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US-Myanmar Defence Cooperation: From Disengagement to Limited Engagement

By Ian Storey

INTRODUCTION

Since the reformist government of President Thein Sein took office in March 2011, US-Myanmar relations have improved considerably. The administration of President Barack Obama has responded positively and concretely to President Thein Sein's moves to revitalize the economy, end conflict between the central government and ethnic groups, achieve political reconciliation and generally set Myanmar on the road to democracy. Over the past 18 months, Washington and Naypyidaw have normalized diplomatic relations and exchanged high level visits, notably US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Myanmar in December 2011 (the first by America's top diplomat in more than fifty years) and visits to Washington D.C. by President Thein Sein and the leader of the opposition party the National League for Democracy (NLD) Aung San Suu Kyi in September 2012. And while Washington has not yet fully lifted economic sanctions on Myanmar, it has permitted US companies to invest in the country. So long as the reform process continues, the prospects for US-Myanmar relations seem bright.

In contrast to the political and economic aspects of bilateral relations, defence and security cooperation has been much slower to develop for obvious reasons. Restrictions put in place by America in 1988 on contact between the US military and its Myanmar counterpart, the Tatmadaw, remain in effect, as does the US prohibition on weapons sales to Myanmar. Moreover, over the past two decades the Tatmadaw's image has been sullied by human rights abuses, and overcoming this legacy will take time. Nevertheless, the armed forces of both countries have signalled their desire to develop closer links, and moves are currently underway that will lay the foundations for future US-Myanmar military-to-military

relations, starting with cooperation to recover US military personnel lost in action in Burma during the Second World War. While defence and security ties between the United States and Myanmar will develop only gradually, and remain focused on humanitarian and professionalization issues for the foreseeable future, China will likely view this development as inimical to its strategic interests in Southeast Asia, and another example of a perceived policy of US encirclement.

HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION IN US-MYANMAR RELATIONS

After the Tatmadaw had seized power and violently suppressed anti-government protesters in 1988, the United States, along with other Western countries, imposed a slew of sanctions on Myanmar which restricted political, economic and military relations between the two countries. In 2003 the sanctions regime was tightened by President George W. Bush—whose administration would later characterize Myanmar as an “outpost of tyranny”, along with Cuba, North Korea, Iran and Zimbabwe— following a crackdown by Myanmar’s military junta on the activities of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. As Myanmar has moved to liberalize its economy and political system under President Thein Sein, however, the United States has progressively relaxed some of its sanctions. Most notably, following by-elections in April in which the NLD was returned to parliament, the Obama administration allowed US companies to invest in all sectors of the Myanmar economy. However, US firms cannot invest in entities owned or operated by the Tatmadaw or the Ministry of Defence, and the ban on arms sales to the country remains in place.

Yet US sanctions have not entirely prohibited contact between defence and military officials from the two countries at regional security forums, including at the highest levels, especially in recent years. In 2011 and 2012, both the US and Myanmar defence ministers attended the Shangri-La Dialogue –the annual meeting of Asian defence ministers in Singapore hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies— although they did not hold bilateral discussions. Earlier, in Hanoi in 2010, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his Myanmar counterpart Major General Hla Min had met at the inaugural meeting of the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and their successors will meet again at the next ADMM-Plus ministerial meeting in Brunei in 2013.¹

The ADMM-Plus process is important for the development of US-Myanmar military relations not only because it allows the two countries’ defence ministers to meet but also because it facilitates interaction between lower level officials on a more regular basis. In 2010 the ADMM-Plus agreed to establish Expert Working Groups (EWGs) to promote defence cooperation among the 18 members in five areas: military medicine, peacekeeping, maritime security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) and counter-terrorism. Since 2010 the EWGs have met two to three times a year, and have progressed from meetings and workshops to Table Top Exercises (TTX). In 2013 ADMM-Plus members are scheduled to hold three Field Training Exercises (FTX): an HA/DR-military medicine FTX in Brunei in June; a counter-terrorism FTX in Indonesia in September; and an at sea maritime

security FTX later in the year. US-Myanmar military interaction at the ADMM-Plus has taken place under the rubric of humanitarian cooperation, which is permitted under US rules. Prior to the ADMM-Plus process, US and Myanmar defence officials had cooperated over other humanitarian issues, though both instances were limited in scope and duration due to strained political relations. In May 2008, and despite initial resistance from the Myanmar government, the US military delivered relief supplies to areas in the Ayeyarwady Delta that had been devastated by Cyclone Nargis. Admiral Timothy Keating, then Commander of US Pacific Command (PACOM), even accompanied one of the relief flights into Myanmar, becoming the highest ranking US military officer to set foot in the country since 1988. However, Keating's offer of further humanitarian assistance to be delivered from US naval ships off the coast of Myanmar were turned down because of the military government's suspicion of US intentions towards the regime.

Several years earlier, the US and Myanmar had begun tentative moves towards increasing cooperation to recover American military personnel missing in action in Burma during the Second World War. But this initiative fell victim to the deterioration in bilateral relations following the Depayin Incident in 2003 during which pro-government mobs had attacked Aung San Suu Kyi's entourage, resulting in her re-arrest and a crackdown on the activities of the NLD. Due to improved relations, however, cooperative activities between the two militaries to recover America's war dead is now set to resume.

Looking to the Past to Build Future Cooperation

The US agency tasked with searching for, recovering and identifying US military personnel missing from past conflicts is the Joint Prisoner-of-War/Missing-in-Action Accounting Command (JPAC) based at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Honolulu, Hawaii.² According to JPAC, 73,690 Americans remain unaccounted for from the Second World War, 7,978 from the Korean War, 1,679 from the Vietnam War and 125 from the Cold War.³ While JPAC is not the only organization of its kind in the world, no country devotes as much resources to the recovery of its fallen soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen as America.

The work of JPAC began in 1973 during the closing stages of the Vietnam War, and ever since its inception the agency's primary focus has been to recover American servicemen missing in action (MIAs) in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Locating and identifying MIAs is a lengthy, complex and costly process. Based on historical research or reports by local people who have uncovered bone fragments or aircraft wreckage, JPAC dispatches investigation teams to sites across the world. If sufficient evidence is found, a recovery team of specialists, including a forensic anthropologist, conducts an excavation. Recovery sites are usually located in inhospitable terrain such as cliff sides, mountain tops or underwater. Recovered artefacts and human remains are subsequently sent to JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory (CIL), the largest forensic anthropology facility in the world. At CIL, forensic anthropologists use the remains to

determine sex, race, age at death and height. The majority of successful matches are made using dental records or material evidence such as personal effects, dog tags and clothing. When these are not available, JPAC scientists rely on mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). Unlike nuclear DNA, which is inherited from both parents, mtDNA is passed directly from a person's mother. JPAC has pioneered the use of mtDNA in the identification of human remains because it does not degrade as quickly as nuclear DNA. Once a successful identification has been made, the remains are returned to their families and buried with full military honours. The whole process can take many years.

Despite looming cuts in America's defence budget, Congress recently increased funding for JPAC so that the number of identifications can be increased from the current 70-80 per year to a minimum of 200 beginning in 2015. The increased funding will be used to stand-up more recovery teams, and the focus of their work will be Southeast Asia. The search for MIAs in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos is being stepped up because the region's acidic soil rapidly breaks down human remains. The search for MIAs from the Vietnam War has become a race against time.

In addition to accelerating the recovery of MIAs in Indochina, JPAC is also preparing to send its teams into Myanmar, possibly as early as 2013. According to JPAC, there are an estimated 730 MIAs in Myanmar. From 1942 until 1945 the US military fought Japanese forces in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre and ferried supplies by air to the Kuomintang (KMT) in China. Supplying KMT forces required US aircraft to fly over the Himalayas, the mountain range pilots nicknamed "The Hump". Many aircraft were shot down by enemy forces or crashed due to severe weather.

In 2003, at a time when US-Myanmar relations were going through a short-lived warming, JPAC teams examined around 30 sites in Myanmar but were withdrawn a year later as a result of the political fallout from the Depayin Incident. Cooperation to recover US MIAs remained suspended until US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the issue with Myanmar officials during her visit in December 2011. The issue was seen by both sides as relatively non-controversial and an area in which progress could be achieved in the near term. Accordingly, in February 2012, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Newberry travelled to Myanmar to open talks with the Myanmar government on resuming the search for MIAs.⁴ In August, a delegation of military officers from the Tatmadaw visited JPAC in Hawaii for further discussions, paving the way for JPAC personnel to visit Myanmar for initial on-the-ground surveys either later this year or early next year.

Obstacles remain, however. Many of the MIAs are located in Kachin State –scene of some of the fiercest fighting in the CBI—which is still a conflict zone since the 17-year-old ceasefire between the central government and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) collapsed in June 2011 leading to a resumption in hostilities. Government and KIO officials are currently deadlocked over the venue for peace talks. The lack of a ceasefire agreement between Naypyidaw and the KIO could impede JPAC's mission in Myanmar.

When it does occur, JPAC's return to Myanmar will be important for three reasons. First, the recovery and identification of remains will bring closure to the families of US military personnel killed in the CBI theatre during the Second World War. Second, JPAC's

work has bipartisan political support in the United States and the search for MIAs in Myanmar may generate support within Congress for the complete lifting of US economic sanctions.

Thirdly, and most germane to this article, JPAC activities will act as a catalyst for enhanced US-Myanmar military-to-military relations. The work of JPAC recovery teams (of which there are presently 18) will have to be coordinated by military officials from both sides. Tatmadaw officers will likely be on site when the recovery teams begin their investigations. Given that the most common method of reaching remote sites is by air, JPAC may also utilize helicopters and transport aircraft belonging to the Tatmadaw. Regular and sustained interaction between US and Myanmar military personnel will help forge professional relationships and foster habits of cooperation which will be invaluable in helping the two armed forces understand each other better.

America's normalization process with another Southeast Asian country, Vietnam, provides an important precedent. US-Vietnamese talks on the POW/MIA issue began in the early 1980s and the first recovery operations began in late 1988. While bilateral discussions were often protracted, shared military cultures helped the two sides find practical and mutually acceptable solutions to address the MIA issue.⁵ Ultimately JPAC's work contributed to the normalization of US-Vietnam relations, including the lifting of US economic sanctions in February 1994 and the establishment of diplomatic ties in July 1995. Seventeen years on, America is one of Vietnam's largest trade and investment partners, and interaction between the US and Vietnamese armed forces is growing.

MOVING US-MYANMAR MILITARY-TO-MILITARY RELATIONS FORWARD

The defense establishments in both the United States and Myanmar appear keen to advance military-to-military relations. Myanmar officers who spoke with specialists from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank, expressed interest in participating in training programmes run by the US military.⁶ According to a report in the *Bangkok Post*, senior Myanmar military leaders have sought help from their Thai counterparts to gain observer status to the annual US-Thai Cobra Gold combined exercises.⁷ At the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta indicated his support for closer military ties with Myanmar.⁸ In October, a 22-member inter-agency delegation from the United States visited Naypyidaw for a human rights dialogue. The delegation included Lieutenant-General Francis Wiercinski, Commanding General of US Army Pacific, the highest ranking military officer to hold formal talks with Myanmar officials since the imposition of sanctions in 1988, and Deputy Assistance Secretary of Defense for East Asia Vikram Singh. En route to Myanmar, Deputy Secretary William J. Burns noted that the United States was considering "further steps" in bilateral military relations though he did not provide details.⁹

Notwithstanding the genuine desire of both sides to promote closer military ties, the process faces significant hurdles. The Myanmar government will need to make substantive progress on a range of challenging issues before full military relations can be restored, including ending ethnic conflicts, achieving political reconciliation, enacting judicial and media reforms and further liberalization of the economy. America has also pressed Myanmar to end its military relationship with North Korea. The US government will also want to see the Tatmadaw withdraw from politics completely and become a professional military force focused on national security issues. Indeed Clinton has stated that the US arms embargo will remain in force until Myanmar's military comes under civilian control.¹⁰ And no matter how keen the Obama administration or its successor is about advancing ties with Myanmar, the complete lifting of sanctions requires Congressional approval.

Talk of combined exercises between the US and Myanmar armed forces is therefore premature, to say the least. For the foreseeable future the two sides will be focused on advancing cooperation over humanitarian issues. Yet the US will also be keen to promote the professionalization of the Tatmadaw by exposing its officers to democratic values such as respect for human rights and the rule of law. To advance this process, the most obvious option would be to allow Myanmar officers to attend courses at US military educational institutions under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) programme. An IMET agreement between the United States and Myanmar is thus a priority if military-to-military ties are to advance.

THE CHINA FACTOR

Improved US-Myanmar relations will undoubtedly impact Myanmar's existing foreign relations, especially with Myanmar's northern neighbour China. After 1988, Myanmar and China forged a close relationship that served the interests of both governments well: Beijing helped the junta to consolidate power by arming the Tatmadaw with \$2 billion worth of military equipment; financial assistance from China helped keep Myanmar's economy afloat during lean times; China's purchase of Myanmar's rich natural resources, especially oil and gas, filled government coffers and allowed the government to circumvent Western sanctions; and China repeatedly used its position on the United Nations Security Council to shield Myanmar from international criticism of its human rights record. Nevertheless, Sino-Myanmar relations were, in the words of the International Crisis Group, a "marriage of convenience rather than a love match",¹¹ and Myanmar's leaders were always uncomfortable with their dependence on China. While the desire to reduce that dependence on China does not seem to have been a central driver of the reform process, what is clear is that as the government moves to broaden its foreign relations, China is in danger of losing its privileged position. President Thein Sein's decision in September 2011 to suspend construction of the Chinese-financed Myitsone dam –which on completion would have exported 90 per cent of the electricity generated to China– was an early indication that under the new government it was no longer business as usual in Sino-Myanmar relations.¹²

Both the US and Myanmar governments have been keen to stress, however, that the improvement in their bilateral relationship is not at the expense of Sino-Myanmar ties. Hillary Clinton has stated that the United States “does not expect any country to give up relationships with their neighbor”, noting that in the case of Myanmar and China there are “longstanding ties that certainly are deep in the soils of both nations”.¹³ During his visit to China in September 2012, President Thein Sein lauded the “deep friendship” between the two countries and promised to cultivate it further.¹⁴ Even Aung San Suu Kyi has tried to reassure Beijing, promising that the NLD would continue to promote good relations with China.¹⁵

Although China has been relatively muted in its response to burgeoning US-Myanmar relations, it is likely to look askance at recent developments. In particular China will view nascent military-to-military relations between the United States and Myanmar as part of the Obama administration’s “pivot” or rebalancing of military forces towards Asia. This strategy—which includes the stationing of US Marines in Darwin, northern Australia, the forward deployment of Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore, a greater US presence in Asia’s maritime domain, especially the South China Sea, and more frequent training and capacity building exercises with Southeast Asian countries—has been interpreted by Beijing as part of a wider policy of US-led encirclement or even containment of China.

As noted in this article, the full normalization of US-Myanmar military ties faces significant hurdles and will take time. Nevertheless, China is likely to adopt countermeasures to the nascent relationship between the US military and the Tatmadaw by stepping up its defence diplomacy activities in Myanmar. Such activities may include renewed arms sales (which have declined over the past decade, partly due to complaints from the Tatmadaw over the poor quality of Chinese equipment), naval visits (the Chinese Navy only made its first port call to Myanmar in 2010) and the holding of combined exercises which the People’s Liberation Army has so far only conducted with the armed forces of Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. As such, Myanmar could well become a critical theatre in the growing competition between America and China for influence in Southeast Asia.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *The ADMM-Plus brings together the defence ministers of the 10 ASEAN countries plus eight Dialogue Partners: Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States.*
- 2 See JPAC website <<http://www.jpac.pacom.mil/>>.
- 3 Statistics provided to author by JPAC.
- 4 Jane Perlez, "A solemn path back to Myanmar for the U.S.," *New York Times*, 14 April 2012.
- 5 I am indebted to Lewis Stern and Bob Destatte for sharing their insights into the POW/MIA issue and its contribution to the full normalization of US-Vietnam relations.
- 6 Ernest Bower, Michael Green, Christopher Johnson and Murray Hiebert, *CSIS Myanmar Trip Report: State of the Nation and Recommendations for U.S. Policy* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 10 September 2012), pp. 7-8 <http://csis.org/files/publication/120911_MyanmarTripReport.pdf>.
- 7 "Myanmar makes war games plea", *Bangkok Post*, 17 August 2012.
- 8 "US looking to forge military ties with Burma", *Associated Press*, 2 June 2012.
- 9 Interview, William J. Burns, Deputy Secretary, US Embassy, Tokyo, 15 October 2012 <<http://www.state.gov/s/d/2012/199122.htm>>.
- 10 Remarks with Foreign Minister of Burma U Wanna Maung Lwin After Their Meeting, US Department of State, 17 May 2012 <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/05/190260.htm>>.
- 11 International Crisis Group, *China's Myanmar Dilemma*, Asia Report No. 177 (14 September 2009), p. i available at <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/china/177-chinas-myanmar-dilemma.aspx>>.
- 12 Ian Storey, "Burma and China: The Beginning of the End of Business as Usual", *China Brief XI*, Issue 22 (30 November 2011), pp. 13-17 <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38718&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=4eb55cda9bfa924d162c24686c90f2b9>.
- 13 Remarks with Foreign Minister of Burma U Wanna Maung Lwin After Their Meeting, US Department of State, 17 May 2012 <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/05/190260.htm>>.
- 14 "Thein Sein concludes China visit", *The Irrawaddy*, 24 September 2012.
- 15 "Suu Kyi looks to 'Good Neighbor' China", *The Irrawaddy*, 4 July 2012.

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