanmar and Japan has been known as a relatively generous aid donor.³⁴

THE UNITED STATES

Engagement by the US military with the Tatmadaw does not appear likely in the foreseeable future. Washington insiders have sometimes labelled the Burma question a 'boutique issue' as it does not appear to strike directly at clear and present concerns to US national interests.³⁵ As Andrew Selth observed, notwithstanding the United States' recognition that Myanmar

³³ See Des Ball, 'Burma's Nuclear Secrets', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 2009; Andrew Selth, 'A Reply to Des Ball: Burma's Nuclear Programs: A Need for Caution', *Security Challenges*, vol. 5, no.4 (Summer 2009), pp. 133-7; and Andrew Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Griffith Asia Institute, Regional Outlook Paper No 34, 2011, at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/378036/Selth-Regional-Outlook-Paper-34.p> [Accessed 9 December 2011].

³⁴ 'Japan: Stronger Ties Needed For Myanmar Development, Kyodo report, Stratfor, 21 October 2011, <<http://www.stratfor.com/sitrep/20111021-japan-stronger-ties-needed-myanmar-development-fm>> [Accessed 21 October 2011].

³⁵ See for instance Francis Wade, 'Democratic Voice of Burma', *BurmaNet News*, 21 January 2010, <<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2010/01/21/democratic-voice-of-burma-state-backed-attacks-on-activists-grow-%e2%80%93francis-wade/>> [Accessed 26 June 2011].

occupies a sensitive geostrategic position between the nuclear armed giants of India and China, Washington is unlikely to make any significant changes to its Burma policy without first considering the views of Aung San Suu Kyi.³⁶ He may have added that the United States' congressional constraints on executive presidential action significantly encumbers the State and Defence Departments from creatively seeking to engage with prominent military personnel.

Options for Australia

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The limitations in the approaches of the countries mentioned above, point to the space available for a constructive approach to engagement from Australia. Australia has a clear and genuine interest in bolstering regional security and seeking to bolster civil society across ASEAN. In fact, the Australian military has an impressive track record of being involved in reform initiatives across South East Asia through the Defence Cooperation Program. Myanmar stands as a glaring exception and, given the changing political dynamics, this warrants re-examination. Australia's current posture allows for little direct engagement with the authorities. Yet as we have seen, the institution of the military in Myanmar can be expected to continue its prominent role in society for the foreseeable future.

IMPORTANCE OF PROXIMITY

All these countries mentioned so far recognise the self evident strategic significance of Myanmar, yet they place different emphasis, depending on, by rough rule of thumb, what equates to the issue of proximity. Like Thant Myunt-U, David Steinberg has described Myanmar as geographically strategic, being sandwiched between the great and growing cultural, economic and military powers of China and India and contiguous with US-ally Thailand. Myanmar's neighbours bear what he describes as "the burden of proximity" whereas those further away have the "luxury of distance".³⁷ Australia could perhaps be described as somewhere in the middle on this spectrum. For Australia, the position is different to that of other Western countries: Australia is not so distant. For Australia, Myanmar is one of the few countries in South East Asia without a permanently stationed military attaché (the others being Laos and Brunei). But Australia maintains a non-resident attaché in part to facilitate access to military authorities, and also because, as AusAID's (The Australian Agency for International Development) Richard Moore said recently, on the question of Myanmar

³⁶ Andrew Selth, 'Burma and Libya: The Politics of Inconsistency', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 20 June 2011, <<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/>> [Accessed 23 June 2011].

³⁷ Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar*, pp. 3-4.

Australia has always been a little bit more pragmatic and flexible than the European Union.³⁸

UNDERSTANDING HISTORY

If Australia is to engage with the Tatmadaw and to speak to them without what is said being completely rejected or ignored, then a sound understanding of their real fears and premonitions is important. It is worth reflecting on the historical context, starting with the granting of independence after World War II. Given the fundamental issue of self preservation, the two principal areas the people in power have enduring concerns about include (1) national unity, fearing balkanisation, as manifested in the plethora of ongoing ethnic conflicts; and (2) external threats, fearing intrusion from outside as illustrated by the repeated invasions by British, Japanese and Chinese forces over the last few centuries. In its post colonial history, 1948 saw the military play a prominent role in the creation of the state of Burma. Fourteen years later, in 1962 the experiment with civilian-controlled democracy came to an end. Then the army, under General Ne Win, set about creating a militarised form of socialism. By 1988 this had failed but the military reasserted itself through the onomatopoeically named SLORC—the State Law and Order Restoration Committee, subsequently renamed the more genteel-sounding State Peace and Development Committee or SPDC. Twenty years later the military still called the shots in arranging a constitutional transition from a military-run government to a military-controlled government. As Robert Taylor points out,

more than 60 years of internal strife and political discord have created an army which, no matter what the constitution says, will probably prevail in any future political conflicts.³⁹

To be sure, as Ashley South observed, the Tatmadaw is an agent of—often brutal—suppression in the country which it is supposed to protect.⁴⁰ This reported brutality makes any form of military engagement politically risky. Nonetheless, the point here is that the Tatmadaw is not going away. If a genuine concern for the people of Myanmar is to be manifest, then engagement with this institution will be critical. Indeed, some kind of resolution of the conflicts would appear an important precursor to any significant diminution in human rights concerns. Armed with such understanding, modest reform-minded engagement may be able to begin to address issues of concern to the international community.

³⁸ Richard Moore, 'The Continued Importance of International Assistance', presentation at 2011 ANU Myanmar/Burma Update Conference, 17 May 2011.

³⁹ Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, p. 506.

⁴⁰ Ashley South, review of *Building the Tatmadaw* by Maung Aung Myoe, ASEASUK, News 47 (2010), <<http://aseasuk.org.uk/v2/aseasuknews/%252Fbookreviews/47/Maung>> [Accessed 27 June 2011].

ASEAN TIES

Australia's interests in seeking a resolution to the Burma question stems largely from its relative proximity to Myanmar as well as its extensive and important institutional ties with the other countries of ASEAN. For Australia, ASEAN is not of little consequence and therefore in terms of Australia's national interests, Myanmar is not a 'boutique' issue either. Consequently, Australia has been prepared to maintain official contact and engagement through AusAID with development scholarships as well as considerable relief and development related projects. Similarly, the Australian Federal Police has remained engaged through its regionally-focused law enforcement programs.⁴¹ But Australia has not been prepared to appear to get its hands dirty by being associated with the Tatmadaw in seeking actively to generate reform initiatives.

RESIDENT DEFENCE ATTACHÉ

A first step for Australia might be to establish a permanently-based defence attaché in the country. Only by being in the country, engaging with the military authorities, learning the language and seeking to understand the culture and the people will any real inroads be achievable. This should be a start point if Australia is serious about seeking to be an agent for reform in the Tatmadaw.

EDUCATION REFORM

One area where reform and assistance is needed is in the area of education. Once a leading light academically in the region, Myanmar has slipped far, particularly following the closing of universities and the strict monitoring and control of remaining tertiary educational institutions. Today the premier tertiary institution is not the University of Rangoon but the Defence Services Academy or DSA in Pyin Oo Lwin north-east of Mandalay. In 2009 the DSA had a graduating class of 2500 students—up from only about 350 a few years earlier. The surge appears to have been geared for producing a large crop of military-trained officers to manage the transition to so-called civilian rule and to participate in the administration of the country. Interestingly enough, the DSA attracts candidates from across the country, arguably being one of the most relatively egalitarian institutions in the country where advancement is based largely on merit. With no comparable opportunities elsewhere in Myanmar, the DSA attracts people from all walks of life. Indeed, it would appear that the prominent role of the military in society and in tertiary education will remain a feature for the foreseeable future in Myanmar. Attempts at addressing the question of good governance, therefore, would likely need to involve the Tatmadaw as well. Engagement

⁴¹ See for instance, Australian Government, 'Burma', Australia Awards, February 2011, <www.ausaid.gov.au/scholar/pdf/burma.doc> and 'Law Enforcement Cooperation Program', Australian Federal Police, <www.afp.gov.au/policing/international-liaison/law-enforcement-cooperation-program.aspx> [Accessed 22 June 2011].

in some form of exchange with the DSA would be a bold and constructive move.

BUILDING PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

The settlement of Burma's longstanding ethnic conflicts, is perhaps the most significant outstanding issue which generates the most concerns about human rights abuses and which contributes to the opprobrium heaped on the Burmese state. But if the current government's overtures are a true indication, then there is a real need for countries like Australia to do what they can to engage in the problem and to help the people of Myanmar find resolution and lasting peace. Australia has a proud tradition of assisting in other regional countries' disputes, in places such as Cambodia, in helping to resolve disputes and map a path out of the political problem being faced. To be sure, Myanmar is not like Cambodia was at the end of the Cold War, with the opportunity for a UN intervention. But perhaps there is scope for some innovative thinking about how to help the people of Myanmar to find peace and reconciliation, in such a way that the government is not scared into rejecting any overtures and in a way which actually addresses the concerns of human rights groups and other interested parties. Perhaps a fact-finding team could be put together with Australia playing a prominent role to ascertain what can be done to bring about a lasting peace within this troubled country. Conceivably such a team could be managed under the auspices of the UN or ASEAN and could involve military officers, and expert advisers on peace and conflict resolution, ethnography and Burmese history and culture.

Conclusion

Australia should have the courage and the vision to engage with the Tatmadaw now that it is facing a new political context. To be sure, there are risks and it is easier and arguably safer to criticise from afar and avoid any opprobrium that may accrue from being seen to be involved with the Tatmadaw. But that would be an approach that borders on hypocrisy. Australia should have the courage and conviction to seek engagement with the Tatmadaw to not only press for reform but to offer to assist in bringing it about as a partner in fostering regional stability and security.

Australia is perhaps the only country in the West that is well placed to do this. Australia is recognised as being of the region, yet without the baggage of a superpower or a former colonial power. What is more, Australia has, for decades now, consistently engaged militarily across the region through the Defence Cooperation Program, having participated in various ASEAN fora and having contributed generously and altruistically in Myanmar with aid following Cyclone Nargis in 2007.⁴² There is an opportunity for Australia to

⁴² Australia contributed \$25 million in humanitarian assistance following Cyclone Nargis. The Royal Australian Air Force also assisted the World Food Program to transport urgently needed

be at the forefront in such engagement through the extension of the Defence Cooperation Program to cover Myanmar as well.

This can happen if Australia has the vision and the courage to do so. A discrete and modest approach from a responsible and concerned regional partner like Australia may be surprisingly well received. Indeed, if we really care about the suffering of the people of Myanmar and want to see change in the order of things then arguably this is an important step.

Dr John Blaxland is a Senior Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. Prior to leaving the military he was Australia's Defence Attaché to Thailand and Burma from 2008 to 2010. john.blaxland@anu.edu.au.

helicopters across from Africa to assist. See <www.ausaid.gov.au/anrep/rep08/section02c.html> [Accessed 22 June 2011].