

# US- Myanmar military engagement: A step to counter China?

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THE very fact that the US is seriously thinking to involve Myanmar to observe its joint military exercises with Thailand demonstrates amply how far relations between the United States and Myanmar have improved since President U Thein Sein took power 18 months ago.

President Thein Sein made a landmark trip to New York last month, becoming the first Myanmar leader to speak to the UN General Assembly, following a series of visits to Myanmar by US officials including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The government has released hundreds of political prisoners, welcomed Nobel Peace laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party back into mainstream politics and inked a series of ceasefire deals with ethnic minority rebels.

In response the United States and other Western countries have begun rolling back sanctions. Washington has also urged Myanmar to cut any military ties with North Korea. U Thein Sein's government has said that it will abide by UN resolutions banning weapons exports from the secretive communist state.

A 22-strong delegation, led by Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Michael Posner, that included Lt. Gen. Francis

Wiercinski, the commanding general of the U.S. Army in the Pacific, recently visited Myanmar which would appear to be the first step toward a new relationship with Myanmar's military, one that could potentially provide the Southeast Asian country more leverage in dealing with larger neighbors, including China.

State media on October 18 said Deputy Minister for Defence Commodore Aung Thaw "led the discussion session in which the two sides held talks on levels and operations of defence institutions of Myanmar and US and exchanged views on future dialogue and bilateral cooperation".

Other issues discussed included protection of civilians in conflict areas, provision of humanitarian assistance in those regions, the judicial system, the role of courts and judicial staff in the rule of law, issues related to prisoners, and the role of civil society, the New Light of Myanmar reported on October 18.

"This dialogue would promote mutual trust and bilateral ties between Myanmar and the United States of America," Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs U Zin Yaw was quoted as saying.

"In the past, Myanmar has always been unhappy about the US military exercises (known as Cobra Gold), thinking that it was directed against them, said Dr Tin Maung Maung Than, a senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and an expert on Myanmar's military.

However, the military links between the two countries continued in the 80s. It is reported that some 255 Myanmar officers graduated from the United States from 1980 to 1988 under the International Military Education and Training programme, more than from any other country. The programme was halted, and U.S. sanctions were imposed in 1990.

Against the above background, the United States plans to invite Myanmar to a major regional military exercise next year, with Thailand, reflecting a dramatic easing of tensions between the US and Myanmar, according to Myanmar Times of 22 October

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The move would see Myanmar's military to join the annual Cobra Gold drills as an observer. Cobra Gold is the United States' largest multi-

lateral exercise in the Asia-Pacific region. The joint military exercise involves more than 10,000 U.S. and Thai troops and other participants from countries in the region. Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia are expected to participate next year along with 13 observer nations, Thai officials said.

"Myanmar is on the list of observers but it's not finalised yet," Thai Defence Ministry spokesman Colonel Thanathip Sawangsang said on October 19, adding that the participants would discuss the idea at a meeting later this month.

The proposal to invite Myanmar was Washington's initiative, said a senior Thai military official who did not want to be named. "If all members agree ... it will become official," he said.

However, US ambassador to Myanmar Derek Mitchell declined to comment on the report. Pentagon press secretary George Little told AP in Washington that Myanmar may be invited for the exercise, which normally takes place at the beginning of each year, but there has been no final decision.

In the longer term, a "military-to-military" partnership or dialogue is a definite possibility, according to U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, who visited the country recently on a separate tour through Asia,

meeting with President Thein Sein and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

In a recent report, the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies called on the US government to "increase engagement with Myanmar's military ... to provide training to a new generation of military officers in such areas as civilian-military relations, law of war, and transparency".

John Blaxland, a senior fellow at the Strategic and Defense Studies Centre Australian National University, said military engagement is critical for achieving a democratic, market-oriented state in Burma. An invitation amounts to a compliment to the military, which has long been isolated from

its neighbors, and that the participation in these exercises, even as an observer, is important for regional stability in a Voice of America article on 20th October.

He added "The authorities in Myanmar clearly want to diversify their strategic security relationships," he said. "They have had a very close relationship with China in recent years, India has made overtures, they're part of Asean [Association of Southeast Asian Nations], so the opening up of the opportunity of participating in Cobra Gold is actually a very important step."

The proposed invitation by the US provides a new dimension of how far the US-Myanmar relations have come since the former military regime transformed itself when President Thein Sein came to power in March 2010. It's the latest signal that Myanmar's gradual reform process is providing new opportunities for Washington to pursue President Obama's Asia pivot strategy.

Observers believe China, which until recently had enjoyed a privileged position in the hierarchy of Myanmar foreign relations, will probably view this nascent military relationship with the US with great suspicion. Observers add that Washington's biggest military concern in Asia is reportedly China's growing and increasingly assertive armed forces, in particular in South China Sea. America's regional allies have generally welcomed a renewed U.S. emphasis on Asia, which includes deepening existing partnerships and building new ones.

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# Name that foreign policy legacy

JOHN FEFFER

IN re-electing President Barack Obama, voters decisively rejected the Republican version of economic reform. Obama is already angling to use his mandate to solve the nation's fiscal woes by letting the Bush-era tax cuts expire for the rich.

But the election delivered no foreign policy statement. Mitt Romney and Obama rarely disagreed on anything that had to do with other countries. Iran? Romney promised more of the same. Israel? Even more. Drone warfare? What drones?

There's no reason to assume that Obama will adopt a bold new approach to foreign policy in his second term.

But never mind that, pundits and journalists are now playing their favorite post-election game: pumping up the legacy.

"For any reelected president, the notion of a foreign policy legacy has a certain allure," Josh Gerstein wrote in Politico. "It offers a chance to leave a lasting global imprint and an alternative to the daily interference of Congress on domestic issues."

The New York Times' editorial writers drafted a short list of options for Obama to choose from over the next two years: nuclear arms cuts, an accelerated withdrawal from Afghanistan, negotiations with Iran, a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine before the next election season turns even the boldest president into a play-it-safe standard-bearer for his party.

I'm sure Obama would treasure a foreign policy legacy, like being known as the President Who Ended the Arab-Israeli Conflict or the President Who Froze Global Warming in Its Tracks. But let me inject a dose of realism into this debate on legacy. After all, Obama himself is a certified realist.

First of all, the idea that Obama can chart a foreign policy path without Republican interference is wishful thinking. On the first day of his first term, he tried to close the Guantanamo prison only to come up against a Republican wall of resistance. He pledged to reduce nuclear weapons but GOP lawmakers made an arms control agreement with Moscow contingent on an extravagant modernization of the very nuclear weapons complex that should have been going on the chopping block. Republican-controlled House committees Energy and Commerce, Natural Resources block the White House from addressing climate change.

Just this year, Obama tried to negotiate a prisoner exchange with the Taliban the first step in what might have been more wide-ranging negotiations but the Republican Congress balked.

Obama can, of course, travel wherever he pleases and talk to whom-ever he wants. But if the discussions result in a treaty, the Senate must approve it by a two-thirds vote and the Democrats don't have that margin of control. If the discussions result in an agreement that costs any money, then the House Appropriations committee has to weigh in. And that brings the Republicans back into the loop.

But let's assume for a moment that Obama can overcome these political obstacles. Is he willing to invest the political capital to do so?

The record so far suggests that he likes to make important game-changing speeches on re-engaging the Muslim world, on nuclear abolition but he isn't willing to put in the monumental effort to implement these visions.

The Obama administration prefers to "lead from behind" rather than step boldly in front of everyone else. It makes the home front think health care reform the top priority.

The one major diplomatic accomplishment of his first term the rapprochement with Burma that culminated in Obama's recent trip there is emblematic of this more modest approach to foreign policy. The negotiations with a junta making a slow transition away from authoritarianism have taken place rather quietly, in close coordination with allies, and away from the main stage of global affairs.

Under Obama's leadership, Washington is finally coming to terms with the world's multipolarity. The notion that one man or one country can change this multipolar world is fast becoming antiquated.

Getting Americans to accept this new reality may ultimately mark Obama's foreign policy legacy.

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# Food security in South Asia: Much needed regional cooperation

WOLFGANG-PETER ZINGEL

WITH 1.7 bn people, South Asia has more inhabitants than Europe, North and South America put together. In a few years time South Asia is expected to overtake East Asia and then will be the most populous region of the world. Unfortunately, it is also the poorest region. More people are going hungry than in Africa. Feeding better a rising population will be one of the most pressing needs of the years ahead (Zingel 1999, 2006).

There is substantial inequality within the region, especially in food supply. If South Asian cooperation is

Women and girls are the worst fed in the world. Compared by income groups, women and girls are less well fed in South Asia than in Asia.

As harvests fluctuate over the years, still depending on the seasonal monsoon rains, especially the poorer people suffer in years of bad harvests.

Amartya K. Sen has brought out that there are no famines in democracies. However, there still is hunger.

## SWOT: strength and weaknesses, opportunities and threats

The greatest strength of South Asian agriculture is that it has been keeping the pace of population growth and even to grow a little faster, so that South Asia on average has been better fed by own production than in previous decades. Even in Bangladesh, we have been witnessing an unexpected rise not only of industrial, but also of agricultural production.

The major weakness is distribution. Markets work quite efficiently; there is hardly any need that South Asian governments engage themselves in the physical distribution besides investing in the necessary infrastructure for transport and communication. What is needed is a distribution of incomes and wealth, so that people have the necessary means either to produce enough for their own

consumption or to purchase the quantities needed for a healthy subsistence.

The greatest threat comes from an overuse of the natural environment, from an irresponsible price policy in the power sector and a non-sustainable use of irrigation water.

## Regional cooperation

Saarc was established in 1985. The idea was that South

Asia might be united like Europe in the European Union or the Southeast Asia in ASEAN. In that hope, a South Asian Preferential Trade Area (Sapta) and a South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta) were established.

Afghanistan joined Saarc in 2007. A number of states have observer status. It was hoped that the regional cooperation would help to overcome hostilities among neighbours as in Europe and in Southeast Asia. South Asia, however, is different, mainly because of the tense relation between its two major partners, India and Pakistan.

Although India and Pakistan are founding members of the WTO, they have used all possible excuses not to open their borders for bilateral trade. Most of the bilateral trade goes via third countries, especially Dubai, blamed in India and Pakistan as "smuggle". The trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan also mostly goes unaccounted, helped by Afghanistan's transit rights through Pakistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) being a virtual free trade zone.

The situation between India and Bangladesh is not much better: There are only a few crossings; paperwork easily takes days and Indian entrepreneurs are blaming the Indian government more than the governments of the neighbouring countries of obstructing trade and transport.

When in 1965 bad weather resulted in a steep decline in production and India and Pakistan were on the brink of famine, the subcontinent was saved by large scale 'wheat loans' of the USA and other exporters that later were turned into grants. 'Food power' as the then US Vice-President called it, had become a mighty weapon. For Indira Gandhi, who then became Prime Minister, it was a clear signal that India had to become independent in food supply at any cost. Since then, India has been pursuing a policy of price control, procurement and public food distribution. Indian stocks of food grain became the largest in the world. The main argument for a cautious food policy is that a huge country like India cannot hope to simply close a production gap by imports from the world market.

The situation was very different in neighbouring Bangladesh that usually imports around one tenth of food-grain requirements. In previous years, imports used to come from Thailand and other countries, now they come from India. The Bangladeshi government had the greatest difficulties to remind the Indian exporters to stick to prices agreed on earlier.

The seven Saarc members outside India together have not more than one third of the population of India. In case of need, they could only supply a small fraction of food what would be needed in India. The other way round, India would be in the position to meet almost all requirements from her neighbours.

Where cooperation is urgently needed is in resource management. Pakistan and Bangladesh are lower riparian of the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna/Surma and all their tributaries. In 1960, Pakistan and India signed the Indus Water Treaty that gave exclusive rights to three rivers each to the two countries. It has been a blessing politically. In the case of the Ganges, such a solution has not been possible, although there is a bilateral agreement between India and Bangladesh on the use of the Ganges water, the most important factor has not been addressed: Water all over South Asia is highly subsidized. Governments bear most of the construction and running costs of the irrigation networks, fuel for diesel and for electric pumps are provided at below market prices, if not free of charge. The resulting overuse of irrigation water means that hardly any water arrives at the lower stretches of the large rivers; in the case of the Ganges less and less water is left to be distributed.

Regional Cooperation leaves much to be desired. The problem is political. If the countries of South Asia come to a partnership and build cooperation there will be hardly any people starved.

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to become meaningful, more collaboration will be needed in ensuring food security.

## The state of food and nutrition in South Asia

South Asia is self-sufficient in food, at least on a net basis. Food production is enough for an average supply above 2,000 Kcal per head a day but that is the lowest of any world regions. Besides substantial inequality and insecurity of food supply, South Asia has a gender gap: