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This article is drawn from Burma: A Strategic Perspective, *Asia Foundation Working Paper 13 (San Francisco, 2001). A shorter version was presented at the conference on "Strategic Rivalries on the Bay of Bengal: The Burma/Myanmar Nexus," held in Washington, D.C., on 1 February 2001 and sponsored by the Asian Studies Center and Center for Peace and Security Studies, Georgetown University; the Center for Strategic Studies of the CNA Corporation; the Asia Foundation; and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation.*

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Naval War College Review, Spring 2002, Vol. LV, No. 2

BURMA AND SUPERPOWER RIVALRIES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

Andrew Selth

The Western democracies have declared that their strong stances against the current military regime in Burma* reflect principled stands against the 1988 massacres of pro-democracy demonstrators, the failure of the regime to recognize the results of the 1990 general elections (which resulted in a landslide victory for the main opposition parties), and the regime's continuing human rights abuses. Yet it can be argued that such a strong and sustained position would have been less likely had the Cold War not ended and Burma's importance in the global competition between the superpowers not significantly waned. Lacking any pressing strategic or military reason to cultivate Burma, and with few direct political or economic interests at stake, countries like the United States and the United Kingdom can afford to isolate the Rangoon regime and impose upon it pariah status. If this was indeed the calculation made in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is possible that the changes that have occurred in the strategic environment since then may prompt a reconsideration of these policies.

Burma lies where South, Southeast, and East Asia meet; there the dominant cultures of these three subregions compete for influence. It lies also across the "fault lines" between three major civilisations—Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian.[1] At critical times in the past, Burma has been a cockpit for rivalry between superpowers. Today, in the fluid strategic environment of the early twenty-first century, its important position is once again attracting attention from analysts, officials, and military planners.[2] Already, Burma's close relationship with China and the development of the Burmese armed forces have reminded South and

* The U.S. Department of State officially refers to the nation as the Union of Burma. The formal name used by the Rangoon regime is Pyidaungzu Myanma Naingngandaw—Union of (variously) Myanma or Myanmar.

Southeast Asian countries, at least, of Burma's geostrategic importance and prompted a markedly different approach from that of the West.

INTERNATIONAL RIVALRIES BEFORE 1988

For centuries, the part of Southeast Asia that eventually became modern Burma was largely isolated from, and ignorant of, the wider world. Burma was visited by travelers and traders from a very early date, and by Europeans from the fourteenth century, but it was of truly strategic interest only to its immediate neighbors, with whom it fought a number of wars. India, China, and Thailand have all invaded, and been invaded by, Burma at various times.[3]

As the major European empires expanded, however, and geopolitics began to be practiced on a global scale, the world's most powerful countries came to recognize that Burma occupied a geostrategic position of some importance. In 1824–26 Britain annexed the coastal districts of Arakan and Tenasserim; one of its prime motives was to safeguard eastern India and close the gap between Bengal and the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore.[4] Sixty years later, both the United Kingdom and France were competing for influence in the Burmese court at Mandalay. Indeed, by attempting to balance the rivalry between these two colonial powers the last king of Burma, Thibaw (reigned 1878–85), probably helped precipitate his own downfall.[5] The British authorities in Delhi subsequently saw Burma as a bulwark against French westward expansion from Indochina. Burma also represented a possible overland trade route to China.

In 1937, after Japan's invasion of China, Japan's opponents quickly realized that Burma offered Chiang Kai-shek's embattled Nationalist (or Kuomintang) government a lifeline to Europe. Even before the Burma Road was officially opened in January 1939, vital military supplies were flowing north to Chungking through the port of Rangoon.[6] During the Second World War, Burma was a major theatre of operations. Both Allied and Japanese strategists appreciated that it not only provided China with access to the Indian Ocean and dominated the Bay of Bengal but lay between Japan's conquests in Southeast Asia and the Allied bastion of British India. The campaign for Burma, which lasted from December 1941 until August 1945, was the longest and one of the most difficult of the entire conflict.[7]

After the war, Burma continued to figure in the security calculations of key Western policy makers. The Ministry of Defence in London, for example, anxious to retain rights to use Burmese ports and airfields, persuaded the government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee to include such access in its 1947 independence agreement with the Burmese. In the face of rising nationalist sentiment in the Asia-Pacific region and the danger of communist insurgencies

in such colonies as Malaya, Mingaladon airfield outside Rangoon became an important factor in British defence planning. It was considered necessary "in connection with His Majesty's Government's air reinforcement route to the Far East, and, in the event of an emergency arising, for the rapid movement of air and land forces, to and through Burma."[8] Burma was strategically important to Britain also as one of the main sources of rice for its Asian dependencies, where food shortages were fuelling anticolonial sentiment. Because Burma was inside the sterling currency area, Britain could purchase rice there for places like Malaya without using its precious reserves of U.S. dollars.

After Burma was granted independence in 1948, its geostrategic position attracted even wider attention. Close to China, India, and Vietnam, it was seen as being "on the periphery of the free world."[9] During the 1950s, when Rangoon was threatened by a number of insurgencies, including one led by the powerful Communist Party of Burma, British Commonwealth countries made considerable efforts to shore up the fledgling governments (1948–58 and 1960–62) of Prime Minister U Nu.[10] To the members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation, Burma was a "domino" of almost as much strategic importance as Vietnam. The United States, for example, firmly believed that "should Burma come under communist domination, a communist military advance through Thailand might make Indochina, including Tonkin, militarily indefensible."[11] To the United Kingdom, the loss of Burma to the Chinese-sponsored Burmese communists would threaten the security of Malaya (then including Singapore) and the strategically important Straits of Malacca.[12] Some Western analysts (who clearly had not experienced the harsh terrain) were concerned about "a relatively easy invasion route from Yunnan Province across northern Burma to India's Assam province."[13] It has been claimed that India had a tacit understanding with Burma over the joint defence of the Assam–northern Burma area in the event of a Chinese invasion.[14]

Burma may not have been the most important Southeast Asian country facing communist insurgency at the time, but all these concerns underscored Burma's strategic role in the ideological struggle then being conducted in the Asia-Pacific region.

The United States and its allies were convinced that China was actively supporting communist "subversion" throughout Southeast Asia and that this effort was being coordinated, or at least encouraged, by the Soviet Union.[15] Burma could not be persuaded to join any military alliances, but the West identified it as an ideal place for "listening posts" from which to observe developments inside China. At the height of the Korean War, the United States even drew up plans to use Burma as a springboard from which to launch the southern half of a "double envelopment operation" against China.[16] From 1951 until the mid-1950s, the

Central Intelligence Agency provided covert military support to Kuomintang troops who had fled China after the communist victory in 1949 and established bases in Burma. With additional troops flown in from Taiwan, and supplements of local insurgents, these forces eventually exceeded twelve thousand men. They staged seven unsuccessful "invasions" of China before Burmese pressure in the United Nations forced the United States to end its assistance to the Nationalists and transfer some six thousand Kuomintang troops to Taiwan.[17] Only when Rangoon sought Beijing's help in 1961 and twenty thousand People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers conducted a joint operation with Burmese forces in northeastern Burma were the last remnants of the Kuomintang finally driven into Thailand.[18]

The secret support of the United States for the Kuomintang helped to confirm the reservations of Burma's leaders about involvement with foreign powers. They felt strongly that Burma could and should manage its own affairs. Prime Minister Nu was acutely conscious of the need to maintain good relations with Burma's powerful neighbor China, but otherwise he strove for strict neutrality in international affairs.[19] Burma was desperately in need of external assistance to recover from the war, but Nu preferred aid from "independent" countries like Israel and Yugoslavia; he was a major force behind the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961.

After General Ne Win's coup in 1962, Burma retreated even farther from the mainstream of global affairs. Fearful of almost all outside influences, the new military regime adopted and strengthened the former government's neutral foreign policy, shunning most international contacts. In 1979 Burma even withdrew from the Non-Aligned Movement, on the grounds (notwithstanding its own socialist system) that the movement had become unduly influenced by the Eastern bloc.[20] In any case, the doctrinaire regime introduced by Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party permitted little external participation in the country's economy. It still welcomed foreign aid, particularly after the failure of its own policies, but only on a scrupulously evenhanded basis. It was most amenable to assistance provided by multilateral bodies like the United Nations and through arrangements like the Colombo Plan.*

After the military coup and Burma's withdrawal into xenophobia and isolationism, its geostrategic standing greatly diminished. The country rarely figured in published studies of regional security. Yet to a certain extent it was still seen as a prize in the global competition between the major power blocs. The United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China all maintained large missions

* Formed in 1950 at Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), by India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain to discuss and arrange financial and other assistance for development in South and Southeast Asia.

in Rangoon, facilities that served as bases for active diplomatic and intelligence campaigns.[21] Divided countries—the two Koreas, East and West Germany, and North and South Vietnam—also competed for Burma's diplomatic support in forums like the UN General Assembly. Burma's success in balancing all these pressures can perhaps be gauged by the fact that at the height of the Cold War a Burmese, U Thant, was twice unanimously elected secretary-general of the United Nations.[22]

International interest in Burma's geostrategic position, however, declined even further after the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War in 1990. Indeed, as noted, had it not done so, it is unlikely that the United States (and its friends and allies) would have felt able to adopt such strong policies against the new military government in Rangoon. Ironically, it was the imposition of economic sanctions and arms embargoes by Western countries that encouraged the Rangoon regime to develop a much closer relationship with Beijing, something that has in turn prompted other Asia-Pacific countries to reassess their relations with Burma.

THE MODERN STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council in 1988 and its subsequent introduction of a range of new policies broadly coincided with dramatic shifts in the global strategic environment. The end of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe led to the emergence of the United States as the world's sole superpower. Accordingly, the agenda of the United Nations became much more aligned to U.S. interests and values, and more interventionist in nature. This in turn prompted a backlash by a diverse group of countries united by a desire to deny the United States a paramount position in world affairs. Also, with the close of the Cold War came the end of the relative stability and predictability of the old power balance. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them greatly complicated management of the strategic environment. Finally, a number of new states and substate actors appeared, and new tensions arose.

As a result of all these developments there now exists much greater fluidity, and thus greater uncertainty, in international relations. In particular, the last twenty years have seen the rise of China, which is now considered a serious challenger to the preeminence of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

Perhaps more than any other factor, perceptions of China now generally shape the ways in which regional states are responding to changes in the strategic environment. These perceptions may be based on a selective reading of history and on enduring myths about China's worldview, but in international relations perceptions become realities.[23] Governments make national policy on

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CHINA
BHUTAN
ASSAM
INDIA
BANG.
CHINA
YUNNAN
LAOS
THAILAND
Ledo
Putao
Shingbwiyang
Chindwin River
Myitkyina
Mogaung
Bhamo
Tamu
Katha
Namhkam
Irrawady River
Salween River
Falam
Hakha
Lashio
Hsipaw
Shwebo
Chittagong
Maymyo
Sagaing
Mandalay
Cox's Bazar
Myingyan
Ta-kaw
Chauk
Meiktila
Namsang
Taunggyi
Sittwe
Magway
Arakan
Pyinmana
Loi-kaw
Kyaukpyu
Allanmyo
Ramree Island
Toungoo
Cheduba Island
Prome
Sandoway
Sittang River
Bay of Bengal
Henzada
Pegu
Thaton
Hpa-an
Bassein
Rangoon
Moulmein
Mawlamyine
Pyapon
Thanbyuzayat
Ye
Three Pagodas Pass
Preparis Island (Burma)
Coco Island (Burma)
Launglon Bok Islands
Tavoy
Ban Pong
Bangkok
Narcondam Island (India)
Andaman Sea
Gulf of Thailand
Mergui Arch.

BURMA'S GEOSTRATEGIC POSITION

Burma, covering 253,950 square miles, is the largest independent state in mainland Southeast Asia.[1] Its 3,640-mile land boundary touches five different countries, including two strategic giants. To the west it shares a nine-hundred-mile border with India, a nuclear power that dominates the South Asian subcontinent and Bay of Bengal. To the northeast Burma shares a 1,350-mile border with China, now within reach of the great-power status that it has long felt is its due. In the east Burma's frontier runs southwest and south for 1,100 miles alongside Thailand, still an influential player in the region despite a number of setbacks in recent years. At its easternmost point Burma shares a short border with Laos (145 miles), and at its westernmost point another with Bangladesh (120 miles). Though these five borders are in mostly rugged and heavily forested terrain, they have always been porous to local ethnic communities, traders, drug smugglers, insurgents, and invading armies.

Burma's coastline is 1,200 miles long, not counting the 852 islands that lie within its waters (most in the Mergui Archipelago). Burma faces the Bay of Bengal to the west and the Andaman Sea to the south. In 1977 the Burmese government in Rangoon declared a territorial sea of twelve nautical miles and a contiguous zone of twenty-four nautical miles. Since that time, Burma has also laid claim to a continental shelf and exclusive economic zone of two hundred nautical miles, thus extending its maritime interests over a total area of about 57,400 square miles.[2] While Burma's security concerns have traditionally been land based, this large expanse of open ocean and coastal waters has long been exploited by local fishermen, traders, smugglers, poachers, pirates, and the navies of other countries.[3] Burma does not dominate any major sea lines of communication, but it is close to some Indian Ocean shipping lanes, and its airspace is crossed by a number of important east-west commercial air routes.

A major dispute over the land boundary with China was satisfactorily resolved in 1960, and the border with Bangladesh was agreed upon in 1999, but differences over territorial claims still arise with Burma's neighbors.[4] These disputes tend to occur (with Thailand in particular) as a result of poorly demarcated boundaries and shifting river courses. Maritime disputes are also common. Burma has laid claim to its waters in a number of ways that seem to violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.[5] An agreement was reached with India over some of Burma's claims in 1986, and in 1993 a trilateral agreement was negotiated between Burma, India, and Thailand over the junction between the three countries' exclusive economic zones in the Andaman Sea.[6]

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1. These and the following statistics are drawn from Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook 2000* (Washington, D.C.), available on the World Wide Web: www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bm.html.

2. U.S. State Dept., *Limits in the Seas, No. 36, National Claims to Maritime Jurisdictions* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, 1995), p. 20. See also George Kent and M. J. Valencia, eds., *Marine Policy in Southeast Asia* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), p. 44.

3. See Andrew Selth, "The Burma Navy under the SLORC," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1999, p. 234.

4. See *History of Chinese Communist Strategy re Sino-Burmese Border Question: Research Backgrounder* (Hong Kong: n.p., 1960); and Ralph Pettman, *China in Burma's Foreign Policy,* Contemporary China Papers 7 (Canberra: Australian National Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 11, 23.

5. Kent and Valencia, *Marine Policy in Southeast Asia,* pp. 242–3. See also J. R. Morgan and M. J. Valencia, eds., *Atlas for Marine Policy in Southeast Asian Seas* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), p. 49.

6. Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "Trends in the Delimitation of India's Maritime Boundaries," *Strategic Analysis*, January 1999, pp. 1513–6.

However, Burma has yet to settle a number of other maritime disputes, affecting fishing rights, with Thailand and Bangladesh.[1] Burma has also attracted criticism from the United States for some of its bolder claims, including insistence that foreign warships obtain permission from Rangoon prior to entering its territorial sea and contiguous zone.[2]

Surrounded by rugged mountains to the west, north, and east, and wide seas in the south, Burma is to a large extent geographically self-contained. Communications with the rest of the world are poor. Indeed, before 1938 there were no road or rail routes to any neighboring countries. The Second World War saw the construction of the Burma Road between Chungking and Lashio, the Ledo Road from Mogaung to Ledo in northeastern Assam, and a railway (built by Japan) from Ban Pong in Thailand through Three Pagodas Pass to Thanbyuzayat. However, as a historian has noted, "all of these were of strategic rather than commercial importance," and none survived as a trunk route after the war.[3] Overland access to Burma is still very restricted, but projects are under way to restore parts of the old Burma and Ledo Roads and to upgrade land communications with India and Thailand.[4] There are still no international rail links, but the old Japanese line from Thailand may eventually be rebuilt as part of a proposed trans-Asia railway.[5]

As a result of all these factors, much of the legitimate foreign trade over the last few centuries has been seaborne. This is not to discount the massive scale of smuggling across Burma's land borders since 1962, a problem that has been but little reduced by a 1989 agreement legalising trade with China.[6]

Within Burma most rivers run north to south, as do the main transport corridors. East-west travel is difficult. Burma boasts not quite eight thousand miles of inland waterways, two thousand miles of which are navigable by large commercial vessels. The Irrawaddy River, for example, carries shipping from the sea to Bhamo, more than six hundred miles inland and only thirty miles from the Chinese border. The Sittang, lower Chindwin, and lower Salween Rivers are also used extensively by launches and other river craft, as is the maze of tributaries and creeks in the Irrawaddy Delta. Indeed, "the role of river navigation in traditional Burmese life can scarcely be exaggerated"; these waterways remain a fundamental component in the country's transport network.[7] Burma also has 17,500 miles of roads, but many follow the rivers and railway corridors; only 2,100 miles of roads are paved. Since independence, Burma has placed increasing reliance on air transport, but the national fleet has always been small. Of the country's eighty airfields, only three have paved runways over 7,800 feet; most runways are unpaved.[8]

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1. See, for example, "Junta Jails More than 300 Bangladesh Fishermen," Reuters, 7 December 1999; and "Fishing Ban Preserved to Replenish Stocks," *Bangkok Post,* 23 December 2000.

2. U.S. State Dept., *Limits in the Seas*, p. 20.

3. C. A. Fisher, *South-East Asia: A Social, Economic and Political Geography* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 464.

4. Interviews by author, Rangoon, April 1995. See also Bertil Lintner, "Burma Road," *Far Eastern Economic Review* [hereafter *FEER*], 6 November 1997, pp. 16–7.

5. Bruce Gilley, "All Aboard," *FEER,* 14 December 2000, p. 29; and "New Border Trade Post Opened on Sino-Burma Border," *Burma News Update,* June 2000, p. 5.

6. It has been estimated that before 1988 almost half of Burma's actual trade was "unofficial"—that is, conducted on the black market (interview, Rangoon, April 1995). Trade with China now exceeds four hundred million dollars per annum (Xinhua wire service, 19 October 1999).

7. Fisher, *South-East Asia,* pp. 442–3.

8. CIA, *World Factbook 2000*.

Burma's rulers have long been fearful of the massive populations of their larger neighbors. Burma's birthrate has been rising, but its population of fifty million is dwarfed by those of China and India, the world's two most populous countries, with 1.262 billion and 1.014 billion people, respectively.[1] At an average of 190 people per square mile, Burma's population density is still lower than those of most major Southeast Asian countries.[2] Greatly complicating the demographic question for Burma is the fact that its population is not homogeneous. At present, about 68 percent are ethnic Burmans, who have traditionally dominated the central lowlands. The remainder comprises numerous ethnic groups and subgroups, largely concentrated in separate zones around the country's highland periphery. The most important of these groups are the Shan (who constitute 9 percent of the population), Karen (7 percent), Arakanese (4 percent), and Mon (2 percent). There are also significant numbers of Chin, Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Pao, Palaung, Lahu, Wa, and Rohingya. There are also sizable communities of Chinese (3 percent of the population) and Indians (2 percent), most of whom are found in the urban areas and along the main transport corridors.[3]

Despite the development of a few cities—Rangoon (with four million people), Mandalay (800,000), and Moulmein (300,000)—about 70 percent of Burma's population still lives in small, rural towns and villages. Roughly the same proportion is dependent on agriculture as the main means of livelihood, a figure that has held surprisingly constant for the past century.[4] Burma also enjoys an abundance of natural resources; it has been described as potentially the richest country in Southeast Asia. Before the Second World War, it was the largest rice producer in the world and a major exporter of oil. Even now, about half the country remains covered by forest and woodland, and its fishing grounds are relatively unexploited; in addition, Burma has 75 percent of the world's known reserves of teak. The country had not recovered from the Second World War, however, before management of its economy fell into the hands of the armed forces, which adopted an ideology known as the "Burmese Way to Socialism." Despite some modest growth, this doctrinaire and highly centralized system was a manifest failure, and in 1987 Burma was declared by the UN to be one of the world's least developed countries.[5] Despite some improvement in the economy since 1988, largely due to a more open system, state enterprises remain highly inefficient, and privatisation efforts have stalled. There have been attempts to widen the economic base, but the light-industrial sector is still small. At three hundred U.S. dollars, Burma's average annual per capita income is lower than those of most other Asia-Pacific countries. Nearly 25 percent of the population is below the official World Bank poverty line.[6]

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1. CIA, *World Factbook 2000.* See also Charles Hirschman, "Population and Society in Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* September 1994, p. 390; and "Burma Says Population Passes 50 Million," Reuters, 12 July 2000.

2. Nations with densities lower than Burma's are Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, and Brunei.

3. CIA, *World Factbook 2000*. See also Peter Kunstadter, ed., *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 75–124; and Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights* (London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994), pp. 34–65.

4. Cheng Siok-hwa, *The Rice Industry of Burma, 1852–1940* (Kuala Lumpur: Univ. of Malaya Press, 1968), p. 220. See also CIA, *World Factbook 2000*.

5. For a concise summary of this period, see Khin Maung Kyi et al., *Economic Development of Burma: A Vision and a Strategy* (Stockholm: Olof Palme International Center, 2000), pp. 1–16.

6. CIA, *World Factbook 2000*. See also U.S. State Dept., *Burma: Country Report on Human Rights Practices—2000* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human

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the basis of what they believe to be the case as much as on the objective truth. For example, not since the eighteenth century has China harbored expansionist ambitions toward or engaged in open hostilities with Burma, Thailand, or Laos; China once included parts of these and other states in a list of "lost territories," but this list has been omitted from Chinese public statements since the 1967 Cultural Revolution. Yet regional perceptions of China's long-term strategic intentions are still coloured by the historical evidence of China's support for communist guerrilla movements during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, its war with India in 1962, its (unsuccessful) invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and its more recent occupation of reefs and islands in the South China Sea.[24] China's economic growth and military development are being watched closely by analysts in the region, and any signs that China is looking to extend its strategic reach are considered causes for concern.

In this regard, Burma's close relationship with China since 1989, in particular its defence links, has attracted considerable attention. Over the past fourteen years there have been numerous reports in the international media and professional journals to the effect that China has provided the Rangoon regime with a wide range of military equipment, arms production facilities, and training programs.[25] There has also been a spate of news items that China and Burma have an intelligence-sharing arrangement and that Chinese military personnel are helping to operate some electronic surveillance equipment reportedly acquired by the Burmese armed forces.[26] Some commentators have gone farther and claimed that China has already established a permanent military presence in Burma, one that includes naval and air bases and specialized facilities to replenish Chinese naval vessels (including submarines) during regular deployments to the Indian Ocean.[27] Burma has even been characterized as a "pawn" of China, or at least a satellite state.

While some of these reports are true, either in whole or in part, the accuracy of others is highly suspect. Few can be verified from independent sources, and a number are clearly based on unsubstantiated rumours or idle speculation. Some of the more outlandish stories may have been planted deliberately by self-interested parties.[28] Yet, accurate or not, these and similar reports have played on existing suspicions of China's aims and helped fuel a more immediate concern that Burma's relationship with China could threaten regional stability. These perceptions have in turn prompted a number of specific policy decisions by Southeast Asian governments. For example, aside from the strong economic motives that are clearly present, the reluctance of these states to join in the West's condemnation of the Rangoon regime almost certainly stems in part from a fear of driving Burma farther into the arms of China.[29] In addition, among the reasons why Burma was admitted to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 against

the wishes of the West was an apparent desire on the part of member states to draw Rangoon away from Beijing's orbit and prevent it from actually becoming China's stalking horse in the region.[30]

India, at first an outspoken critic of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, soon reassessed the value of a hard line against Rangoon. Since 1989 New Delhi has watched anxiously as Chinese capital, aid, and military equipment have flowed into Burma. Fears of China's long-term intentions have been heightened by news reports of Chinese naval bases being constructed on the Burmese coast and of intelligence collection stations being developed in and around the Andaman Sea.[31] As one Indian analyst puts it,

> While China professes a policy of peace and friendliness toward India, its deeds are clearly aimed at the strategic encirclement of India in order to marginalise India in Asia and tie it down to the Indian sub-continent. . . . Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have been assiduously and cleverly cultivated towards this end. Myanmar [Burma] has been recently added to this list.[32]

All of these factors prompted a major policy switch in the early 1990s, as India too became afraid of pushing Burma further into China's embrace. New Delhi began establishing closer bilateral relations with Rangoon through increased political, trade, and even military ties.[33] At the same time, India began trying to develop its economic relations with such Southeast Asian countries as Thailand, while representing itself to countries such as Singapore and Vietnam as a strategic counterweight to China.[34]

Others in the Asia-Pacific region have also been feeling uneasy. Japan, for example, is apparently concerned about China's increasing influence in Burma and its implications for regional stability, in light of China's rivalry with India. This may be one reason why the Japanese government has been keen to restore aid to Burma, despite the opposition of the United States and other Western democracies.[35] Japan is also reported to be worried about the security of its sea-lanes through the Malacca Strait, which are essential for its Middle Eastern oil imports. The possibility of increased Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean and the reported construction of Chinese naval and intelligence facilities in the Mergui Archipelago have added a new factor for Japan's consideration.[36]

The Republic of Korea shares some of Japan's concerns. It too is dependent on oil shipments from the Middle East and hopes to develop its "textbook complementary" trade with Burma.[37] While President Kim Dae Jung has been a consistent supporter of the Burmese democratic movement, South Korea is keen to see international friction avoided in that part of the world.

In contrast, Burma's foreign policies and their wider implications do not appear to have attracted a great deal of interest on the part of Western analysts and officials.[38] This may soon change. Should the Bush administration continue to see its relationship with Beijing in terms of a "strategic competition" rather than the "strategic partnership" once envisioned by President William J. Clinton, Burma's close relationship with China could assume much greater importance as an integral part of a much larger security architecture. For example, the currently developing ties between the United States and India, including shared interests in a ballistic missile shield, are being viewed by some regional observers as part of a long-term move to offset China's strong security relationships with countries like Burma and Pakistan. Similarly, American military aid to Thailand, aimed in the first instance at stemming the flow of narcotics across the Burmese border, has been interpreted as the beginning of a proxy struggle between the United States on the one hand and China on the other, through their Thai and Burmese allies.[39]

For its part, China has much to gain from a close relationship with Burma. The People's Republic remains anxious about the security of its frontiers, including its long border with Burma. The present government in Rangoon—friendly and politically compatible, looking to China for support against the Western democracies—is very much to Beijing's liking. In any case, the current alternative to the military regime is opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, seen by Chinese leaders as strongly inclined to the United States; a democratic government in Rangoon would thus add to China's fears of strategic encirclement by the United States and its allies.[40] While regular Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean are a distant prospect, some analysts believe that access to Burmese ports could eventually permit the People's Liberation Army Navy to "control and dominate the Indian Ocean's [sea lines of communication]," including the Straits of Malacca.[41] Beijing is also keen to develop the economy of southern China by exporting goods through a transport corridor stretching from Yunnan to the Irrawaddy River at Bhamo and thence to the Bay of Bengal.[42] Burma is already exporting timber, agricultural and marine products, and precious stones to China, and it is receiving light industrial machinery and consumer goods in return.[43]

At the diplomatic level, the ASEAN countries are probably correct in judging that China sees Burma as a sympathetic voice in regional councils. In this regard, Beijing would not have to dictate terms to Rangoon, as the Burmese regime already shares Beijing's views on such key issues as internal security, human rights, and whether other governments and multilateral organizations are entitled to involve themselves in a country's domestic affairs.[44] In addition, China no doubt welcomes the addition of Burma to that diverse coalition of countries around

the world (including Russia, Iraq, Libya, India, and Malaysia) that are concerned about the sole-superpower status and global economic influence of the United States. These countries also distrust the increased willingness of the United Nations since 1990 to intervene in global crises in response to humanitarian sentiment or to promote regional stability. China knows that its position on the Security Council is seen by the Rangoon regime as the ultimate guarantee against a UN-sponsored military operation to restore democracy in Burma or to create autonomous ethnic states, as was done by the multilateral intervention in East Timor.[45] In return, China feels it can count on Burma's support in other UN debates on such subjects as human rights and arms sales.

THE FUTURE

There are two main schools of thought about future Burma-China relations.[46] The first harks back to the great-power politics and strategic balances of the Cold War era. Its advocates argue that small, poverty-stricken Burma will inevitably succumb to the pressures of its much larger neighbor and effectively become a pawn (if it is not already a pawn) in China's bid to become a world power. The members of this school cite, in addition to China's enormous strategic weight, its apparent "stranglehold" over Burma, represented by loans, arms sales, and trade.[47]

The second school argues that throughout history Burma has always been highly suspicious of China, that it turned to Beijing in 1989 only out of dire necessity, having been ostracized by the West. Proponents of this view claim that China has not been as successful in winning Burma's confidence as is sometimes reported. They also believe that the Rangoon government would be prepared to pay a very high price to remain independent, and they accept the regime's repeated assurances that Chinese military bases will never be permitted in Burma.[48] Should the Rangoon government wish to break out of China's embrace, this second school argues, then India, other regional countries, and possibly even the Western democracies would be prepared to assist.[49]

The latter school reflects the deeper understanding of Burmese history. The conclusion that Burma has become a satellite of China and would be a willing ally in any future military confrontation between China and other regional countries should not go unchallenged. Indeed, it can be argued that in many respects it is not Beijing but Rangoon that has the whip hand. The military regime recognizes Burma's considerable debts to China and its vulnerability to a range of Chinese diplomatic, economic, and military pressures, but it believes it can manage the bilateral relationship in a way that preserves Burma's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and freedom of action.[50] The regime may have been encouraged by the way that Chinese officials in Burma have kept a low public profile and have learned to tread warily in contacts with their Burmese counterparts. They seem to have

behaved in this way so as not to offend the notoriously volatile and unpredictable Burmese leadership and thereby lose the gains China has made since 1988. The Chinese may also retain memories of the violent anti-Chinese riots in Rangoon of 1967, unrest that led to a break in diplomatic relations.

In any case, the State Law and Order Restoration Council and its nominal successor, the (again, all-military) State Peace and Development Council, have been quick to perceive Burma's growing importance in the increasingly fluid Asia-Pacific strategic environment. Over its fourteen-year history the military government has become adept at exploiting Burma's geostrategic position and at manipulating the concerns of its regional neighbors. For example, it has been quite comfortable about using its close relationship with Beijing and the possibility of its becoming an ally of an expansionist China to gain attention in important councils like ASEAN and to attract support from influential rivals like India and Singapore.[51]

In addition, there are other security issues that are likely to focus international attention on Burma over the next decade. For example, since 1988 the Rangoon regime has implemented a massive military expansion and modernisation program. The Burmese armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) have more than doubled in size and are now the second largest in Southeast Asia. Should Vietnam continue to reduce its military, Burma's could become the largest. Thanks largely to China, its armed forces are already among the best armed. Since 1988 the Burmese air force has acquired nearly two hundred new combat aircraft, the navy has commissioned more than thirty surface combatants, and the army has been reequipped with a wide range of armoured vehicles, artillery, surface-to-air missiles, and infantry weapons. The Tatmadaw still has a number of serious problems to overcome, but has been transformed from a small, weak counterinsurgency force barely able to maintain internal security into a very large, much more powerful defense force, increasingly capable of major conventional operations.[52] While the Burmese armed forces still lack a credible power-projection capability, regional countries like Thailand and India have already expressed concern about Burma's rapidly growing strength and cited it as justification for military acquisition programs of their own.

There are a number of other disturbing trends. Thailand and Bangladesh, for example, continue to express concern about the wider implications of Burma's persistent internal problems, particularly the periodic outflows of refugees across its borders that these "internal problems" often produce.[53] Burma has also attracted strong criticism over its failure to stem the flow of narcotics from the "Golden Triangle"* and to take action to counter its rapidly growing HIV/AIDS

* The mountainous area where Burma, Thailand, and Laos meet, a major world source of opium and heroin.

problem. These issues are seen, and not only by Burma's neighbors, as having far-reaching strategic implications.[54] For example, in 2000 the American secretary of state characterized HIV/AIDS as Southeast Asia's greatest threat to health and security.[55] In addition, international attention has been drawn to Burma's use of forced labor and child soldiers, its indiscriminate sowing of land mines, its intolerance of religious minorities, and its traffic in small arms. The Rangoon regime has been slow to react to international representations about such issues; a rare exception occurred in 1992, when the State Law and Order Restoration Council responded to protests by the Islamic countries of ASEAN and permitted the repatriation of some Muslim Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh. The plight of the Rohingyas had attracted the attention also of Islamic extremists from Afghanistan and the Middle East—as well as that of the UN secretary-general, who declared that he was "seriously concerned" that the crisis could threaten the stability of Southeast Asia.[56]

In such a climate of uncertainty, interstate tension, and incipient instability, Burma's geostrategic position is likely to become more important to regional security than it was in past decades. Burma may also become a player in the wider strategic environment, especially if the current relationship between the United States and China develops into a more overt competition, into which other Asia-Pacific states are drawn, for political and economic influence. In these circumstances, Burma would probably attempt to steer an independent course, while protecting its relationship with China as far as possible. The U.S. government would come under domestic pressure to maintain a hard line against Rangoon, but the realpolitik of great-power rivalry could oblige it to change its policy toward Burma and to seek a more neutral, if not closer, relationship. Should that occur, other Western democracies would find it hard not to follow the American lead.

NOTES

1. For "fault lines" between civilisations, see Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
2. As evidence of this trend, an international conference was held in Washington, D.C., on 1 February 2001, to consider "Strategic Rivalries on the Bay of Bengal: The Burma/Myanmar Nexus."
3. For two interpretations of this period, see Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967); and J. F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978).
4. C. A. Fisher, *South-East Asia: A Social, Economic and Political Geography* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 435, n. 15. The Straits Settlements were the former British East India Company territories of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca, combined as a single colony in 1858.

5. Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: Cresset, 1962), pp. 222–30; and Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, pp. 117–21. See also O. B. Pollak, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979), pp. 153–72.
6. A useful account of the birth of the Burma Road can be found in J. L. Christian, *Burma and the Japanese Invader* (Bombay: Thacker, 1945), pp. 210–36.
7. The best one-volume history is Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941–1945* (London: Dent and Sons, 1984).
8. Hugh Tinker, ed., *Burma: The Struggle for Independence, 1944–1948* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1983), vol. 2, pp. 693, 736.
9. T. D. Roberts et al., *Area Handbook for Burma* (Washington, D.C.: American University, 1968), p. v.
10. For the thinking behind this policy, see Andrew Selth, "Australian Defence Contacts with Burma, 1945–1987," *Modern Asian Studies*, July 1992, pp. 451–68.
11. "1952 Policy Statement by U.S. on Goals in Southeast Asia," Key Document 2, *The Pentagon Papers* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 28. See also Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp. 624, 632.
12. A. J. Levine, *The United States and the Struggle for Southeast Asia* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), pp. 12–3. See also Andrew Selth, "Burma: 'Hidden Paradise' or Paradise Lost?" *Current Affairs Bulletin*, November 1991, pp. 4–5.
13. U.S. State Dept., *Union of Burma: Background Notes* (Washington, D.C., 1971). Anyone who believes that an invasion of India through this part of Burma would be "relatively easy" is advised to read Bertil Lintner, *Land of Jade: A Journey through Insurgent Burma* (Edinburgh: Kiscadale, 1990), and Shelby Tucker, *Among Insurgents: Walking through Burma* (London: Radcliffe Press, 2000).
14. T. N. Dupuy, ed., *The Almanac of World Military Power* (Dunn Loring, Va.: Dupuy Associates, 1970), p. 252.
15. See, for example, Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945–1969* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1970), pp. 62–3.
16. Bertil Lintner, "The CIA's First Secret War," *Far Eastern Economic Review* [hereafter *FEER*], 16 September 1993, pp. 56–8.
17. *Kuomintang Aggression against Burma* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1953). See also R. H. Taylor, *Foreign and Domestic Consequences of the KMT Intervention in Burma*, Data Paper 93 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1973).
18. According to Bertil Lintner, Kuomintang activities in Burma did not end here. Until forced out by the Burmese communists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kuomintang intelligence networks in northern Burma provided Taiwan and the United States with regular reports on developments in China and Chinese arms shipments to neighboring countries. Lintner, "The CIA's First Secret War," p. 58.
19. This brief reference does not do justice to the complexity of Burma's foreign policy during the postwar era, which, as David Steinberg has pointed out, "within the overall neutralist position, has shifted markedly in response to both internal and external stimuli." D. I. Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of Southeast Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1982), p. 122.
20. K. P. Misra, "Burma's Farewell to the Nonaligned Movement," *Asian Affairs*, February 1981, pp. 49–56.
21. See, for example, Aleksandr Kaznacheev, *Inside a Soviet Embassy: Experiences of a Russian Diplomat in Burma* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962). Edgar O'Ballance has suggested that Russia was looking for access to Burma's naval facilities, but this seems unlikely. See his "Burma: Back Water or Black Sheep?" *Asian Defence Journal*, April 1986, pp. 28–35.
22. Thant served as secretary-general from 1961 to 1971. See, for example, June Bingham, *U Thant: The Search for Peace* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966), pp. 211–21.
23. As suggested by R. O. Tilman, *The Enemy Beyond: External Threat Perceptions in the ASEAN Region* (Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1984).
24. A Chinese textbook entitled *A Brief History of Modern China*, published in Beijing in 1954, includes a map that shows all of mainland Southeast Asia and the South China Sea as falling within China's national borders before the Opium War of 1840.

25. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Myanmar's Chinese Connection," *International Defense Review*, November 1994, pp. 23–6; and Andrew Selth, *Burma's Arms Procurement Program*, Working Paper 289 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1995).
26. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," *FEER*, 16 December 1993, p. 26, and "Enter the Dragon," *FEER*, 22 December 1994, pp. 22–4; and Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1998), p. 219.
27. See, for example, "China and the Indian Ocean: Poised for Chaos," in *SP's Military Yearbook 1992–93*, ed. Jayant Baranwal (New Delhi: Guide Publications, 1992), p. 374; and Poshpinder Singh, "Concern at Chinese Build-Up," *Asian Defence Journal*, February 1993, p. 8.
28. There have been suggestions that certain Indian groups have deliberately encouraged fears of a growing Chinese threat in Burma, for both domestic and international political purposes. See, for example, William Ashton, "Chinese Bases in Burma: Fact or Fiction?" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1995, pp. 84–7.
29. See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Secret Military Partners*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence 136 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 2000), pp. 38–43.
30. Robert Cribb, "Burma's Entry into ASEAN: Background and Implications," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1998, pp. 49–62.
31. See, for example, Swaran Singh, "Myanmar: China's Gateway to the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, November 1995, pp. 80–7; also "India Trying Hard to Build Military Ties with Burma," *Asian Age*, 7 July 2000.
32. Gurmeet Kanwal, "Countering China's Strategic Encirclement of India," *Indian Defence Review*, July–September 2000, p. 13.
33. See Andrew Selth, "Burma and the Strategic Competition between China and India," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, June 1996, pp. 213–30.
34. Michael Vatikiotis, "A Friend in Need," *FEER*, 10 July 1997, p. 32. See also Ranjan Gupta, "Singapore Buys Indian Protection as Old Friendships Cool," *Australian*, 7 February 1994.
35. "The New World Order, according to Dr. Kissinger," *Financial Review*, 17 November 1995; and "China Fears Stoke New Passions," Reuters, 9 December 2000.
36. Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," p. 26.
37. Korea imports energy and raw materials, and exports manufactured goods. Burma, on the other hand, has the capacity to export energy and raw materials, and imports manufactured goods. See Than Nyun and Khin Maung Oo, "Prospects for Myanmar-Korea Economic Cooperation," in *Myanmar-Korea Economic Cooperation*, East and West Studies Series 22 (Seoul: Institute of East and West Studies, Yonsei University, 1992), pp. 189ff.
38. See, for example, Selth, *Burma's Secret Military Partners*.
39. See, for example, "U.S., China Take Sides in Border Skirmish," *Chicago Tribune*, 19 May 2001; and Rodney Tasker and Bertil Lintner, "Nasty Job for Task Force 399," *FEER*, 19 April 2001, pp. 24–5.
40. Interview, Beijing, October 1999. All cited interviews conducted by the author.
41. "Beijing Consolidates Its Hold on Myanmar," *Defense and Foreign Affairs*, July 1997, p. 3; and Lintner, "Arms for Eyes," p. 26.
42. Bertil Lintner, "Enter the Dragon," pp. 22–4. See also Pan Qi, "Opening the Southwest: An Expert Opinion," *Beijing Review*, 2 September 1985, pp. 22–3.
43. See, for example, E. C. Chapman, "Cross-Border Trade between Yunnan and Burma, and the Emerging Mekong Corridor," *Thai-Yunnan Newsletter*, December 1992, pp. 15–19; and Mya Maung, "On the Road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the Sinonization of Upper Burma," *Asian Survey*, May 1994, pp. 447–59.
44. Robert Karniol, "New Channels of Asian Diplomacy Unfold," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 24 June 1995, pp. 27–31.
45. Interview, Rangoon, November 1999.
46. These two schools were first identified in Kay Merrill, "Myanmar's China Connection: A Cause for Alarm?" *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, 1998 annual reference edition, January 1998, pp. 20–1.

47. J. M. Malik, "Sino-Indian Rivalry in Myanmar: Implications for Regional Security," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, September 1994, pp. 137–56; and J. M. Malik, "Burma Slides under China's Shadow," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 1997, pp. 319–22.

48. See, for example, "Junta Denies It Poses Threat to Region," Reuters, 10 August 1999.

49. See, for example, Selth, "Burma and the Strategic Competition between China and India," pp. 213–30; and Kay Merrill, "A Closer Look at Sino-Burmese Links," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 1997, p. 323.

50. Interview, Rangoon, December 1999. This interpretation has been questioned by, for example, J. M. Malik, "Myanmar's Role in Regional Security: Pawn or Pivot?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, June 1997, pp. 52–73.

51. William Ashton, "Burma Receives Advances from Its Silent Suitors in Singapore," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, March 1998, pp. 32–4.

52. See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power without Glory* (New York: EastBridge, forthcoming).

53. One of the best studies on this subject is Hazel J. Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, forthcoming). See also *Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: The Search for a Lasting Solution*, Human Rights Watch/Asia, August 1997.

54. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, "Global Reach: Drug Money in the Asia Pacific," *Current History*, April 1998, pp. 179–82; Sarah Stewart, "Myanmar Facing AIDS Catastrophe," Australian Associated Press, 27 November 2000; and "Burma Continues to Present Unusual Threat," *Burma News Update*, May 1998, p. 8.

55. "HIV/AIDS Number One Security Threat in SE Asia: Albright," Agence France Presse, 28 July 2000.

56. Bertil Lintner, "The Secret Mover," *FEER*, 7 May 1992, p. 21.