



Myanmar's military mindset: An exploratory survey

MYANMAR'S MILITARY MINDSET: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY

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About the publication

There are many strategies for influencing other actors in the international arena ... Each strategy is much more likely to be effective, and all diplomacy is better served, if informed by a sound model of the adversary's behavioural style and patterns of action. A correct image of other leaders requires understanding of their personal and political development and early life experiences that shaped their self-image, values and motivations. Special attention is needed to grasp the effects of mentors and role models. Personality analysis must be integrated with how a leader and leadership group have been shaped by historical events and memories and specific cultural influences in their political socialisation.

Jerrold M. Post


(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANU	Australian National University
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BSI	Bureau of Special Investigation
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CRS	Congressional Research Service
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
DSA	Defence Services Academy
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisations
GAD	General Administration Department
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IIFMM	Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar
KMT	(National People's Party)
MEC	Myanmar Economic Corporation
MEHL	Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd
MIS	Military Intelligence Service
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MPF	Myanmar Police Force
NDC	National Defence College
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
NUP	National Unity Party
OCMI	Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence
OCMSA	Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs
OR	Other Ranks
OTC	Officer Training Course
OTS	

GLOSSARY

▲	Major General
▲ ▲	Senior General
▲ ▲ ▲	General
▲ ▲ ▲ ▲	Colonel
▲ ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲	Brigadier General
● ▲	Second Lieutenant
● ▲ ▲ ▲	Vice Senior General
▲	spiritual doctrine of cause and effect
▲	traditional sarong-like garment
L ▲ ▲	Committee to Protect Race and Religion
▲ ● ▲	way of doing thin(f k)3nnTB4 (o)3e(8 Td [(C)-8C 7 ()110.008 T2 (e)-82.1 (7id)1.-7.5 (d R)-2

country's three main intelligence agencies are thus also included. On occasion, the Myanmar Fire Service Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category. As the 2008 constitution decrees that "all the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services", the formal title of the Tatmadaw's most senior officer is Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services.

Over the years, some components of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus have changed their formal titles several times. The military intelligence organization, for example, has periodically been renamed, usually coincide with structural changes in the armed forces. These adjustments have not always been known to, or recognized by, foreign observers. Also, Burmese language titles have been translated into English in different ways. The use of popular names has added another complication. For example, ever since 1948 the Tatmadaw's intelligence arm has been widely known as the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), or simply the "MI" ("em-eye"). Similarly, the Police Force's Special Intelligence Department (or, strictly translated, the "Information Police"), has long been known as Special Branch, or "SB". All this has meant that in the literature some agencies have been called by several different names, and not always accurately.

These organisations give rise to a number of other descriptors that need to be explained. The collective terms "security forces" and "security apparatus" include the armed forces, the Myanmar Police Force and the country's three main intelligence agencies, namely the Tatmadaw's Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA), the MPF's Special Branch and the Ministry of Home Affairs' Bureau of Special Investigation (BSI). Together, all these organisations constitute the state's "coercive apparatus". Under various military governments, that term has sometimes included other bodies, like the MPF's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and the General Administration Department (GAD). Both have been used to help monitor the civilian population and enforce compliance with various laws and regulations.⁰ The Tatmadaw's "senior officer corps" is taken to include those commissioned officers, from all three services (army, navy and air force), who are at one star rank (ie army and air force Brigadier General and navy Commodore, NATO Code OF-6) or above. The "officer corps" includes all commissioned officers in the armed forces, from Second Lieutenant and Sub-Lieutenant (NATO Code OF-1) up to Senior General (NATO Code OF-10).

All Burmese personal names are particular. Most people do not have surnames or forenames. Names may be one to four syllables long, and are usually chosen depending on the day of the week that a child is born (which is why many people in Myanmar share the same names). Also, among the majority Bamar ethnic group names are usually preceded by an honorific, such as "U", meaning "uncle", or "Daw", meaning "aunt". "U" can also form a part of a man's name, as in U Tin U. The titles "Maung", "Ko" ("brother") and "Ma" ("sister"), usually given to young men and women, are also found in personal names, as in Maung Maung Aye, Ko Ko Gyi and Ma Ma Lay. "Maung" is sometimes adopted by respected figures as a gesture of modesty, as in the name of the author and scholar Maung Htin Aung. To all such rules, however, there are exceptions. Some of Myanmar's ethnic minorities, like the Kachin, have family or clan names, which are placed before their given names, as in cases like Maran Brang Seng, where "Maran" is the name of a clan.¹ Most ethnic minorities, like the Shan, Kachin, Karen and Chin, have their own systems of honorifics.

In Myanmar, names can be changed relatively easily, often without seeking official permission or registration. This situation is further complicated by the frequent use of nicknames and other sobriquets as identifiers, such as "Myanaung" (the town) U Tin, "Tekkatho" (university) Phone Naing, or "Guardian" (the magazine) Sein Win. Pen-names, ^၂ and pseudonyms also have a long history in Myanmar. For example, the birth name of General Ne Win, who effectively ruled the country from 1962 to 1988, was Shu Maung. "Ne Win", which means "bright sun" in Burmese, was a nom de guerre he adopted in 1941, and retained after the war.³ Some Myanmar citizens were given or have adopted Western names, including those who attended Christian missionary schools in their youth. Others use only one part of their name for convenience, for example when travelling abroad or dealing with foreigners. It is not uncommon for an obituary to list more than one name by which the deceased was known.

In this research paper, the country has been called "Myanmar", which has been its formal name since 1989. The old name "Burma" has been used, however, when it appears in direct quotations or citations. Myanmar's population and national language are both called "Burmese" ("Myanmar" has no adjective). The dominant ethnic group, once called "Burmans", is here described as "Bamar", in keeping with modern practice.

For reasons that are not always clear, they have been remarkably resistant to approaches from foreign governments and international organisations. The usual diplomatic carrots and sticks appear to have



Chapter One

THE RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

*Principles of Diplomacy and the Study of
International Relations*

RA Morse and HL Loerke (eds)

*Principles of Diplomacy and the Study of
International Relations*

(Washington DC: The Wilson Centre, 1987)

As the former CIA official Herb Meyer once observed,
figuring out how national leaders think and what

deliberations, factional fights within the senior officer corps or the private thinking of particular generals, while occasionally well-sourced, can rarely be verified.³⁹ Descriptions of “hard-liners” and “soft-liners” can be misleading. Without supporting evidence, such stories must be considered anecdotal and, as the saying goes, the plural of anecdote is not data. Often, such reports prove to be inaccurate or unrepresentative of the wider organisation. The Yangon and Naypyidaw rumour mills, on which foreign observers (including resident Defence Attaches) seem to base many of their assessments, are notorious for their unreliability.

In these circumstances, it is little wonder that, despite

40 United States Department of Defense, Office of the Inspector General, Report to Congress: The State of the Military and Security Developments Involving China, (Washington, DC: USDOIG, 2017), p. 25. The report also notes that the Chinese military is a large and complex organisation, and that the US military is often unable to verify the accuracy of reports from Chinese sources.

community⁵¹ In recent years, unprecedented resources have been devoted to investigating the Tatmadaw's structure, command and control systems, economic interests and



Chapter Two

MYANMAR'S “NATIONAL CHARACTER”

On the chance of bygone days a copy of
the old edition. The chance of bygone days
she is a delight.

Lucian W Pye



Another reason for the dearth of cultural and sociological explanations for political behaviour in Myanmar is the much greater acknowledgement these days of the richness and changing nature of all large social groups, not to mention their resistance to simplistic and misleading labels imposed on them by outsiders.⁹⁴

In considering this issue, Myanmar poses particularly difficult challenges. For, as David Steinberg has recently pointed out, it is not, and never has been, a “nation” in the strict sense of the word.⁹⁵ Rather, it is an extraordinarily diverse collection of social and ethnic groups, many with special characteristics and strong partisan tendencies, captured within borders drawn largely by colonial map-makers during the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁹⁶ For example:

1. Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with eight recognised national races and at least 135 distinct ethno-linguistic groups.⁹⁷ One survey has claimed that there are in fact 242 different spoken languages or, by ethnographical analysis, 172 different “tribes”.⁹⁸ Within these divisions, the classification of which is still the subject of some debate, a great many Burmese acknowledge mixed ancestry.
2. There is the NLD, other civilian political parties and their supporters which, according to the results of a relatively free and fair election held in November 2020, account for a majority of the population (which currently stands at about 55 million).⁹⁹
3. Approximately 70 percent of the population live in rural districts. The large majority are engaged in artisan or agricultural pursuits of different kinds.¹⁰⁰
4. Urban dwellers make up a minority of the population, but there are 5.5 million people living in Yangon, 1.5 million in Mandalay and about 650,000 who live in the new capital of Naypyidaw.¹⁰¹
5. The approximately 350,000 strong armed forces, their immediate families, relatives and close supporters, together with service veterans, constitute a virtual “state” within the state of Myanmar, in all probably numbering four million or more people.¹⁰²
6. There are some 85,000 male and female members of the Myanmar Police Force who, on paper at least, subscribe to a different ethos (“community policing”) and professional culture than the armed forces.¹⁰³


7. There are half a dozen or so religious communities in Myanmar, broadly aligned with different ethnic groups.¹⁰⁴
8. In 2020, approximately 25 percent of the Myanmar population was...¹⁰⁵



Chapter Three

MYANMAR'S “STRATEGIC CULTURE”

*Take a glance at the republic. We are here in a republic
and the facts are clear.*

Prime Minister U Nu
"Korea", 5 September 1950

(Rangoon: Ministry of Information,
Government of Burma, 1951)

Another issue is relevant to this survey and deserves

and predispositions, at least when it comes to security matters. These can be summarised as a deep commitment to Myanmar's independence and sovereignty, and a determination to decide the country's future. As then General () Maung Aye put it in 1995:

Seen from our perspective, security entails non-interference in internal affairs and freedom from external pressures. Security is synonymous with the basic right to choose freely one's own political, economic and social systems and determine one's future at one's pace and in accordance with cherished values and ideals.

Similar views were expressed by the U Nu administration before 1962 and the military-backed Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government that ruled Myanmar between 1974 and 1988. They have probably also been held by large parts of the Burmese population possibly even the majority. However, in Myanmar it has long been the generals that make the key decisions on such matters and implement the policies that result. Even under the NLD government, the management of security, broadly defined, remained firmly in the hands of the armed forces.³⁴

The Tatmadaw enjoys a unique position. It is not only the most powerful political institution in Myanmar but, particularly after 1988, it became increasingly self-contained and self-reliant. Even after the advent of a quasi-civilian government in 2011, the 2008 constitution granted the armed forces considerable institutional autonomy, including the freedom to conduct military operations without government oversight. The Tatmadaw has nurtured its own professional culture and managed its own economic base, separate from the official Defence budget. Despite the growth of the economy and relaxation of social constraints since 2011, its personnel have become increasingly isolated from the rest of the population.³⁵ They have their own mass media outlets, banks, educational institutions, hospitals, insurance companies, recreational facilities, social structures and support mechanisms. Military personnel, their families and close supporters, plus retired veterans, amount to about 2.5 percent of the population, constituting a privileged caste within Myanmar society. This caste enjoys a number of defining characteristics that permit it to be viewed separately from the rest of the population. Indeed, the Tatmadaw has long been so far removed from mainstream Burmese society that, as Martin Smith noted 20 years ago, it is virtually a "state within a state"³⁷

The makeup of the Tatmadaw has changed over the years. As the only means of social mobility after the 1962 coup, it attracted recruits from all walks of life.³⁸ Also, advancement was to a large extent based on merit, allowing even members of ethnic minorities and non-Buddhists to rise through the ranks. The Tatmadaw greatly expanded under the SLORC but, even after a massive recruitment drive, it increasingly took on the appearance of an exclusively Bamar Buddhist force, in both composition and outlook.³⁹ After 2011, the Tatmadaw was reduced in size and further modernised, to make it more like a "standard army". There were token efforts to recruit women and members of the ethnic minorities, to make it more representative of the entire country. As Myanmar's economy began to grow, however, and there were alternative avenues for employment and social advancement, it became more difficult to fill the ranks. Even so, the continued dominance of the armed forces in national life, and the opportunities that they were seen to offer young men and women meant that, despite the popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD, there was no shortage of officer candidates.⁴² Many came from military families, the similarities in their backgrounds reportedly encouraging the development of a common outlook, including acceptance of the Tatmadaw's values.

That is not to say, however, that the Tatmadaw is now, or has ever been, a homogenous organisation that thinks and behaves as one. Care must be taken not to fall into the same trap as those writers who refer collectively to "the Burmese" and make sweeping generalisations about their "national character".

Ever since the Tatmadaw's creation in 1948, there have been reports that it has been wracked by internal disputes of various kinds. Some have been more serious than others. For example:

1. The Myanmar Army has always been the largest and most powerful of the three services. The Myanmar Air Force and Myanmar Navy have never enjoyed the same status, influence or access to resources. From time to time this has caused jealousies and friction.
2. Particularly in the early days, there were ideological differences between capitalists, socialists and communists in the armed forces, and tensions between elements favouring a strong unitary state and those who sought a looser, federal system. Even now, there appear to be different views in the Tatmadaw on what is the most suitable style of government for Myanmar.

3. Rivalries have also arisen between graduates of the prestigious Defence Services Academy (DSA) at Pyin Oo Lwin (formerly Maymyo), the Defence Services (Army) Officer Training School (OTS) at Bahtoo and the Officer Training Course (OTC), known as ဝန်ထမ်းတန်းတက်ကျောင်း. Those from the latter two have often felt resentful when passed over for promotion.¹⁴⁴
4. Over the years, factions and cliques have formed within the officer corps, based on different backgrounds, different experiences or different interests. For example, under the SLORC and SPDC there was a bitter rivalry between the so-called “combat faction” led by Vice Senior General (ဗိုလ်ချုပ်မှူးကြီး) Maung Aye and the “intelligence faction” led by General Khin Nyunt. This rivalry came to a head in 2004 when Khin Nyunt was arrested and almost the entire Intelligence Corps was disbanded.¹⁴⁵
5. There have also been reports from time to time of centre-periphery tensions, notably disputes between the Tatmadaw’s powerful field commanders, responsible for the Regional Military Commands, and staff officers based at Defence Headquarters in Yangon, later Naypyidaw.¹⁴⁶
6. There have been signs over the years that differences have arisen over policy questions such as the treatment of key dissidents (notably Aung San Suu Kyi), management of the economy and relations with foreign countries (like China). In describing such debates, some observers have referred to “hard-liners” and “soft-liners”, but these terms are always relative and can be misleading.¹⁴⁷
7. Powerful individuals in the armed forces have long gathered around themselves acolytes and groups of supporters, often in exclusive patron-client (မိမိနှင့်အောက်ခံ) relationships that permit the exercise of influence outside the formal chain of command.
8. Given the emphatic results of the 1990, 2015 and 2020 general elections, it would appear that a sizeable proportion of the armed forces has voted for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, rather than for openly pro-military parties, like the National Unity Party (NUP) and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).
9. Inevitably, within such a large and hierarchical organisation, there is competition for promotions, postings and other forms of personal advancement.
10. On at least three occasions during Myanmar’s modern history, individuals or elements within the armed forces have taken such exception to its policies or practices that they have contemplated a coup, or an attempt to assassinate the Tatmadaw’s most senior leaders.¹⁴⁸

At one level, none of these internal tensions are particularly surprising. Indeed, attempted coups and assassination plots aside, it can be argued that many armed forces harbour such divisions, to a greater or lesser extent. However, in Myanmar’s case they affect the cohesion and loyalty of the Tatmadaw, and the decisions of its leadership, both of which have profound implications for the entire country.

All that said, these and other differences are muted by the rigid training regime, comprehensive indoctrination program and strict disciplinary code experienced by all members of the Tatmadaw. This is particularly the case with regard to the officer corps, where a reputation for political reliability has always been essential for advancement, if not survival. There have been numerous cases where, according to reasonably reliable reports, personal loyalty and a willingness to obey orders have been rewarded before raw talent. Also, many officers have shared experiences, such as



Chapter Four

THE TATMADAW'S MENTAL LANDSCAPE

Brian Yalindi
Col (in) Yes alindi
Brian Yaldiffe
Col (in) Yes aldiffe

(London: Handmade Films, 1979)

THE PERSONAL LEVEL

It is very difficult to identify and assess in a rigorous, scientific manner the many, varied and often subtle influences on the thinking of Myanmar's senior military personnel. Not only is research difficult, and reliable data scarce, but even well-established academic disciplines like psychology, anthropology and sociology have struggled to explain the workings of the human mind and the complex relationship between individual thinking and group dynamics. Trying to apply such approaches to political behaviour adds another layer of difficulty.⁵¹ This problem is compounded in Myanmar's case by the country's extraordinary social and ethnic diversity which, as noted in an earlier chapter, introduces additional complications. Also, notwithstanding the fact that all senior members of the Tatmadaw are currently ethnic Bamar, have grown up and been educated in Myanmar, imbibed Burmese Buddhist culture to a greater or lesser extent, and been moulded by their long service in the armed forces, they are all individuals. This makes generalisations about their formative experiences, personal perspectives, cognitive processes and unconscious biases very risky, not to mention an open invitation to the inevitable critics, who understandably view such intellectual exercises with scepticism.

The noted American Myanmar-watcher Melford Spiro believed that there was a universal human nature, expressed mainly through the structure and functioning of human personality. It transcended race, ethnicity and nationality. If this is true, then it seems reasonably safe to say that Myanmar's military officers broadly share the same kinds of strengths (a)-0.6 (t)22.7 (

All that said, there is some value in trying to identify the most important factors that appear to influence the thinking and behaviour of the Tatmadaw's senior officer corps, both individually and as a leadership group. For heuristic purposes, these factors can be divided into those predominantly found at the personal or individual level, those found at the Tatmadaw or institutional level and those found at the state or national (and international) level. Inevitably, there is some overlap between these categories, which are in any case rather arbitrary. The focus of the chapter is on commissioned officers, ie Second Lieutenant (▲) and above, but it also touches on the position of the other ranks (OR).⁵³ This is in part to explain certain characteristics common to all members of the Tatmadaw, but also to illustrate the extraordinary reach that the organisation has into the private lives of its personnel.

Some big neo-colonialist countries, who want to dominate and manipulate Myanmar, are trying to destroy the spirit of national solidarity in order to weaken the country and put it under their influence ... taking advantage of their superiority in science and technology, these big nations are trying to dominate the developing nations politically, economically, socially, and culturally⁶⁸.

Even now, colonialism is blamed for many of Myanmar's problems, including the country's bitter ethnic divisions and religious tensions. For example, the current Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has described the security forces' brutal pogroms against the Muslim Rohingyas in 2016 and 2017 as "unfinished business" left over from the Second World War⁶⁹.

Tatmadaw officers have also grown up learning about the bitter political divisions, economic hardships, criminal activ

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Individualism

Aung San dismissed the notion of individualism as “nonsense”, preferring instead “one nation, one state, one party, one leader”⁷². Democratically-elected Prime Minister U Nu was more inclined to argue for the “freedom and equality of the individual”⁷³. The military governments which followed him, however, have portrayed Myanmar as a “collectivist” society, in which “the group, be it family, community or something else, is more important than the individual”⁷⁴. This notion has been used to create real or imagined groupings of perceived value to the regime, and has been contrasted with the reportedly destructive “individualistic” cultures and societies of Western countries. Yet, foreigners have long viewed Myanmar as “moderately individualistic”, if not “hyper-individualistic” in nature⁷⁵.

to line their pockets. Even the ORs use their military positions and access to scarce resources to make “tea money”, for example by dabbling in the black market or by extorting payments from members of the public.²⁰¹ As one Yangon businessman has lamented, “Either you have green (US dollars) or real khaki green, or you can’t do business and make real money in my country.”²⁰²

Broadly speaking, under General Ne Win such activities were not tolerated, but after 1988 attitudes toward the exploitation of military positions to make money on the side seemed to become more

itself through at least three generations of military officers. Despite recurring tensions and occasional crises, they have remained surprisingly cohesive and loyal. Generally speaking, discipline has held firm, guaranteeing the Tatmadaw's survival and continued dominance of Myanmar life, despite its lack of a popular mandate. Supported by an elaborate system of rewards and punishments that has kept its personnel in line, it was able to become even more powerful and autonomous. When the military regime handed over the reins to President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government in 2011, it was stronger than it had been at any time since the 1962 coup.

Also, despite their appearance on billboards erected around the country (in both English and Burmese), and their obligatory reproduction in books and newspapers throughout the SLORC/SPDC period, the "three national causes" of "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and the perpetuation of sovereignty" are not just propaganda slogans. As noted above, they reflect deeply-held beliefs and shared commitments, derived from Myanmar's troubled history, current challenges and the Tatmadaw's perceived leadership role.


It was on the basis of these principles, formally enshrined in the 2008 constitution, that in 2003 the Tatmadaw's leadership was able to launch a plan for the managed transition of the country from a military dictatorship to a "disciplined democracy", to be implemented over a decade or more. In doing so, the armed forces high command demonstrated an

ability to think strategically, formulate and maintain a long-term vision for the country's future. This was a significant achievement, given the military's historical role as a guardian of the status quo. The Tatmadaw's leadership in 2003 demonstrated a willingness to embrace change and to work towards a more democratic future for Myanmar. This was a bold move, given the military's historical role as a guardian of the status quo. The Tatmadaw's leadership in 2003 demonstrated a willingness to embrace change and to work towards a more democratic future for Myanmar. This was a bold move, given the military's historical role as a guardian of the status quo.

teach and develop specific military, academic and technical skills, but also to implement a sophisticated ideological program. This starts with classes at

to reshuffle ministerial responsibilities to give civilians greater power, have been viewed with concern.²⁶⁵ Indeed, the generals may have seized power in February 2021 to forestall such plans.²⁶⁶

Isolation

One aspect of the Tatmadaw that strikes many foreign observers is the extraordinary degree of control that is exercised over the private lives of both officers and ORs. Indeed, it has been claimed that, once someone joins the armed forces they have no private lives. This also applies to their families. Most servicemen and women live on military bases, where they are subject to constant surveillance by their peers, their superiors and the ubiquitous military intelligence service, the Office of the Chief of Military Security Affairs (OCMSA).²⁶⁷ Even allowing for some exaggeration, defectors have described a cloistered, strictly controlled life where “everything is monitored”.²⁶⁸ The level of control extends from the colour of the  worn by soldiers’ wives (red is not favoured, as it is the recog5 (e)-832da276.3 (o)-8.3 (n)eolou,

their right to decide for themselves how their country is managed and developed. For example, in

going to be very effective, not so much because the SLORC and SPDC could work around them (which they could) but because they were seen as an affront to Myanmar's national dignity.⁸⁰⁷ They

insurgent groups and activist organisations based in Myanmar and around its borders received clandestine support from foreign governments and independent

For 20 years, we have been in the

regime seems to become. As Foreign Minister Win Aung stated in 1999, "Our mentality is not to succumb to any pressure. If there is pressure put upon us, we become more resistant to this pressure²⁸⁰. It took decades, and even now is not accepted by die-hard activists, but most governments and international organisations accept that economic and other sanctions were merely "modest inconveniences" for the SLORC and SPDC. The hard line policies adopted by many countries demonstrably failed to change the generals' thinking or make them amend any of their core policies. Sanctions were symbolically important, but the me, bo (h)-7.5 1

pandemic devastating the country. Recent reports predict that up to half the population will contract the virus, and millions may die. Yet, even in these dire circumstances, the generals seem to be calculating the odds on their own survival, the survival of the Tatmadaw and the survival of the country as a stable, united and independent state under their control.

norms. That will be expected. After that, however, it is up to the negotiators. One approach would be to acknowledge the generals' commitment to Myanmar's best interests, as they see them. The point can then be made that these goals cannot be achieved unless circumstances change. This would not only be in the Caretaker Government's interests but also those of Myanmar more broadly. A critical first step, however, would be for the generals to shift their current stance and embrace policies that would help relieve Myanmar's immediate problems. If this was not done, history would judge them unkindly. By citing the Caretaker Government's own broad aims regarding matters like education, health and child welfare, many of which are uncontroversial, foreign delegations may get a sympathetic hearing. The obvious next step would be to ask how the international community can help the generals to make the necessary changes. Such an approach would not satisfy the regime's strongest critics, who want nothing less than the overthrow of the Caretaker Government, disbandment of the Tatmadaw and the trial of the senior generals. However, it may help more of Myanmar's people survive the current crisis³⁸⁵

As part of such an approach, there may be value in pointing out to the generals that the resolution of Myanmar's current problems, or at least the provision of practical assistance, would not only be in Myanmar's interests but also in those of other countries. For example, even if Myanmar did not become a "failed state", whatever that may mean in this context, there would be serious repercussions for its immediate neighbours if it continued along its current trajectory.

The social distress, civil (e)-8.3 ((s)-9.8 -4.5 (e)-6.3 (s)-9.7 (8)1.3 Td md)-3.51.6 Td [(o)8.1 7.6 (i)1.5 (a)--8 (.)TJ 0 -1.3 T

level of public outrage and official concern generated by the 2021 coup and its bloody aftermath, that even to contemplate discussions with the Caretaker Government is to court controversy.³⁹⁵ Already there have been accusations that, simply by speaking to the junta, the international community has bestowed some form of legitimacy upon it.³⁹⁶ Many activists are demanding that talks be held instead with the self-styled National Unity Government (NUG), created in April 2021 by an eclectic mixture of elected NLD politicians, minor party members, EAOs and pro-democracy figures. However, the NUG has no formal standing, controls no territory in its own right, nor has the power to make significant changes inside Myanmar. Its stated policies may have popular appeal, at least outside Myanmar, but in many ways are quite unrealistic.³⁹⁷ Its “declaration of war” on 7 September 2021 caused widespread foreign concern.³⁹⁸ Some officials have already made contact with NUG representatives, but formal recognition is unlikely.³⁹⁹ Any government or international organisation that openly acknowledged this shadow administration would be condemned by the Caretaker Government. Their resident representatives would most likely be declared and expelled from Myanmar. They would thus lose any chance they ever had of being able to assist in delivering the kind of aid that is so badly needed.⁴⁰¹

There is also the risk that, by acknowledging the historical, cultural and social foundations of the generals’ mindset, and consciously taking them into account in any negotiations, governments will be accused of being apologists for the junta.⁴⁰² As some Myanmar-watchers have already found to their cost, even to suggest that the generals may be justified in having certain concerns is to invite condemnation from members of the global activist community. Similarly, to posit various intangible reasons for the behaviour of the armed forces and its leaders over the years has been seen as making excuses for policies and practices that are by any normal measure inexcusable.⁴⁰³ Hard-headed analyses by veteran Myanmar-watchers that do not support the prevailing popular mood have also attracted the ire of pro-democracy activists, human rights campaigners and anti-junta Burmese.⁴⁰⁴ In the highly-charged atmosphere that surrounds contemporary Myanmar, even scholarly works employing established social science techniques, with the aim of producing objective, evidence-based analyses, have been dismissed as “bloodless erudition”, far removed from the harsh

CONCLUSION

Ideally in progress and to be continued

Vaclav Havel
"Foreword", in Benedict Rogers,
(Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010)

A survey such as this is a real "ramble through the brambles", as a veteran British diplomat once described discussions about policy options on Myanmar.¹³ There are political thorns everywhere, threatening to draw blood, analytical thickets inviting entanglements of all kinds, and emotional bogs luring the reader deeper into impossible moral and ethical dilemmas. It is offered, however, in the interests of intellectual inquiry and in the hope that these musings will be of interest to those officials, academics and others who, in their own ways and for their own purposes, all follow developments in Myanmar with keen interest.

This study is necessarily laden with all sorts of caveats and cautions. In part, this is because it deals with intangibles, and what former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called "known unknowns".¹⁴ The Tatmadaw begs for closer attention, but there is simply not enough hard data on which to draw firm conclusions. It is also because Myanmar's senior officer corps defies detailed analysis. In part, this is because there are vast gaps in the public record, not to mention the "unknown unknowns", or "the ones we don't know we don't know".¹⁵ This leaves the field wide open to intuition, interpretation and speculation. Even if based on wide reading and long experience, these are very fragile bases for serious analysis. Inevitably, an exercise such as this attracts questions, criticisms and controversy of all kinds, made all the more heated by the dreadful events of the past eight months. As has been seen on many occasions before now, Myanmar has the power to arouse

strong passions on the part of officials, activists and members of the public, in many countries. In these days of the Internet, social media and other forms of mass communication, such emotions can easily overwhelm objective analysis, evidence-based or not.

It is to be hoped, however, that whatever the verdict passed on this exploratory survey, and its tentative conclusions, there is wide agreement about its basic premise. That is, before any progress can be made in resolving Myanmar's many complex problems, both those inside the country and those outside it need to understand much better the mindset of the generals who make up the Tatmadaw's senior officer corps, in particular those who are members of the Caretaker Government. They need to try and see the world from the generals' perspective and formulate their responses accordingly. For, unless it is known how the generals look at themselves, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar and the world, it will not be possible to treat with them in a productive fashion. Even then, interlocutors are going to require great patience and a willingness to compromise, even to win small gains. Indeed, if a decision is made to talk with the generals, as seems inevitable at some stage, then nothing could be worse than going into negotiations with a resolutely Western approach, making strong demands and insisting that to avoid dire consequences the generals in effect surrender their position. For all the reasons outlined above, that is simply not going to happen. It will only make the generals even more resistant to change. As always, it will be the long-suffering people of Myanmar who will pay the costs.

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90. Callahan, *Burma: A Country Guide*, p. 6.
91. See, for example, Monique Skidmore, "Scholarship, Advocacy and the Politics of Engagement in Burma (Myanmar)", in Victoria Sanford and Asale Angel-Ajani (eds), *Burma: A Country Guide* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), pp. 42-59.
92. Callahan, *Burma: A Country Guide*, p. 6.
93. Callahan, *Burma: A Country Guide*, p. 7. See also R.H. Taylor, *Burma: A Country Guide* (London: Hurst and Co., 2009).
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181. Win Min, "Looking Inside the Burmese Military", *The New York Times*, pp. 1018-37.
182. Of the eight military members of the State Administration Council in February 2021, six had been Regional Military Commanders. See Htet Myet Min Tun, Moe Thuzar and Michael Montesano, "Min Aung Hlaing and his Generals", p. 6.
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184. It has been suggested, for example, that Min Aung Hlaing wished to avoid compulsory

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296. See Nancy Hudson-Ross and Myo Nyunt, "The Military Occupation of Burma", *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2005, pp. 500-21.
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338. She was reported to have made this remark during the 1973 Sinai talks.
339. Post, p. ix.
340. Timothy Garton Ash, "Beauty and the Beast in Burma", *New York Review of Books*, 25 May 2000, at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/05/25/beauty-and-the-beast-in-burma/>
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342. *Asia Briefing no. 166* (Yangon/Bangkok/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 16 February 2021), at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b166-responding-myanmar-coup>
343. Mehmet Ozturk, Iftikhar Gilani and Riyaz ul Khaliq, "Myanmar: 'Military coup triggers a shift in national consciousness'", *Al Arabiya*, 20 March 2021, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/myanmar-military-coup-triggers-shift-in-national-consciousness/2182486>
344. The assumption is that, despite informal contacts with the NUG, most governments

358. Rozenberg, "How 'The Generals' Think", p. 13. See also Callahan,
359. Pedersen, , p. 222.
360. Bo Kyaw Nyein, "Understand6.2 (r)-42-1m [(P)13 Tm [(, p)9.8 (.)TJ -0.02/rstrantrls' Think e

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381. Mark Tischler, "China's 'Never Again' Mentality", *The Diplomat*, 18 August 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/chinas-never-again-mentality/>
382. Lintner, "Neither Sanctions Nor Engagement Will Influence Myanmar's Military".
383. The generals are not alone in this attitude. For example, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi 'exploded' when former US Congressman Bill Richardson started 'lecturing' her

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398. D.S. Mathieson, "Myanmar's shadow government formally declares war", *Asiatimes*, 7 September 2021, at <https://asiatimes.com/2021/09/myanmars-shadow-government-formally-declares-war/>

399. This is not just a political decision. Most governments recognise states not governments, and the state of Myanmar has already been acknowledged by the international community. See Ralph Wilde, Andrew Cannon and Elizabeth Wilmshurst, *Myanmar's Shadow Government: A Legal Analysis* (London: Chatham House, 2010), at https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/Meeting%20Summary%20Recognition%20of%20States.pdf

400. The credentials of the two Myanmar representatives at the UN (one appointed by the ousted NLD government and one designated by the Caretaker Government will soon be decided by the relevant committee. At the time of writing, the outcome is uncertain. See Catherine Renshaw, "The battle for Myanmar's seat in the UN General Assembly", *Lowy Institute*, 10 August 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/battle-myanmar-s-seat-un-general-assembly>

401. See, for example, "Seoul Calls for Return to Democracy in Myanmar, Backs Shadow Govt", *Irrawaddy*, 27 August 2021, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/seoul-calls-for-return-to-democracy-in-myanmar-backs-shadow-govt.html>

402. See, for example, Bruce Matthews, "Myanmar: Prospects and Perils for the Military Junta", *Lowy Institute*, 10 August 2021, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/myanmar-prospects-and-perils-for-the-military-junta>

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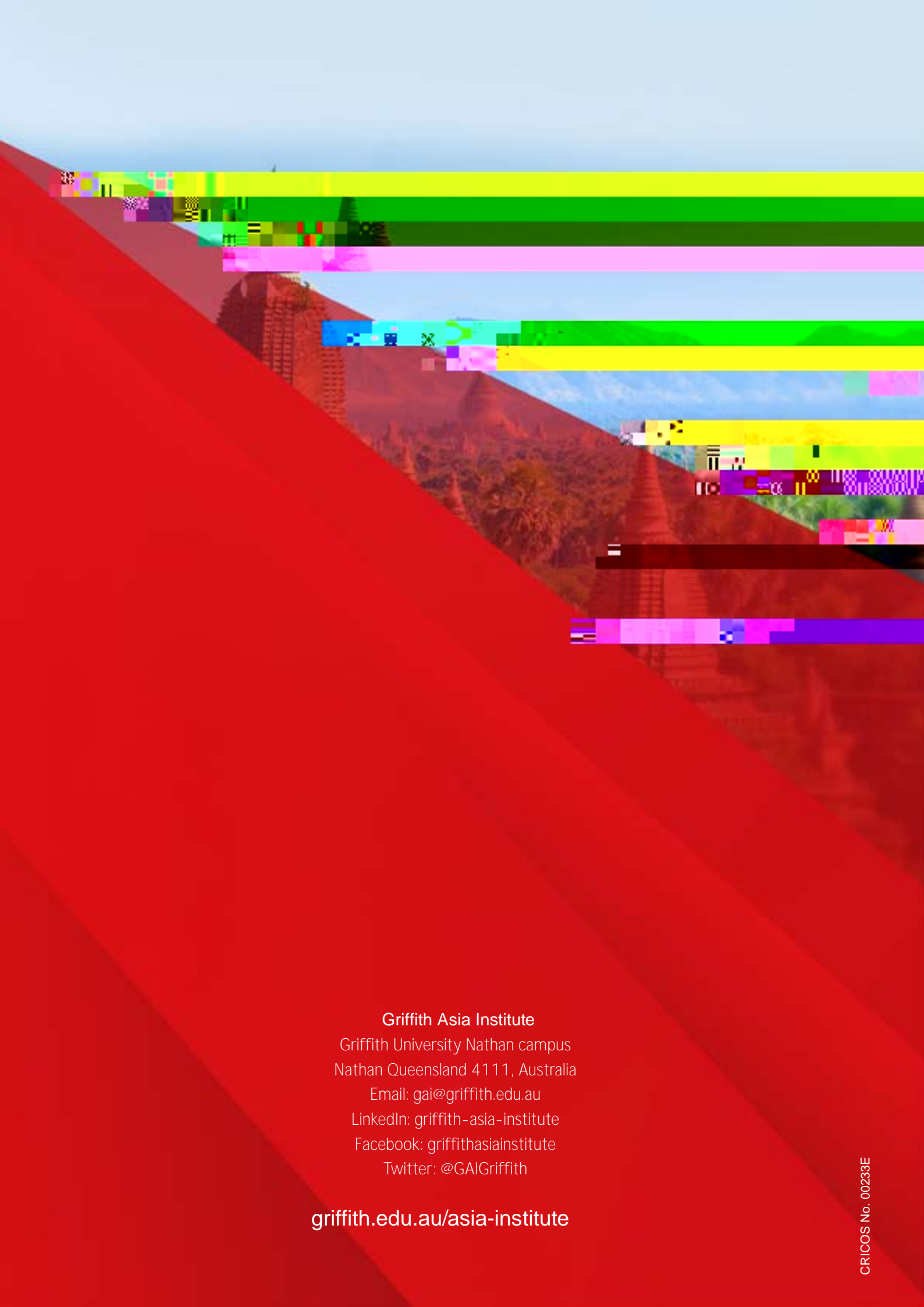


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Selth has published 11 books, 25 research papers and more than 50 other peer-reviewed works, most of them about Myanmar (Burma) and related subjects. He has also contributed to the public debate on Myanmar through numerous articles, commentaries and reviews in magazines, newspapers and online fora.

Books by Andrew Selth

- 1986 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 1988 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 1996 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 2002 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 2012 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 2015 *Myanmar: A Country Guide* (2nd edition)
- 2017 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 2018 *Myanmar: A Country Guide* (3rd edition)
- 2019 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 2020 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*
- 2021 *Myanmar: A Country Guide*



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