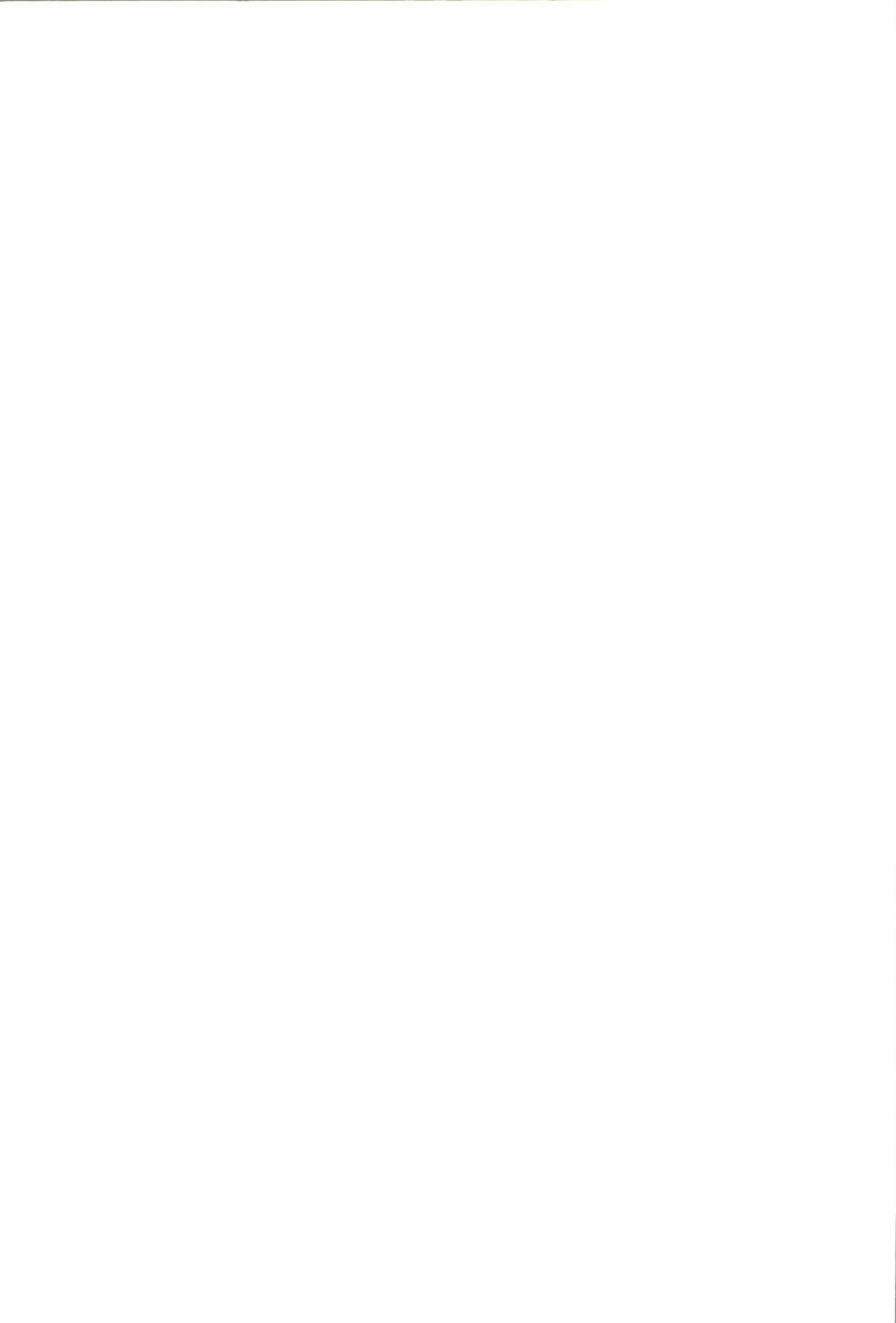


BURMA'S SECRET MILITARY PARTNERS

Andrew Selth



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ABSTRACT

Since the armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) took back direct control of the country in 1988, Burma has consistently been branded a pariah state by the Western democracies, and made to endure a wide range of political, economic and military sanctions. As a result, the Burmese armed forces have lost much of the access they once enjoyed to the arms, training and military technology of their traditional suppliers, such as the United States of America and Federal Republic of Germany. Some countries, however, have deliberately ignored this body of international opinion and developed close defence relations with the Rangoon regime. While a few, such as the People's Republic of China, have barely troubled to conceal such ties, there are other smaller and diplomatically more vulnerable countries which have attempted to hide the links which now exist between their armed forces and arms industries, and those of Burma. Three countries which stand out most strongly in this latter group are Singapore, Israel and Pakistan, all of which currently enjoy significant military partnerships with Burma. Suggestions that Germany has quietly resumed its former links with the *Tatmadaw*, however, remain unconfirmed.

THE AUTHOR

Andrew Selth is a former visiting fellow of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. He is the author of numerous published works on the Burmese armed forces, including *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces since 1988*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No.113 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1996). He is currently preparing an expanded and fully updated version of that book.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After the creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988, Burma's name was officially changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989 the military regime changed the country's name once again, this time to the 'Union of Myanmar', a direct transliteration of *Myanmar Naing-Ngan*, the official name in the Burmese language. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform to their original Burmese pronunciation. These new names were subsequently accepted by the United Nations and most other major international organisations. Some governments and opposition groups, however, have clung to the old forms as a protest against the military regime's human rights abuses and its refusal to hand over power to an elected civilian government. In this study the better known names, for example Burma instead of Myanmar, and Rangoon instead of Yangon, have been retained for ease of recognition.

Even before the SLORC introduced its new nomenclature, some places in Burma were known by different names, or the names were given different spellings in English. When such places are first mentioned in the text, the alternative form is given in brackets immediately afterwards, for example Akyab (Sittwe), or Htonebo (Tonbo).

The use (or otherwise) of the final 'r' in Myanma(r) relates to the tonal nature of the Burmese language.

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I am indebted to the many people who helped me with sources and advice. Not all can be named here, but special mention should be made of my fellow Burma-watchers David Steinberg, Bertil Lintner and Garry Woodard. There are a number of others who deserve mention here but, because of their official positions, or their fear of retribution from the current Burmese government, would prefer to remain anonymous. They have my heartfelt thanks. I am also obliged to Lyndall McLean and her family for their generous hospitality during a research visit to Rangoon in November and December 1999. As always, I could not have completed this project in the face of many other competing demands without the steadfast support and encouragement of Pattie Collins.

It goes without saying that, while I gratefully acknowledge the help given by all of the above, I take full responsibility for what I have written. For the record, it should also be noted that this study is based entirely on open sources. It represents my views alone and has no official status or endorsement.

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Andrew Selth
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June 2000

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAM	air-to-air missile
AAP	Australian Associated Press
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACDA	Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
AEW	airborne early warning
AFP	Agence France Presse
AG	<i>Aktiengesellschaft</i> (Joint Stock Company)
AR	assault rifle
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BA	Burma Army
BAe	British Aerospace
BAF	Burma Air Force
BN	Burma Navy
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CIS	Chartered Industries of Singapore
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CW	chemical weapons
DDSI	Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
DSI	Defence Services Institute
FFV	<i>Forenade Fabriksverken</i>
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GAIC	Guizhou Aviation Industry Corporation
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GmbH	<i>Gemeinschaft mit beschränkter Haftung</i> (Limited Liability Company)
GTZ	<i>Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit</i> (Agency for Technical Cooperation)
IAF	Israel Armed Forces
ICBL	International Campaign to Ban Landmines
IMI	Israel Military Industries
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence (Directorate)
<i>Ka Pa Sa</i>	<i>Karkweye Pyitsu Setyoun</i> (Directorate of Defence Industries)

<i>Ka Sa La</i>	<i>Akyisa Sehmou Longhan</i> (Heavy Industries Corporation)
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
MFW	Myanma Fritz Werner
MP	Member of Parliament
NAMC	Nanchang Aircraft Manufacturing Company
NCGUB	National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma
NLD	National League for Democracy
OAV	<i>Ostasiatischer Verein</i> (East Asia Association)
OIC	Organisation of the Islamic Conference
PAC	Pakistan Aeronautical Complex
PLA	People's Liberation Army
POF	Pakistan Ordnance Factories
PVC	polyvinyl chloride
SAF	Singapore Armed Forces
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SNIE	Special National Intelligence Estimate
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSM	surface-to-surface missile
TNT	trinitrotoluene
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Commission
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States (of America)
USN	United States Navy

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 12 years, Burma has consistently been branded a pariah state by the Western democracies, and made to endure a wide range of political, economic and military sanctions. The United Nations and other multilateral organisations have repeatedly condemned the Rangoon regime for its long record of human rights abuses, and its failure to recognise the results of the 1990 general elections, in which the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won a clear victory. As a result, the Burmese armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) have lost much of the access they once enjoyed to the arms, training and military technology of their traditional suppliers, such as the United States of America and the Federal Republic of Germany. Some countries, however, have deliberately ignored this body of international opinion and developed close defence relations with the Rangoon regime. While a few of them, notably the People's Republic of China, have barely troubled to conceal such ties, there are some smaller and diplomatically more vulnerable states which still attempt to hide the links which exist between their armed forces and arms industries, and those of Burma. Three countries which stand out most strongly in this latter group are Singapore, Israel and Pakistan, all of which currently enjoy significant military partnerships with Burma.

Threats and Responses

Not long after Burma's armed forces created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988, and took back direct control of the country, they concluded that they faced four main threats. The first was from a renewed outbreak of civil unrest in the main cities caused by Burma's burgeoning pro-democracy movement. The second was from an upsurge of fighting in the countryside by ethnic, ideological and narcotics-based insurgent groups, trying to take advantage of the military regime's serious political and economic

problems to recover ground lost in earlier campaigns.¹ The third was from the possible creation of a partnership of some kind between the urban dissidents and ethnic insurgents, in a concerted effort to bring down the Rangoon regime. The fourth fear was of an invasion from a coalition of countries led by the United States, determined to replace Burma's military dictatorship with a popularly elected civilian government under someone like opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.²

Given Burma's recent history, and the military regime's customary way of tackling such problems since General Ne Win's *coup d'état* in 1962, the SLORC's answer to this nightmare scenario was perhaps predictable. It was first to crush the urban dissidents, as quickly and as ruthlessly as possible. In the months that followed the August/September 1988 uprising, thousands of students and other pro-democracy activists were rounded up and imprisoned without trial in a massive operation against all forms of opposition to the central government. Many more people were driven into exile abroad. At the same time, the *Tatmadaw* was forced to respond to major military offensives by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in northeastern Shan State, by the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in the mountains along the Thai border, and by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the country's rugged far north. On all three fronts the fighting was fierce and casualties were high.³ The SLORC also made a number of attempts to prevent urban dissidents and others from joining insurgent groups like the Karens and Kachins in their armed struggles against the regime.⁴ In addition, the *Tatmadaw* began taking precautions against the possibility of an invasion by the United States and its allies, a fear encouraged by the

¹ Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (White Lotus, London, 1990), pp.151-4. See also 'Troops tend cities, rebels infiltrate central Burma', Agence France Presse (AFP), 24 October 1988.

² William Ashton, 'Myanmar: Junta Forges Secret Defence Ties', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, Vol.26, No.4, June/July 2000, pp.15-16.

³ Lintner, *Outrage*, pp.151-4.

⁴ Lintner, *Outrage*, pp.155-61. See also Melinda Liu, 'Burma's New Guerrillas: The student-rebel link', *Bulletin/Newsweek*, 25 October 1988, p.83; Bertil Lintner, 'Girding for the Battle', *India Today*, 31 October 1988, pp.100-1; and Louise Williams, 'Burma's heroes have their backs to the wall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 1988.

sudden appearance of the US Seventh Fleet in Burmese waters in late 1988.⁵

Most of these measures placed a premium on military strength, and a plentiful supply of arms and ammunition, but the *Tatmadaw's* armouries were almost empty. A series of bitter campaigns against the insurgent groups around the country's northern borders before 1988 had seriously depleted the government's stocks of essential materiel.⁶ Also, Burma's chronic foreign exchange problems in the period leading up to the pro-democracy demonstrations in the latter part of that year had made it difficult for the regime to purchase fresh military supplies.⁷ Nor could the country's own arms factories meet the demand. Not only did they lack the capacity to produce the required arms and ammunition in time, but they were also facing shortages of critical raw materials, much of which had to be imported. In any case, major new items wanted by the Burma Army (BA), like tanks and artillery, could not be manufactured locally and had to be purchased from abroad. The Burma Air Force (BAF), and to a lesser extent the Burma Navy (BN), had always been heavily dependent on logistics and technical support from overseas. As a consequence, the SLORC was forced to seek out overseas suppliers who were prepared to turn a blind eye to the regime's human rights abuses, and who did not mind flouting the arms embargo placed on Burma by the Western democracies.

By abandoning the foreign policy principles observed by Burma for decades, the SLORC was able within a year to negotiate a far-

⁵ Andrew Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces since 1988*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No.113 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1996), p.138. See also Terry McCarthy, 'Paranoia time for Burma's generals', *Canberra Times*, 4 April 1991.

⁶ For example, a protracted campaign by the *Tatmadaw* against the CPB had resulted in the recovery of a large tract of Burmese territory near the Chinese border. A major operation had also been launched against the KIA, while pressure was maintained against the Karens. See, for example, *Asia 1988 Yearbook* (Far Eastern Economic Review, Hong Kong, 1988), pp.106-7.

⁷ Before the political crisis began in July 1988, Burma's foreign exchange reserves were barely sufficient to cover the cost of imports for two weeks, a position greatly exacerbated by the withdrawal of external assistance after the September massacres. The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Thailand, Burma: Country Profiles 1989-1990* (Economist, London, 1990). See also 'Myanmar' in *Asian Development Outlook 1990* (Asian Development Bank, Manila, 1990), pp.143-8.

reaching agreement with China, which quickly became Burma's principal arms supplier and diplomatic partner.⁸ Later, Yugoslavia, Poland and Russia sold the regime some naval patrol boats, ground attack aircraft and helicopters. A number of other countries provided smaller shipments of arms and ammunition.⁹ Even before these deals were begun, however, three other countries had been prepared to come to the SLORC's assistance. The first was Singapore, which sent two shiploads of arms and ammunition to Rangoon in October 1988, to fill an urgent order for mortars, small arms ammunition, recoilless rifle rounds and raw materials for Burma's arms factories. The second was Pakistan which, only a few months after the SLORC's takeover, negotiated a deal to provide Burma with machine guns, small arms ammunition and mortar bombs. Israel too seemed prepared (through a Singaporean intermediary) to help its old friend and ally. A shipment of captured Palestinian weapons and ammunition (mainly rocket-propelled grenade launchers and recoilless guns) arrived in Burma from the Middle East in August 1989.¹⁰

The defence ties between Burma and these three countries, which were forged in the difficult days of late 1988 and early 1989, have quietly continued to develop. While none approach the level of cooperation which exists between China and Burma, Singapore has established a special relationship with the *Tatmadaw*, and Israel is active in a number of niche areas of military expertise. Pakistan's links

⁸ This remarkable policy development was made easier by the final collapse of the CPB (which had earlier been strongly supported by Beijing) in 1989. For the circumstances contributing to this collapse, see Bertil Lintner, *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)* (Cornell University, Ithaca, 1990).

⁹ See, for example, Andrew Selth, *Burma's Arms Procurement Programme*, Working Paper No.289 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1995).

¹⁰ Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, pp.17-18.

with Burma are more modest, but it still constitutes a valuable source of weapons, ammunition and training no longer available from other countries. There have even been suggestions that Germany, once Burma's main source of military technology, quietly re-established its ties with the Rangoon regime after a brief pause in 1988, and should still be counted among Burma's secret military partners.

BURMA AND GERMANY

From the late 1950s, until the creation of the SLORC in 1988, the Federal Republic of Germany was Burma's largest source of arms technology, and the key factor in the growth of its indigenous defence industries. A special relationship developed, based on these links, which was unique among Burma's foreign contacts. In the early 1980s, the FRG was even publicly accused of secretly building a chemical weapons (CW) plant for the Ne Win regime. Concerns were expressed about the nature of this relationship from time to time, but little action was taken to meet them. These criticisms reached a peak after the massacres of August and September 1988, when Burmese soldiers armed with German automatic rifles were seen on international television shooting down unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators on the streets of Rangoon. A number of pointed questions were asked in the *Bundestag* about the long relationship between the Bonn government and Burma's military dictatorship, which had been directed through both official aid channels and (more discreetly) a state-owned arms manufacturing company.

As a result of this public pressure, the FRG seemed prepared after 1988 to step back and let other countries provide Burma with the specialised machine tools, military technology and strategic raw materials which it so badly wanted. In recent years, however, there have been a number of suggestions that the now-united Germany has rekindled its defence ties with the Rangoon regime and, in defiance of both national and international restrictions, is once again one of Burma's secret military partners.

Early Contacts

After Burma regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, the fledgling administration of Prime Minister U Nu quickly demonstrated a high regard for West Germany's industrial achievements, and it was not long before Burma came to see the FRG as a potential source of vital technical and economic assistance. Burma formally ended its state of war with Germany in 1952. Four years later

the governments in Rangoon and Bonn established diplomatic relations, despite the strict Burmese foreign policy principle at the time of not recognising any divided states.¹ A trade agreement was reached the same year. Numerous official visits followed, in both directions, and despite Ne Win's overthrow of U Nu's democratic civilian government in 1962 the bilateral relationship continued to grow rapidly. In the 1970s a number of further agreements were signed relating to the provision of West German aid and economic cooperation. As a consequence, between 1969 and 1986 Bonn extended to Ne Win's ostensibly civilian Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) government aid worth US\$419.7 million, of which US\$77.4 million was given as grants and US\$342.3 million was in loans.² This level of assistance made West Germany Burma's second-largest aid donor after Japan, for that period.³

Burma also became a major market for West German commodities and expertise. Annual imports averaged US\$10.93 million between 1960 and 1970, and US\$23.38 million per year for the following decade. Between 1981 and 1987 Burma's imports from the FRG dramatically increased to US\$540.22 million, or an average of US\$77.17 million per year.⁴ According to the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), these imports included a large volume of military-related products and services, including the construction of defence production facilities, and dual-use equipment identified as being primarily for military use. For example, between 1978 and 1982 the FRG's recorded arms transfers to Burma amounted to US\$30 million (out of a total Burmese arms bill of US\$110 million).⁵ Between 1984 and 1988 the FRG's arms transfers to Burma were worth

¹ Burma established consular relations with the German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany) in 1960, and full diplomatic relations the following year.

² Liang Chi-shad, *Burma's Foreign Relations: Neutralism in Theory and Practice* (Praeger, New York, 1990), pp.173-4.

³ Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma: Prospects for Economic Development* (Paragon House, New York, 1992), p.235.

⁴ Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, p.174.

⁵ United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1972-1982* (ACDA, Washington DC, 1984), p.96. The ACDA publishes official estimates of the market value of deliveries of military imports, including services, the construction of defence production facilities, and dual-use equipment identified as being primarily for military use. Its statistics do not include foodstuffs, medical equipment and petroleum products.

US\$70 million. This was almost half of all Burma's arms-related imports for the period.⁶ There seems little doubt that a very large proportion, if not all, of the equipment and services provided was destined for Burma's indigenous defence factories, most of which had been built for the Ne Win regime directly or indirectly by the FRG government.⁷

Arms and Arms Industries

Burma's attempts to develop its own arms industries began in the early 1950s, when a factory was built near Inya Lake in Rangoon to produce small arms ammunition and copies of the Italian 9mm TZ45 submachine gun (known in Burma as the BA52 or 'Ne Win Sten').⁸ The Burmese arms industry was given a major boost in 1956, however, when the state-owned West German company Fritz Werner Industrie-Ausrüstungen GmbH agreed to build a factory in Rangoon with Heckler and Koch to produce *Gewehr 3* (G3) automatic rifles and related 7.62mm ammunition.⁹ Finance for the Burmese factory was provided on favourable terms by the FRG government. The project was a success, and it was not long before the G3 became the Burma Army's standard infantry weapon.¹⁰ Three variants of the G3 were also made, an assault rifle, a light machine gun and a sniper rifle.¹¹ Reflecting a decision by the Ne Win regime to move Burma's defence industries to more secure sites, a second factory was built in the 1960s near Prome (Pye) in Lower Burma to manufacture 7.62mm and 9mm

⁶ United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ADCA), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1989* (ACDA, Washington DC, 1990), p.116.

⁷ This probably accounts for the fact that Germany is rarely listed among those countries which have sold arms to Burma. See, for example, Bates Gill and J.N. Mak (eds), *Arms, Transparency and Security in South-East Asia*, SIPRI Research Report No.13 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997), pp.120-2.

⁸ T.B. Nelson, *The World's Submachine Guns* (Arms and Armour Press, London, 1977), Vol.1, pp.383-4, and pp.636-7.

⁹ Fritz Werner GmbH was a small arms-manufacturing company based in Geisenheim in the FRG which had gone bankrupt at the end of the Second World War and was later taken over by the Bonn government. See Bruce Hawke, 'Exposed: Burma's weapons industry', *Jane's Pointer*, December 1998, p.9.

¹⁰ Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Defence Expenditure and Arms Industries', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol.19, No.2, August 1998, pp.34-5.

¹¹ The *Tatmadaw* called the standard G3 automatic rifle the BA63. Local designations were also given to the light machine gun variant (BA64), the assault rifle (BA72), and the sniper rifle (BA100).

small arms ammunition. A third was built to manufacture explosives for both military and civil use. More arms manufacturing facilities were built in the 1970s, including a plant to produce mortars and grenade launchers. All appear to have been constructed by Fritz Werner, some with the help of engineers from the *Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit* (GTZ), the FRG's official Agency for Technical Cooperation.¹² In the early 1980s Fritz Werner also built the Burmese a trinitrotoluene (TNT) high explosives filling plant.¹³

Known as *Ka Pa Sa* factories (after the initials of *Karkweye Pyitsu Setyoun*, the Burmese name for the Directorate of Defence Industries), these factories were under the direct control of the Ministry of Defence, and were funded as part of the central government budget. There are now twelve distinct 'industries', that make a wide range of military and consumer products. By far the largest of these 'industries' is the one which makes weapons, transport and tools for the armed forces.¹⁴ In addition to *Ka Pa Sa* No.1 near Inya Lake, there are now three other major *Ka Pa Sa* weapons and ammunition factories in the Rangoon-Mingaladon area. The largest weapons factory in Burma is reportedly at Sinda (Sindell), just south of Prome. There are also ammunition factories at Htonebo (Tonbo), Padaung and Nyaung Chidauk (Nyaung chi-dauk), all of which come within the broad confines of a large and well-guarded defence industrial complex situated on the western bank of the Irrawaddy River near Prome. Another complex of defence factories is located at Malun, west of the Irrawaddy River near Magwe. There are also military supplies factories at Inndaing (Intaing) in the Pegu (Bago) District, northeast of the capital, and another near Mandalay.¹⁵ A number of Fritz Werner personnel were based at Sinda and Padaung to provide technical advice and to help maintain these facilities.¹⁶

¹² Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma*, p.235.

¹³ Personal communication, Managing Director, Fritz Werner GmbH, to the author, 20 April 2000.

¹⁴ In addition to arms, ammunition and military vehicles, *Ka Pa Sa* factories also produce a wide range of military uniforms, boots, web equipment, sporting goods and eating utensils. Personal observations, Rangoon, April 1995 and November 1999.

¹⁵ This paragraph is largely taken from Mya Maung, *The Burma Road to Poverty* (Praeger, New York, 1991), pp.200-1. See also *Foreign Economic Trends Report: Burma* (US Embassy, Rangoon, 1996), p.21.

¹⁶ Personal communication, Managing Director, Fritz Werner GmbH, to the author, 20 April 2000.

The manufacture of German arms in Burma, and the FRG's central role in the development of the country's indigenous defence industries, was clearly a matter of some sensitivity to the authorities in Bonn. This was not only because of the obviously undemocratic nature of the BSPP government, but also because all defence-related exports from the FRG were supposed to be subject to official controls. For example, under West German law no such exports were permitted to countries which did not present orderly domestic conditions - *geordnete innerstaatliche Verhältnisse* - or could be considered to be areas of tension - *Spannungsgebiet*.¹⁷ Yet under Ne Win, with insurgencies raging in the countryside, unrest in the cities and widespread human rights violations, Burma could hardly be said to meet those conditions. Even if Fritz Werner claimed that it was not actually exporting finished arms, only services, components and machine tools for weapons manufacture, it is difficult to see how the company could have met the elaborate requirements laid down. Either the Bonn government was unaware of the nature of Fritz Werner's activities in Burma, which defies belief, or else it chose not to enforce its own official guidelines.

It was probably for these reasons that, in Burma itself, attempts were routinely made to disguise or downplay the Bonn government's unique relationship with the *Tatmadaw*. During the mid-1970s, for example, FRG embassy representatives in Rangoon were usually quite reluctant to reveal any details about West Germany's involvement in the local arms industry. Also, the expatriate staff assigned to Burma's defence factories were apparently under instructions not to talk to other foreigners about the nature of their work. Those technical experts from Fritz Werner who were assigned to facilities up-country were even discouraged from disclosing where they were based.¹⁸

Largely as a result of the assistance given to Burma's arms industries by Fritz Werner, and the discretion with which such contacts were handled, the company came to be seen by the regime as a trusted ally. In 1971, in a rare gesture of friendship to a private

¹⁷ The formal restraints on the FRG's arms production and exports imposed by the 1954 Paris Agreements were reinforced by a series of domestic laws and regulations, including the FRG constitution. Controls also covered the export of strategic goods not classified as weapons. See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *The Arms Trade with the Third World* (Elek, London, 1971), pp.297-302.

¹⁸ The author can recall encountering this attitude while on a diplomatic posting to the Australian embassy in Rangoon between January 1974 and August 1976.

company, the Rangoon government built Fritz Werner, at its headquarters in Geisenheim, a full-sized replica of the entrance hall to Burma's old royal palace at Mandalay.¹⁹ Also, a close personal friendship developed between General Ne Win and senior German officials, including Fritz Werner executives. The company even helped to make the arrangements for Ne Win's periodic trips abroad for recreation and health checks.²⁰ As a result of this relationship, Fritz Werner was in a good position to win contracts for a wide range of civil projects in Burma, such as the construction of brick factories, a bicycle factory, an alcohol factory (based on sugar cane), a rubber tyre factory, and a ball point pen factory.²¹ Free technical assistance was provided to a number of these projects by GTZ engineers. Also, as consultants, Fritz Werner contributed to other industrial projects, such as the construction of a fertiliser plant, a gas bottle factory and a textiles factory.²² In the early 1970s, the firm took over the operation of the country's mint and security printing works at Warzi (Wasi), near Chauk.²³

In January 1985, Myanma Fritz Werner Industries Co. Ltd. became the first foreign company legally to invest in Burma since the 1962 coup, when it entered into a joint venture arrangement with Burma's state-owned Heavy Industries Corporation, or *Akyisa Sehmou Longhan* (known by its Burmese initials as *Ka Sa La*).²⁴ The announced aim of this joint venture was to 'undertake development, production and assembly of machinery, equipment and accessories for industrial

¹⁹ The hall was for many years used by Fritz Werner as a guest house. See 'Monarchentempel der Koenigsstadt Mandalay', *Der Rheingauer*, January/February 2000.

²⁰ Martin Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', *Index on Censorship*, No.10, 1991, p.43.

²¹ Personal communication, Managing Director, Fritz Werner GmbH, to the author, 20 April 2000.

²² These and other civil projects are listed in Hans-Bernd Zollner, *Unverstandene Partnerschaft in der 'Einen Welt': Eine Studie zu den deutsch-birmanischen Beziehungen am Beispiel der Firma FRITZ WERNER in Birma* (Evangelisches Missionswerk, Hamburg, 1993), pp.78-9. The list does not specifically mention any defence-related factories, but these may have been included under generic names like 'precision casting facility'.

²³ The Burmese mint was initially equipped with the help of the GDR, but control of the printing factory (which produces securities, currency notes and postage stamps) was later transferred to Fritz Werner. See Mya Maung, *The Burma Road to Poverty*, p.201.

²⁴ Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma*, p.235. All industries in Burma employing more than 20 people had been nationalised by 1964.

plants in Burma'.²⁵ As the British author Martin Smith has noted, 'machinery' is 'a recurring euphemism in Burma for military equipment' and there have been a number of suggestions over the years that this particular joint venture was directly related to the country's defence industrial programme.²⁶ For example, Professor Mya Maung of Boston College has stated that:

This venture was supposedly formed to develop heavy industries under the civilian Heavy Industries Corporation, *Ka Sa La*, but the Burmese people and foreign diplomats knew that the real effort was to construct army supply and weapon factories.²⁷

This accusation was later strongly denied by Fritz Werner Industries, however, which stressed that the (then) West German government-owned company was founded 'to do business in the non-military field'. According to the firm's managing director, the main objective of Myanma Fritz Werner (MFW) was:

to utilise the local production capacity available in Myanmar for agricultural and industrial products. This has resulted, on the one hand, in reducing dependence on imports and, on the other hand, in starting the export of locally manufactured components. The scope of deliveries and performances, for example, includes manufacture and export of small machine tools from Myanmar production.²⁸

This explanation was presumably given with the support of both the German and Burmese governments.

Despite such denials, suspicions remained. They were not only fuelled by the clear evidence of the FRG's long involvement in Burma's arms production programme, but also by accusations in the international news media since the early 1980s that Fritz Werner (and

²⁵ Chit Tun, 'Burmese joint venture', *Financial Times*, 26 November 1984.

²⁶ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.43. See also Andrew Selth, 'Burma develops its ability to build arms', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.8, No.5, May 1996, pp.233-5.

²⁷ Mya Maung, *The Burma Road to Poverty*, pp.200-1.

²⁸ 'Correspondence', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.8, No.9, September 1996, p.430.

thus by implication the Bonn government) had helped the Ne Win regime to build a secret chemical weapons plant.²⁹

Chemical Weapons

One of the first public references to this issue was in 1982, when the German author H. Stelzmüller wrote in the journal *International Defense Review* that 'in recent years, chemical agents have been used in ... Burma'.³⁰ In 1984, newspapers in the United States and Australia, citing what was claimed to be a leaked US Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), stated that Burma had been making efforts to acquire a domestic capability to produce mustard gas since early 1981.³¹ The SNIE reportedly went on to say that the Burmese were buying chemical production plant and protective gear from the Federal Republic of Germany. Apart from sulphur, which the Burmese were said to be importing from Italy, the raw materials for the production of the gas were obtained locally. According to these news reports, the SNIE estimated that Burma would be self-sufficient in the operation of the CW plant by the end of 1984. It identified local insurgents as the most likely target for future Burmese CW attacks.³²

These claims were repeated by academic researchers and the international news media in 1985, and were made again by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 1987.³³ That year, the Institute reported in its annual Yearbook that Burma was 'said to be producing mustard gas using plant and chemicals imported from Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany'.³⁴ More

²⁹ Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma*, p.235. For a more detailed examination of Burma's CW programme see Andrew Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Working Paper No.334 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999); and William Ashton, 'Burma's Chemical Weapons Status', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.7, No.6, June 1995, pp.282-4.

³⁰ H.Stelzmüller, 'NBC Defence: a German viewpoint', *International Defense Review*, No.15, November 1982, p.1571.

³¹ Dale Van Atta, 'The Chemical Club Grows', *National Times*, 21-27 December 1984.

³² *ibid.*

³³ See, for example, L.R. Ember, 'Worldwide Spread of Chemical Arms Receiving Increased Attention', *Chemical and Engineering News*, Vol.64, No.15, 14 April 1986, pp.8-16; and Don Oberdorfer, 'Chemical arms curbs are sought', *Washington Post*, 9 September 1985.

³⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 1987: World Armaments and Disarmament* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), p.110.

importantly, in March the following year the US Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), Rear Admiral William Studeman, speaking in Washington before a sub-committee of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, stated categorically that Burma was one of a number of countries 'developing' a chemical warfare capability.³⁵ This claim was strengthened in 1991, when Rear Admiral Thomas Brooks, the new DNI, told the Seapower, Strategic and Critical Materials Sub-Committee of the House Armed Services Committee that Burma 'probably possessed' an offensive chemical weapons capability.³⁶ Increasingly, Burma began to be listed in the academic and defence literature as a probable CW proliferant.³⁷

Shortly after Rear Admiral Studeman's testimony to the US Congress, the Boston-based *Christian Science Monitor* published a story by one of its staff writers suggesting that Fritz Werner GmbH, long known for its close links with the Ne Win regime's military supply programme, had 'played an important role in building Burma's chemical weapons capability'.³⁸ Citing confidential US intelligence sources, the American journalist E.A. Wayne wrote that 'German companies sold equipment, supplies, and possibly know-how under the guise of standard commercial sales'.³⁹ The article also stated that the US government had privately raised its grave concerns over this matter with the FRG government, but could not be certain that all sales to Burma had stopped. More cautiously, but clearly conscious of chemical weapons scandals involving German companies in places

³⁵ Statement of Rear Admiral William O. Studeman, USN, Director of Naval Intelligence, before the Seapower, Strategic and Critical Materials Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee on Intelligence Issues, Washington DC, 1 March 1988.

³⁶ Statement of Rear Admiral Thomas A. Brooks USN, Director of Naval Intelligence, before the Seapower, Strategic and Critical Materials Subcommittee, of the House Armed Services Committee on Intelligence Issues, Washington DC, 7 March 1991.

³⁷ See, for example, E.D. Harris, 'Chemical Weapons Proliferation in the Developing World' in *RUSI and Brassey's Defence Yearbook 1989* (Brassey's, London, 1989), pp.67-88. Several other references are listed in *Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: Assessing the Risks* (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, Washington, 1993), pp.80-1.

³⁸ E.A. Wayne, 'Tracking chemical weapons in the Gulf war', *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 April 1988.

³⁹ *ibid.*

like Libya and Iraq, some German parliamentarians also expressed their concerns over Fritz Werner's activities in Burma.⁴⁰

Suspicious of Burma's interest in CW, and West Germany's possible role in meeting this interest, were strengthened in September 1991. Under public pressure, the Bonn government revealed in the *Bundestag* that, between 1978 and 1989, a total of 15 Burma Army officers had received 'ABC Protection' training (training in protective measures against atomic, bacteriological and chemical warfare) from the *Bundeswehr* at Sonthofen Military Academy in the FRG.⁴¹ The Bonn government claimed that these courses were part of a standard programme offered to many Third World countries, but this argument failed to convince some Burma activists. For example, specifically referring to this training, the Karen Human Rights Group stated in 1994 that:

the list of countries which benefited [from the ABC training] includes several which have close ties with German arms manufacturer Fritz Werner, such as Sudan, where Fritz Werner built a military plant.⁴²

Even now, some years later, suspicions of FRG assistance to the *Tatmadaw* in this field have not entirely dissipated.⁴³

Soon after reports about a possible Burmese CW programme began to appear in public, a number of claims were made that chemical weapons were being used by the Burmese armed forces against their domestic opponents. Karen insurgents based along the Thai-Burmese border, for example, told Thai news reporters in 1984 that the Burma Army had used 'toxic gas', which had been fired into

⁴⁰ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', pp.43-4. According to Burmese opposition groups, in 1984 alone the FRG exported DM16.1 million worth of chemical pre-products to Burma, and DM7.5 million worth of chemical end products. *Human Rights Yearbook 1994: Burma*, pp.243-4. For Germany's close involvement in Iraq's CW programme see, for example, K.R. Timmerman, *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq* (Fourth Estate, London, 1992).

⁴¹ 'Is the SLORC Using Bacteriological Warfare?', Preliminary Report based on information independently gathered by the Karen Human Rights Group, 15 March 1994 (Typescript, Bangkok, 1994). See also *Human Rights Yearbook 1994: Burma*, p.244.

⁴² 'On Allegations of Chemical Weapons Use at Kawmoora', *The BurmaNet News*, No.118, 2 March 1995. See also *Human Rights Yearbook 1994: Burma*, p.244.

⁴³ Interview, Bangkok, November 1999.

insurgent camps in artillery shells and mortar bombs.⁴⁴ In early 1992 the KNLA claimed that several of its soldiers had suffered burns, rashes and partial paralysis as a result of CW attacks by the Burma Air Force.⁴⁵ In July 1992 a Thai newspaper cited Kachin Independence Army insurgents in Burma's far north, who claimed to have in their possession an air-delivered 'gas weapon' which had been dropped on them by the BAF.⁴⁶ Claims of Burmese CW use were also made by Karen insurgents in 1995. They stated that the *Tatmadaw* had used chemical weapons in its dry season offensive against the KNLA strongholds at Manerplaw and Kawmura. At Manerplaw the Burmese reportedly used 'chemical shells fired by heavy artillery'.⁴⁷ After the fall of Kawmura a month later, the Karens spoke of 'chemical gas' being employed against them before they were forced to retreat into Thailand.⁴⁸ Other insurgents at Kawmura referred to 'tear-gas like rockets' which caused chest pains, breathing difficulties, nausea and stinging eyes.⁴⁹ Later that year, there were reports of 'mysterious ailments' and 'ugly seeping wounds', allegedly as a result of these CW attacks.

These and other reports led one observer to state that 'Fritz Werner has also been held responsible for the "probable" possession of chemical weapons by the Burmese army today'.⁵⁰

The difficulty with evaluating all these claims, however, and in making any firm judgements about Burma's past or current CW status, is that no reports of CW attacks by the Burmese armed forces have ever been verified by independent sources. Inevitably, this has led to a certain amount of scepticism about the Burmese CW programme, and by extension the FRG's possible involvement. Questioned about the

⁴⁴ 'Burmese accused of toxic gas warfare', *Bangkok Post*, 1 February 1984.

⁴⁵ 'Is the SLORC Using Bacteriological Warfare?'

⁴⁶ 'Kachin rebels claim government using chemical weapons' *The Nation*, 24 July 1992.

⁴⁷ Ron Corben, 'Attack ends hopes of Burmese rebels', *Australian*, 28-9 January 1995. See also 'Manerplaw falls to Burmese', *Bangkok Post*, 28 January 1995.

⁴⁸ Sutin Wannabovorn, 'Chemical shells used, say Karen', *Canberra Times*, 22 February 1995; and Sutin Wannabovorn, 'Karens retreating, say Burma using chemical weapons', *Asian Age*, 22 February 1995.

⁴⁹ 'Karen guerrillas pull out of last major stronghold', *Bangkok Post*, 22 February 1995; and Yindee Lertcharoenchok, 'Kawmoora falls to Rangoon forces', *The Nation*, 22 February 1995. See also *Chemical Shells at Kaw Moo Rah*, A Special Independent Report by the Karen Human Rights Group, 24 February 1995.

⁵⁰ Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma*, p.235.

issue in 1988, for example, the Staff Director of the Arms Control Subcommittee of the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs stated that he doubted Admiral Studeman's report that chemical weapons were being developed in Asia. In particular, he felt that the DNI's case against Burma was based only on circumstantial evidence.⁵¹ Also, in 1995 the Chairman of the Thai-Burmese Border Coordinating Committee stated publicly that Burmese soldiers were not using CW against ethnic insurgents. The Thai official said that 'examination of those who have come to a hospital for treatment do not provide any evidence that they were subjected to chemicals'.⁵²

Another area of uncertainty is the possible location of Burma's CW production plant and CW testing facilities. The site of the factory has been the subject of speculation, both inside and outside Burma, for many years. For example, clearly referring to CW facilities, the exiled National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), has given broad hints that 'Fritz Werner has also built "fertiliser" and "bottling" factories in Burma for the SLORC, all of which are highly secure locations'.⁵³ One insurgent group has alleged that chemical weapons have been produced at Warzi, at the country's mint, 'which has been run by German technicians'.⁵⁴ Another site often identified by local sources as Burma's secret CW facility is a heavily guarded fertiliser plant across the Irrawaddy River from Pagan, in central Burma.⁵⁵ (This is presumably the plant built by the Burmese government with the assistance of Fritz Werner.) Other sites have also been mooted, including a number in the military regime's extensive defence-industrial complex near Prome, but no evidence has ever been put forward to confirm any of these claims.

In these circumstances, a number of important questions are left unanswered. There is enough evidence available to conclude that at least a small pilot CW production plant was probably built in Burma,

⁵¹ Michael Richardson, 'Australia Holding Chemical Arms Talks', *International Herald Tribune*, 13-14 August 1988.

⁵² 'No Evidence of Chemical Weapon Use by Burma', FBIS-EAS-95-079, Southeast Asia, 25 April 1995, p.68.

⁵³ *Human Rights Yearbook 1994: Burma*, p.244. See also 'On Allegations of Chemical Weapons Use at Kawmoora'; and Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.44.

⁵⁴ Ian McPhedran, 'Chemical weapons enter Burma civil war: report', *Canberra Times*, 7 August 1992.

⁵⁵ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.44.

with West German assistance, during the early 1980s. Its fate, however, remains unknown. Some well-informed observers suspect that the plant was quietly closed down in the mid-1980s, after the US government approached the FRG government and made 'private' representations to the Ne Win regime.⁵⁶ Pressure on the regime to act would have been increased by the exposure of Burma's secret CW programme in the international news media. It is still not known what CW stocks might have been produced during the plant's period of operation, and whether or not they were weaponised, but there are some indications that the project never reached this advanced stage before being shelved, or even abandoned.⁵⁷ For its part, Fritz Werner has categorically denied that it ever helped the Ne Win regime to build a chemical weapons plant, and has stated for the record that it 'is convinced that also the Burmese side never tried to build such a factory'.⁵⁸

Developments since 1988

Before 1988 Burma's German-built arms factories could produce automatic rifles and light machine guns, grenade launchers, light mortars, rifle and hand grenades, anti-personnel landmines and ammunition for various kinds of small arms.⁵⁹ Many of their products, however, depended on imported raw materials. Also, the *Tatmadaw* still relied on foreign firms for much of its heavy arms ammunition, support equipment and machine spare parts. The BAF and BN in particular were heavily dependent on logistics and technical support from overseas. Yet in September that year the SLORC suddenly faced a serious disruption to its military supplies, as influential members of the international community, including a number of Burma's traditional arms suppliers, imposed sanctions against the Rangoon

⁵⁶ Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, p.7.

⁵⁷ Interview, Rangoon, November 1995.

⁵⁸ Personal communication, Managing Director, Fritz Werner GmbH, to the author, 20 April 2000.

⁵⁹ The NCGUB has written that 'Fritz Werner established the entire arms and munitions manufacturing industry under the Ne Win regime'. Strictly speaking, this is true, but it needs to be remembered that, during the U Nu period, a submachine gun design was purchased from Italy and a factory to produce this weapon was built in Rangoon with the help of an Italian engineer. See *Human Rights Yearbook 1994: Burma*, p.244; and Nelson, *The World's Submachine Guns*, p.384.

regime in protest at its violations of human rights. For example, the United States and the United Kingdom immediately introduced restrictions on the sale of arms to Burma and in July 1991 an 'unofficial' embargo was imposed by the European Community.⁶⁰ This was followed by a resolution in the European Parliament in April 1992 that all its member states who were also members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) should propose a mandatory embargo against Burma's military regime. Without China's support any such resolution in the UNSC was bound to fail, and none was ever put forward.⁶¹ Since then, however, further sanctions have been imposed by different countries and international organisations.⁶²

Determined to overcome these problems once and for all, the military government in Rangoon has made a major effort in recent years to find new sources of arms, military equipment and defence technology. In another effort to protect itself from external pressures, Burma has also launched a major defence import substitution programme. For example, it has reportedly expanded and modernised its defence industries, importing substantial amounts of capital equipment for this purpose.⁶³ Machine tools and industrial plant have come mainly from Germany, Singapore and China. Some countries, notably China and Singapore, have even stepped in to provide Burma with entire arms factories, as well as defence industrial expertise. The SLORC has also modernised two iron and steel mills, probably with a view to producing the high-grade metals needed for arms production.⁶⁴ It is likely that the regime's efforts to insulate itself from international pressures have been accompanied by attempts to build up the country's stocks of strategic raw materials not available locally, including those required for the manufacture of weapons and ammunition.

⁶⁰ In September 1988, for example, the US reportedly stopped a scheduled delivery of ammunition for the *Tatmadaw's* old .30 calibre M1 and M2 carbines, and its 40mm M79 grenade launchers. Bertil Lintner, 'Passing in the dark', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 November 1988, p.17.

⁶¹ Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, p.31.

⁶² See, for example, Tin Maung Maung Than and Mya Than, 'Myanmar: Economic Growth in the Shadow of Political Constraints' in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1997* (Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs, Singapore, 1998), pp.205-29.

⁶³ *Foreign Economic Trends Report: Burma*, p.21.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

The role of the FRG in these new programmes is very hard to determine. Even before the 1988 massacres, there had been growing concern in international human rights circles about West Germany's assistance to the military regime in Rangoon. Quite apart from reports about Fritz Werner's possible involvement in Burma's secret CW programme, there was ample evidence of the *Tatmadaw's* responsibility for repeated and systematic violations of human rights, particularly against the minority hill peoples during campaigns against ethnic insurgent groups.⁶⁵ According to Martin Smith, public pressure on the Bonn government grew even further in 1987, when a delegation from Burma's Kachin peoples visited Germany and 'brought evidence of captured German weapons and the deaths of hundreds of their villagers in *Tatmadaw* operations'.⁶⁶ Then came the unprecedented pro-democracy demonstrations in August and September 1988, and the televised scenes of Burmese soldiers armed with G3 automatic rifles indiscriminately shooting protesters in the streets. More than three thousand men, women and children are believed to have died in the violence, which provoked a very strong international reaction.⁶⁷ At one stage, during the massive demonstrations, there were reports that the FRG embassy in Rangoon might not be safe, because of widespread public anger in Burma over the support given by the Bonn government to the military regime over the previous 30 years.⁶⁸

Responding to the public outcry, both in Germany and abroad, Chancellor Helmut Kohl cut off all official FRG aid to Burma and made any resumption of assistance conditional on the 'restoration of democracy' and the ending of the 'civil war'.⁶⁹ German government officials were instructed to distance themselves from Burma. For example, they could not even attend functions hosted by Burma's diplomatic representatives abroad, unless specifically given clearance

⁶⁵ Two key sources on this subject are Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948* (Silkworm, Chiang Mai, 1999), and Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Zed, London, 1999). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch Asia have also published numerous well-documented reports on human rights abuses in Burma.

⁶⁶ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.43.

⁶⁷ While the actual number of casualties during this period may never be known, the most authoritative estimate is from Lintner, *Outrage*, passim. See also Ron Moreau, 'A Breather in Burma?', *Bulletin/Newsweek*, 20 September 1988, p.86.

⁶⁸ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.44.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p.43.

by the German Foreign Ministry. Permission to do so was dependent on 'the progress made in Burma concerning human rights'.⁷⁰ Questions were also raised over Fritz Werner's continued presence in Burma, but they apparently received only an inconclusive answer.⁷¹ After the Bonn government's change of heart, the company withdrew all its technical personnel from Burma, and undertook not to supply (either directly or indirectly) any Burmese defence industries.⁷² However, this did not mean the end of Fritz Werner's association with the military regime in Burma. According to one well-informed observer, in early 1989, 'in an apparent breach of Kohl's policy, Fritz Werner resumed the export of "industrial machinery" to Rangoon'.⁷³ An export promotion guarantee sought by the company was reportedly underwritten by the German Finance Ministry.

The following year the Bonn government finally moved to divest itself of its embarrassing ties with Fritz Werner, by shedding its 80 per cent interest in the company. It is now a subsidiary of Ferrostaal AG of Essen, and consequently a member of the powerful MAN group.⁷⁴ Freed from the official constraints which were (in theory, at least) attached to state majority ownership, the privatised firm soon took steps to rebuild relations with the Burmese regime. As Martin Smith has stated:

in early 1990 a new US\$8 million joint venture, Myanmar Fritz Werner Industries Limited, was reportedly formed with Myanmar Heavy Industries to take over the existing company of that name, and German supplies have continued to flow in. Questions from an intra-parliamentary group of MPs calling for an investigation of all Fritz Werner's projects in Myanmar were submitted to the *Bundestag* this year [1991] but remain unanswered.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Charlotte Halle, 'Burma's Rulers See Israel as "Door to West"', *Ha'Aretz*, 14 April 2000.

⁷¹ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.43.

⁷² Personal communication, Managing Director, Fritz Werner GmbH, to the author, 20 April 2000.

⁷³ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.43.

⁷⁴ Personal communication, Managing Director, Fritz Werner GmbH, to the author, 20 April 2000.

⁷⁵ Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.44.

The Bonn government did not seem to have been directly involved in this new venture, but must have known about it and presumably felt no need to take any measures against it.

The current extent of Germany's involvement in the Burmese arms industry is not clear. The new Berlin government is still one of the Rangoon regime's largest bilateral debtors, but since 1988 Germany's business relationship with Burma has been quite modest.⁷⁶ The *Ostasiatischer Verein* (OAV), the German East Asia Business Association, maintains an office in Rangoon, but there is currently only one example of German direct foreign investment in Burma, a project valued at US\$15 million.⁷⁷ After a downturn in 1989, merchandise exports to Burma have remained reasonably steady at around US\$35 million per year, or about three per cent of Burma's total imports.⁷⁸ It would appear that a fair proportion of these imports are purchased through Fritz Werner.

Fritz Werner still has an office in Rangoon and senior officials from Geisenheim make regular visits to Burma, where their meetings with senior government and military leaders are given prominence in the local news media.⁷⁹ The company is currently engaged in a number of industrial projects in Burma, such as equipping a bitumen plant (for road construction), building a PVC water pipe factory, and repairing railway locomotives.⁸⁰ Fritz Werner has also provided lathes and other industrial machinery for new factories, and components to repair older

⁷⁶ As of March 1993, the Burmese government owed Japan US\$2.44 billion, Germany US\$515 million and China US\$91.4 million. Mya Maung, *The Burma Road to Capitalism: Economic Growth Versus Democracy* (Praeger, Westport, 1998), p.138.

⁷⁷ *Country Commercial Guide: Burma (Myanmar), Fiscal Year 1999* (US Embassy, Rangoon, 1998). Founded in 1900 to promote German business in East Asia, the OAV supports the business activities of its member companies in the Asia-Pacific region, and encourages interest in German culture and language. The only regional countries with resident OAV offices, however, are North Korea, Vietnam and Burma. 'German Business Delegation to Visit Cebu', AAP, 9 June 2000.

⁷⁸ *Foreign Economic Trends Report: Burma*, p.121-2.

⁷⁹ See, for example, 'Minister receives foreign visitors', *New Light of Myanmar*, 21 March 2000; 'SPDC Secretary-1 Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt received Fritz Werner delegation', Radio Myanmar (in Burmese), 22 March 2000; and 'Secretary-1 receives MD of Fritz Werner Co', *New Light of Myanmar*, 23 March 2000.

⁸⁰ See, for example, 'Bitumen plant opened in Thanlyin to produce 200,000 metric tons of bitumen annually', *New Light of Myanmar*, 22 March 2000.

plants.⁸¹ It is possible that Fritz Werner helped to provide the German machine tools and associated equipment purchased by the *Tatmadaw* for a new Defence Services Institute of Technology built near Maymyo in 1994. This is where, according to one observer, 'the Government intends to train technicians and designers for its weapons manufacturing industry'.⁸² Mya Maung has gone even further, and claimed that 'Since the 1988 political uprising, the West German government has halted aid; however, the privatized Fritz Werner firm continues to invest, and operate as before in heavy industries and military-related projects'.⁸³ Elsewhere, the same scholar has written that 'Fritz Werner ... continue to invest heavily in financing the arms factories, heavy industries and infrastructure projects of the Defense Services'.⁸⁴

Yet, despite these statements, there is no firm evidence available to support the claim that, since 1988, either Fritz Werner or any other German firm has continued directly or indirectly to assist the Rangoon regime to develop Burma's arms manufacturing industries. For its part, Fritz Werner has stated for the public record that 'The activities of MFW remain unchanged ... MFW does not have any connections to the defence industries'.⁸⁵ While this statement begs a number of questions about dual-use industrial machinery, statistics compiled by the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency tend to support the company's claim. Since 1988, Germany's recorded arms transfers to Burma have dropped dramatically. For example, between 1987 and 1991 they amounted to US\$20 million, and by 1992 this had declined further to US\$5 million.⁸⁶ According to the ACDA, there were no recorded arms-related transfers from Germany to Burma after that time.⁸⁷ Since the withdrawal of Fritz Werner's personnel from Sinde

⁸¹ 'Reference list, Status 11/99', provided to the author by the Managing Director, Fritz Werner, April 2000.

⁸² Hawke, 'Exposed: Burma's weapons industry', p.8.

⁸³ Mya Maung, *Totalitarianism in Burma*, p.235.

⁸⁴ Mya Maung, *The Burmese Road to Poverty*, p.235, and p.298.

⁸⁵ 'Correspondence', p.430.

⁸⁶ US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1991-1992* (ACDA, Washington DC, 1993), p.132; and US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1993-1994* (ACDA, Washington DC, 1995), p.141.

⁸⁷ US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1996* (ACDA, Washington DC, 1997), p.153.

and Padaung, technical support for Burma's arms industries has been provided by other countries, including Singapore.⁸⁸

There have also been some recent indications that the sale of arms and associated equipment to Burma by German companies has become more difficult. Since its formation in October 1998, Germany's new SPD-Alliance 90/Greens coalition government has moved to impose a number of additional restrictions on defence exports. For example, Berlin has recently introduced legislation which restricts German arms sales to countries which do not meet certain conditions. In particular, it has stated that:

The issue of respect for human rights in the countries of destination and end-use is a key factor in deciding whether or not to grant licences for the export of war weapons and other military equipment.⁸⁹

Predictably, this legislation, and a number of other measures introduced by the coalition government, have been strongly opposed by many of Germany's arms exporters.⁹⁰ There is already considerable pressure on Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder to withdraw, or at least ease, these restrictions on the grounds of economic necessity. Should the SPD-Alliance 90/Greens coalition manage to hold its current position, then the scope for the sale of arms and associated equipment to Burma's military regime by German companies should - in theory - be severely curtailed. Given Germany's past record, however, when a range of similar laws and regulations were openly flouted by many of the country's leading arms manufacturers, it remains to be seen whether the Schroeder government will be any more successful than its predecessors in curbing defence-related exports. Also, persistent problems surrounding the export of dual-use technology like machine tools (which arguably fall outside the new laws) will remain unresolved.

⁸⁸ Bertil Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', *International Defense Review*, Vol.27, No.11, November 1994, p.26.

⁸⁹ Official statement: 'Policy Principles of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Export of War Weapons and Other Military Equipment', Berlin, 19 January 2000.

⁹⁰ See, for example, 'German association warns on defence', *Flight International*, 22-28 February 2000, p.5; and 'German Industry Decries Defense Cuts', *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 28 February 2000, p.40.

Whatever the current status of Germany's exports to Burma, and the outcome of the political debate now taking place in Berlin, it is clear that Germany no longer enjoys the unrivalled position it held before 1988, as Burma's primary source of military technology and the Rangoon regime's willing ally in the development of the country's defence industries. That role has now been taken over by China and a new group of secret military partners, in particular Singapore.

BURMA AND SINGAPORE

Ever since the creation of the SLORC 12 years ago, there have been persistent claims that Burma's military government has been secretly supported by Singapore.¹ Rumours of a close defence relationship continue to circulate under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which replaced the SLORC in November 1997.² While Singapore's motives clearly include a wish to take full advantage of the commercial opportunities flowing from the Rangoon regime's new 'open door' economic policies, longer term strategic factors seem to be at least as important.

Political and Economic Ties

Before 1988, Singapore's relations with Burma were amicable, but low key. Burma recognised Singapore soon after it broke away from Malaysia to become an independent state in 1965, but the Ne Win regime's doctrinaire approach to the economic management of Burma and its isolationist foreign policies did not encourage close bilateral ties. As Singapore's prime minister Lee Kuan Yew stated rather diplomatically during a visit to Rangoon in 1986:

After their independence, Burma and Singapore have taken different routes toward their perceived futures. Burma opted for self-reliance, with selected external ties. Singapore had to plug into the world's network of trade and investment flows, which is determined by the free market economics of the industrial nations. We have had very different experiences.³

¹ See, for example, William Ashton, 'Burma receives advances from its silent suitors in Singapore', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.10, No.3, March 1998, pp.32-4.

² The regime changed in name only. While most members of the SLORC were dismissed from their posts, the key figures at the top of the military hierarchy remained the same, and there were no appreciable policy changes. See, for example, Bertil lintner, 'Just as Ugly', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 November 1997, pp.23-4; and J.M. Tesoro and Domonic Faulder, 'Changing of the Guard', *Asiaweek*, 28 November 1997, p.30.

³ Cited in Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, p.113.

The main link between the two countries was bilateral trade, as Burma quickly became a major source for Singapore of primary products (including timber, fish and agricultural goods), metallic ores and crude petroleum.⁴ In 1984 Singapore took nearly 15 per cent of all Burmese exports. In return, Singapore was Burma's third-largest supplier after Japan and Germany, providing nearly 10 per cent of Burma's imports that year (mainly in the form of finished petroleum products, transport and communications equipment).⁵ The balance of trade was usually in Burma's favour, but the total volume of legal trade remained relatively low.⁶

Since the 1988 uprising, Singapore's approach to Burma has been, above all, a highly pragmatic and self-interested one. When the SLORC suffered the withdrawal of external aid in September that year, and the imposition of an arms embargo by the Western democracies, Singapore was the first country to come to the regime's rescue. Details are hard to come by but, according to Bertil Lintner, on 6 October 1988 hundreds of boxes marked 'Allied Ordnance, Singapore' were unloaded from two vessels of Burma's Five Star Shipping Line in Rangoon's port.⁷ Late that evening, after the route had been specially blacked out, these stores were trucked through Rangoon to *Tatmadaw* storage depots in the Mingaladon cantonment area north of the city.⁸ The shipment reportedly included mortars, ammunition and raw

⁴ In many respects, this was simply continuing trade between Singapore and Burma which had existed since colonial times, and in the period before Singapore's break with Malaysia. See Mya Than, *Myanmar's External Trade: An Overview in the Southeast Asian Context* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1992), pp.90-2.

⁵ Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, p.113; and Mya Maung, *The Burmese Road to Capitalism*, pp.140-3.

⁶ These figures do not reflect the high volume of goods from Singapore which were smuggled over the Burmese border for sale on the country's booming black market, which was estimated in the mid-1980s to be at least equal in size to official external trade. Mya Maung, *The Burma Road to Poverty*, pp.214-15.

⁷ Allied Ordnance is a joint venture between Nobel Industries and Shengli Holdings, an investment arm of the Singapore government. It is a subsidiary of Chartered Industries of Singapore, the arms branch of the state-owned conglomerate Singapore Technologies. See Bilveer Singh and Kwa Chong Guan, 'The Singapore Defence Industries: Motivations, Organisations and Impact' in Chandran Jeshurun (ed.), *Arms and Defence in Southeast Asia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1989), p.101.

⁸ Lintner, *Outrage*, p.140. See also Bertil Lintner, 'Consolidating power', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 October 1989, p.23; and 'Singapore-made arms for Rangoon', AFP, 26 October 1988.

materials (for making rifle ammunition) for Burma's arms factories. The consignment also contained rockets for the Burma Army's 84mm Carl Gustav recoilless guns, which were made by Chartered Industries of Singapore (CIS) under licence from *Forenade Fabriksverken* (FFV) in Sweden. The shipment thus violated an agreement under which the original export licence had been negotiated, requiring that any re-exports only be made with the permission of FFV and the Swedish government. No such clearance was granted.⁹

In August 1989 Singapore was again accused of providing arms to the SLORC when weapons and ammunition originating in Belgium and Israel were trans-shipped to Burma, apparently with the assistance of SKS Marketing, a newly formed Singapore-based joint venture with the Burmese military regime.¹⁰ There have been reliable reports that these shipments included second-hand 40mm RPG-2 rocket-propelled grenade launchers and 57mm anti-tank guns of Eastern-bloc origin. One well-informed source has suggested that this equipment may have come from Palestinian stocks captured in southern Lebanon by Israel in 1982, and resold to Burma.¹¹

It is unlikely that any of these arms shipments to Burma could have been made without the full knowledge and support of the Singapore government.

These gestures of practical assistance to the SLORC, at a time when it felt most vulnerable to both internal and external pressures, won Singapore powerful friends in the highest circles of the military regime. Partly because of this support, the bilateral relationship has blossomed. Since 1988 there have been frequent exchanges of senior visitors, including the heads of state of both countries. Also, Singapore has actively intervened on Burma's behalf in international forums, including after the 1990 general elections, when the SLORC ignored the NLD's landslide victory and reneged on its promise to hand over power. For example:

⁹ Lintner, *Outrage*, p.140. See also Smith, 'The Burmese way to rack and ruin', p.45; and Bertil Lintner, 'An export backfires', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 September 1983, pp.26-7.

¹⁰ SKS Marketing Ltd was formed as a joint venture with the Burmese government officially for marketing 'electrical goods, stationery, and printing and photographic goods'. Lintner, 'Consolidating power', p.23.

¹¹ Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', p.26.

On 19 November 1990, Sweden spearheaded a move at the United Nations to draft a resolution which censured the SLORC for its rapacious conduct and for not honouring the election results. Singapore was particularly vocal in supporting a counter-resolution of 'non-interference in the internal affairs of member States in their electoral process'.¹²

In 1997 Singapore again vigorously defended Burma at the United Nations, when it attempted to weaken a General Assembly resolution which criticised Rangoon for its harsh treatment of human rights activists, widespread human rights violations and the nullification of the 1990 elections.

In an 'urgent' letter to the Swedish mission, which was drafting the resolution, Singapore representative Bilahari Kausikan cited 'progress' in Burma and said that 'the majority of your co-sponsors have little or no substantive interests in Myanmar ... Our position is different. We have concrete and immediate stakes'.¹³

Singapore's senior minister Lee Kuan Yew has also spoken up publicly on behalf of Burma's military regime, suggesting that democratic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi should content herself with being a powerless symbol of democracy, and leave the SLORC to actually run the country.¹⁴ The SLORC later publicly thanked Lee for his 'most constructive vision and pragmatic advice'.¹⁵

The 'concrete and immediate stakes' to which Singapore's UN permanent representative was referring in 1997 were the country's economic interests in Burma, which had grown significantly since the introduction of the SLORC's 'open door' policies in 1989.¹⁶ A ministerial-level committee had been established by Burma and

¹² Chee Soon Juan, *To Be Free: Stories from Asia's Struggle against Oppression* (Monash Asia Institute, Melbourne, 1999), p.84.

¹³ Leslie Kean and Dennis Bernstein, 'The Burma-Singapore Axis: Globalising the Heroin Trade', *Covert Action Quarterly*, No.64, Spring 1998, p.51.

¹⁴ Cited in Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: Myanmar (Burma)*, Third Quarter 1996, (Economist, London, 1996), p.13.

¹⁵ Cited in Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', p.26.

¹⁶ For details of this policy shift see, for example, Paul Cook and Martin Minogue, 'Economic Reform and Political Change in Myanmar (Burma)', *World Development*, Vol.21, No.7, July 1993, pp.1151-61.

Singapore in 1993 to 'forge mutual benefits in investment, trade and economic sectors', and a high priority was given to technology transfers.¹⁷ Since that time, bilateral economic ties have expanded even further. Singapore is now Burma's largest foreign investor, with over US\$1.1 billion committed to more than 50 different projects (mainly in hotels, property development and tourism).¹⁸ Singaporean companies are also heavily involved in a number of major Burmese government infrastructure projects, such as a US\$166 million project to construct the new Thanlyin-Kyauktan industrial zone near Rangoon, and a US\$50 million container port at Thilawa, 10 kilometres south of Rangoon.¹⁹ Burmese ministers have been urged by senior military figures to give preference to projects supported by the Singapore government and, despite the impact of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, more investments are likely in the future.²⁰ In addition, Singapore is now Burma's largest source of imports, and its largest market after India and China.²¹

Both the Burmese and Singapore governments appear to be prepared to overlook the fact that a large proportion of the funds currently being invested in Burma has been generated by narcotics production in the Golden Triangle. According to the US State Department, in the mid-1990s 'over half [of the investments in Burma] from Singapore have been tied to the family of narco-trafficker Lo Hsing-han'.²² For example, by 1996, Asia World Co. Ltd, a Burmese

¹⁷ 'Myanmar-Singapore Ministerial-Level Work Committee helps develop Myanmar's economic and technical sectors', *New Light of Myanmar*, 24 December 1997.

¹⁸ Tin Maung Maung Than and Mya Than, p.229. See also Kean and Bernstein, 'The Burma-Singapore Axis', pp.45-52; and Maw Than and Nyunt Nyunt Swe, 'Overview of Demand for Capital for Myanmar's Development' in Mya Than and Myat Thein (eds), *Financial Resources for Development in Myanmar: Lessons from Asia* (Institute of South East Asian Affairs, Singapore, 2000), p.49.

¹⁹ *The New ASEANs: Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia and Laos* (East Asia Analytical Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 1997), p.139.

²⁰ There are currently three large hotels in central Rangoon, abandoned after construction had already begun because of the Asian financial crisis. Despite the failure of one Singapore-backed venture, a 130-room floating hotel, Singapore survived the crisis better than most regional countries and is now in a position to steal a march on its competitors.

²¹ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: Myanmar (Burma)*, Third Quarter 1999 (Economist, London, 1999), p.5.

²² Cited by Chee Soon Juan, *To Be Free*, pp.92-3. See also Chee Soon Juan, 'Burma and Singapore: Strange Bedfellows' in Ralph Bachoe and Debbie Stothard (eds), *From*

conglomerate controlled by Lo with three 'overseas branches' in Singapore, had reportedly invested more than US\$200 million in various construction projects in Burma, including the luxury Traders Hotel in Rangoon, and a road upgrading contract worth US\$27 million.²³ The same year, Stephen Law, Lo Hsing-han's son and managing director of Asia World, was refused a visa to the United States, because of US concerns over his suspected involvement in the drug trade. Law has denied that Asia World's money had been generated through Burma's opium and heroin trade, and vowed to fight the visa ban.²⁴

The flow of illicit funds can also go in the opposite direction. It has been suggested, for example, that foreign currency generated by narcotics sales was used by the SLORC to pay for some early arms shipments from China, with the money being passed through a bank in Singapore. According to Bertil Lintner:

Burma made a US\$400 million down payment in cash for the Chinese arms through a bank in Singapore in early 1991. The sum amounted to 30% of the total value of military hardware, delivered and yet to be delivered, from China. Yet figures released by international statistical resources registered no difference in Burma's known foreign exchange reserves before or after the payment was made.²⁵

There have been several other reports of Burmese money being laundered through Singapore, not only by Golden Triangle drug lords but also by individual members of the Burmese military leadership.²⁶

Consensus to Controversy: ASEAN's Relationship with Burma's SLORC (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, Bangkok, 1997), pp.26-30. Lo was known as the King of the Golden Triangle until his arrest in Thailand in 1973. He was extradited to Burma and subsequently sentenced to death, but was freed under a general amnesty in 1980.

²³ Kean and Bernstein, 'The Burma-Singapore Axis', pp.45-52. See also Leslie Kean and Dennis Bernstein, 'Singapore's Blood Money', *The Nation*, 20 October 1997, pp.11-17; and *The New ASEANs*, p.146.

²⁴ 'Visa Bar', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 September 1996, p.12.

²⁵ Bertil Lintner, *The Politics of the Drug Trade in Burma*, Occasional Paper No.33 (Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, University of Western Australia, Perth, 1993), p.43. See also 'The Golden Triangle's new king', *Economist*, 4 February 1995, pp.25-6; and 'Heroin warlords cultivate Burmese leadership', *Australian*, 6 February 1995.

²⁶ Kean and Bernstein, 'The Burma-Singapore Axis', pp.46-8. Similar claims were made by Australia's SBS television station in October 1996.

The close political and economic ties which now exist between Singapore and Burma are well known, but much less publicity has surrounded the bilateral cooperation which is occurring in a number of more controversial areas. For example, Burma's armed forces have apparently continued to order arms and ammunition from Singaporean companies. They also seem to have turned to Singapore for military training, intelligence advice, defence technology and arms production facilities. This has placed Singapore in a category reserved for Burma's very special friends, a category currently shared only by the military regime's main financial backer and strategic ally, China.

Military Ties

Since those early consignments in 1988 and 1989, additional arms and ammunition have reportedly been shipped to Burma directly from Singaporean companies. Also, 'Singapore has become the entrepot for a gray market in arms for Burma'.²⁷ Singaporean brokers have facilitated the sale of munitions to Burma from several other sources, and Singapore has been the main trans-shipment point for arms delivered to Burma via dealers in countries such as Israel, Belgium, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.²⁸ The details of these transactions are not always clear, but they are believed to have amounted to 'tens of millions of dollars' worth of arms and military equipment over the past 10 years.²⁹ Shipments to Burma have reportedly included M-16 automatic rifles and associated 5.56mm ammunition (apparently in violation of another export agreement attached to their licensed production in Singapore), 7.62mm assault rifles and ammunition, and a wide range of communications equipment.³⁰ Other shipments of small arms and ammunition seem to

²⁷ Marvin C. Ott, 'From Isolation to Relevance: Policy Considerations', in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future* (Brookings Institution Press, Washington, 1998), p.78.

²⁸ Rodney Tasker and Bertil Lintner, 'Difficult guests', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 March 1993, p.11. Ironically, Burmese insurgents opposed to the Rangoon regime have also bought weapons through middlemen in Singapore. See Bertil Lintner, 'Drugs and Economic Growth: Ethnicity and Exports' in Rotberg, *Burma: Prospects for a Democratic Future*, p.177.

²⁹ Trevor Watson, 'Report from Asia', Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) FM Radio, 17 July 1994.

³⁰ Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', p.26. See also Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, p.53.

have followed.³¹ For example, in late 1992 it was discovered that Singaporean middle-men had arranged for the shipment to Burma of about US\$1.5 million worth of arms and ammunition manufactured in Portugal, in direct violation of the European Community's arms embargo against the Rangoon regime. Included in the order were 120mm heavy mortars, 81mm medium mortars and possibly some 60mm light mortars. There were also said to be at least 20,000 mortar bombs and artillery shells in the shipment.³²

An investigation recently carried out by researchers for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) suggests that the Burma Army may have also imported a quantity of landmines from Singapore. These are thought to include some Italian-designed weapons made under licence in Singapore itself, such as the V-69 bounding fragmentation mine and the VS-1.6 anti-tank blast mine.³³

In addition, according to the regional journal *Asian Aviation*, around 1991:

Myanmar acquired a surplus BAe Dynamics Bloodhound Mk II surface-to-air missile [SAM] system withdrawn from service by the Rep. of Singapore AF. The package is understood to have also included missiles and three Scorpion target illuminating radars.³⁴

An investigative reporter for Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television network later stated that, in fact, more than one Bloodhound SAM system was sold to Burma by Singapore around this time.³⁵ The *Asian Aviation* and SBS reports are believed to be credible,

³¹ According to one regional journal, by 1994 Singapore had become 'a regular supplier of small arms and ammunition' to the *Tatmadaw*. See 'Air Forces Survey: Myanmar', *Asian Aviation*, Vol.14, No.6, June 1994, p.34.

³² 'Portuguese Men-of-War', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 November 1992, p.8; and Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese Connection', p.26.

³³ Personal observation, Rangoon, November 1999; and correspondence with ICBL researcher, March 2000. See also Andrew Selth, *Landmines in Burma: The Military Dimension*, Working Paper No.352 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000).

³⁴ 'Air Forces Survey: Myanmar', p.36; and Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', p.26.

³⁵ Kerry Brewster, 'Dateline', SBS Television, 25 March 1995. Also, interview with Mike Carey, Sydney, May 1996.

but they have yet to be confirmed.³⁶ If they prove to be true, then Singapore would be responsible for providing the Burmese armed forces with their first-ever guided missile system.

The close bilateral relationship is also reflected in links between the armed forces of the two countries. For example, after the SLORC's 1988 takeover, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) opened its military training schools to members of the *Tatmadaw*. A number of Burma Army officers have attended SAF staff colleges, at least seven Burma Air Force officers have been trained in Singapore, and the SAF has provided training (in Singapore) to specialist units like the Burma Army parachute team.³⁷ There have been persistent rumours in Rangoon that the SAF have also provided the Burma Army with artillery training in Burma. (Another version of this story has it that the SAF is itself undertaking artillery training on Burmese ranges.³⁸) This is one explanation that has been offered by observers to account for the regular visits to Rangoon of Singapore Air Force Fokker F-50 troop carriers and Lockheed C-130 transports. Twice a week these aircraft stage through Rangoon on their way to Dacca in Bangladesh, reportedly on 'navigational training' flights.³⁹ Other observers, however, have claimed that Singapore uses these flights to mount secret intelligence-collection operations against regional countries, including Burma itself.⁴⁰ While most of these reports are very difficult

³⁶ The SLORC's fear of an invasion by a US-led coalition after the 1988 uprising reportedly prompted a frantic search for anti-aircraft weapons, some of which were later mounted on the roofs of public buildings in Rangoon. There was a similar scare in 1991, when the US landed troops in Bangladesh to help with flood relief. See Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Military Expansion Program: Plans and Perceptions', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.26, No.4, 1996, pp.473-4; and McCarthy, 'Paranoia time for Burma's generals'.

³⁷ Interviews, Singapore, May 1995 and November 1999. See also Aung Myoe, *Officer Education and Leadership Training in the Tatmadaw: A Survey*, Working Paper No.346 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000), pp.4-5.

³⁸ Interviews, Rangoon, April 1995; and William Ashton, 'Myanmar: Foreign military training a mixed blessing', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, Vol.24, No.2, February-March 1998, pp.9-11.

³⁹ Interview, Singapore, May 1995; and interview, Rangoon, November 1996.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Robert Karniol, 'Singapore boosts SIGINT using C-130 transports', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 17 September 1997, p.19; Bertil Lintner, 'Burma Road', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 November 1997, p.17; and Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1998), pp.235-7.

to prove, the relationship between the armed forces of the two countries is clearly much closer than publicly acknowledged.

Singapore is also believed to be the main source of information technology and other electronic equipment being obtained by the military regime in Rangoon. For example, a Singaporean firm, or group of firms, has apparently installed computers throughout Burma's defence ministry, and helped to upgrade its data communication links with the country's twelve Regional Military Commands.⁴¹ Also, Singapore is probably the source of at least some of the communications equipment provided in recent years to Burma's powerful Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI).⁴² This equipment has reportedly been installed in the Ministry's 'cyber war centre' (created a few years ago under a new Directorate of Defence Services Computers). Training in the equipment was provided as part of the sales package.⁴³ This centre is reported to be closely involved in the monitoring and recording of foreign and domestic telecommunications, including the satellite telephone conversations of Burmese opposition groups. Also, there is reason to believe that in 1993 or 1994 the Burma Army acquired equipment from Singapore to protect Burmese military communications from interception by insurgents and hostile agencies.⁴⁴

Bilateral cooperation may have also been extended to other intelligence areas. For example, there has been at least one report in the news media that, only a few years after the *Tatmadaw* took back direct control of the country, Singaporean intelligence officers were observed in Burma, near the border with Thailand. This press report purportedly quoted a cable to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, from either the Australian embassy in Rangoon or Bangkok, stating that the Singapore Armed Forces had deployed

⁴¹ Interview, Singapore, May 1995. See also Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets*, pp.92-5, and pp.235-6.

⁴² Andrew Selth, 'Burma's Intelligence Apparatus', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.13, No.4, Winter 1998, p.58. See also 'Burma', *Asia 1998 Yearbook* (Far Eastern Economic Review, Hong Kong, 1999), p.89.

⁴³ 'Listening Post', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 September 1997, p.12; and Robert Karniol, 'Myanmar spy centre can listen in to sat-phones', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 17 September 1997, p.18. See also Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets*, pp.92-5.

⁴⁴ Selth, 'Burma's Intelligence Apparatus', p.59. See also Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets*, pp.92-5, and pp.235-6; and A Resident of Kayin State, *Whither KNU?* (News and Periodicals Corporation, Rangoon, 1995), p.41.

intelligence-gathering teams to the border area.⁴⁵ Also, an Australian analyst has since cited a claim that Singapore is providing intelligence training to Burma's 'secret police' in central Singapore. Hundreds of Burmese officers are said to be involved.⁴⁶ The last Singaporean ambassador to Burma was a former senior SAF officer, and a past director of Singapore's defence-oriented Joint Intelligence Directorate. That appointment may have simply been a coincidence, but it is curious that Singapore chose to assign someone with a military intelligence background to this fellow-member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and not one of its many capable professional diplomats.

In recent years there have been several reliable reports that Singapore has stepped in to help modernise and expand Burma's indigenous defence industries, drawing on Singapore's well-developed expertise in this field. By the early 1990s, for example, Singaporean technicians had replaced the West German experts formerly based at Padaung, suggesting that a Singaporean company, or group of companies, had taken over Fritz Werner's advisory role at the regime's well-guarded defence industrial complex nearby.⁴⁷ More significantly, in February 1998 Singapore provided Burma with a state-of-the-art facility to manufacture small arms and ammunition.⁴⁸ The modular, prefabricated factory was designed and built in Singapore in 1997 by state-owned Chartered Industries of Singapore, with help from some Israeli consultants. The factory, which is reportedly capable of producing weapons and ammunition up to 37mm calibre, was first tested in Singapore and then shipped to Burma early the following year. Its modular construction permits easy expansion of the plant in the future.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ David Lague, 'Evans seeks support for ban on Burma', *Financial Review*, 27 May 1991.

⁴⁶ Interview, Canberra, April 1997. See also Ashton, 'Burma receives advances from its silent suitors in Singapore', p.33; Chee Soon Juan, *To Be Free*, pp.83-4; and Robert Karniol, 'Singapore: Diplomacy Teams up with Deterrence', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 30 April 1997, p.22.

⁴⁷ Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', p.26.

⁴⁸ Bruce Hawke, 'Myanmar making small arms in imported factory', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 22 July 1998, p.14.

⁴⁹ This factory, which is already producing Burma's indigenously designed family of 'MA' automatic rifles, assault rifles and light machine guns, appears to have been chosen instead of the Chinese arms plant mooted in 1991. See Bertil Lintner, 'Rangoon's Rubicon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 February 1993, p.28; P. Stobdan, 'The dragon's

The Defence Services Institute of Technology outside Maymyo has also imported equipment from Singapore, reportedly to train Burma's next generation of munitions experts.⁵⁰

Ever since they began to surface, these rumours and news media reports, and subsequent claims made in the academic and defence literature, have been consistently denied by the Singapore government. Indeed, Singapore has shown considerable sensitivity to any suggestion that it is secretly supporting the military regime in Rangoon or turning a blind eye to Burmese money laundering operations.⁵¹ Some of the reasons for this sensitivity are obvious. Despite ASEAN's ambivalent attitude towards Burma since 1988, there would be considerable diplomatic embarrassment to Singapore if it was known to be actively supporting an international pariah like the SLORC (and now the SPDC) regime in such a fashion. Singapore can hardly accuse Western countries of interfering in Burma's internal affairs (for example, by condemning the military regime's repressive policies towards the NLD) when it is helping to provide the same regime with the means to retain its firm grip on power. Also, Singapore would not want to offend its fellow ASEAN member Thailand, by admitting to a role in increasing the military capabilities of that country's troublesome and potentially hostile neighbour in the west. Nor does Singapore wish to lose its hard-won reputation as an honest dealer in regional affairs, and a staunch opponent of narcotics trafficking. Yet, despite these constraints, the imperatives to pursue a close relationship with Burma appear to be overwhelming.

Strategic Imperatives

Marvin Ott has stated that 'Singapore's economic involvement in Burma and its out-spoken support for constructive engagement is mainly about making money'.⁵² This may be true, but there are additional reasons for Singapore's interest in developing close ties with Burma - and for its sensitivity over such a policy. Burma is growing militarily more powerful, and is thus likely to become a

arm across the bamboo curtain', *Pioneer*, 11 November 1993; and Selth, 'Burma's Defence Expenditure and Arms Industries', pp.36-7.

⁵⁰ Hawke, 'Exposed: Burma's weapons industry', p.8.

⁵¹ Interviews, Singapore, April 1995; Cambridge MA, December 1996; and Singapore November 1999.

⁵² Ott, 'From Isolation to Relevance', p.79.

greater factor in regional politics. Singapore has always been quick to react to such strategic shifts. More importantly, Singapore wishes to counter China's growing influence in Burma, while at the same time avoiding any potential difficulties in its own developing bilateral relationship with Beijing.

Singapore seems to have decided that, in a number of ways, close links with the military government in Rangoon serve its long-term security interests. Having apparently assessed that Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy were unlikely to win power for the foreseeable future, Singapore has deliberately set out to forge closer ties with what it sees as the real centre of power in Burma - namely the armed forces. By assisting the *Tatmadaw* with weapons sales, defence technology transfers, arms production, military training and intelligence resources, Singapore has been able to win a sympathetic hearing at the very heart of Burma's official councils. From there, it is in a good position not only to encourage its own commercial interests but also to pursue wider strategic aims. These aims relate in part to Burma's own growing military capabilities, but also to China's future role in the Asia-Pacific region.

Singapore has recognised, perhaps earlier and more readily than most countries, that Burma has the potential to become a much more influential factor in the region's changing strategic environment.⁵³ For example, as part of an ambitious expansion and modernisation programme, the Burmese armed forces have grown from around 186,000 in 1988 to about 400,000 now - and at a time when all other regional countries are reducing the size of their armed forces. According to one senior Burmese official, the regime's eventual aim is an efficient fighting machine 500,000 strong.⁵⁴ In addition, since 1988 the *Tatmadaw* has acquired more than 140 combat aircraft, nearly 30 naval vessels, and large numbers of new tanks, armoured cars, multiple launch rocket systems and artillery pieces. Its mobility and firepower have greatly increased. The armed forces have also

⁵³ See, for example, Andrew Selth, 'Burma and the Strategic Competition Between China and India', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.19, No.2, June 1996.

⁵⁴ Interview, Rangoon, April 1995. This figure remains the official war establishment, but the SPDC has probably accepted that any figure above 400,000 will be very difficult to achieve. See Andrew Selth, *The Burmese Armed Forces Next Century: Continuity or Change?*, Working Paper No.338 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999), p.10.

improved their command, control and communications systems, increased their intelligence capabilities and upgraded their military infrastructure.⁵⁵ With one of the largest armed forces in Southeast Asia, newly equipped with a wide range of more modern weapon systems, Burma now has the potential to play a far greater conventional defence role than at any other time in its history.⁵⁶

Perhaps more importantly, most of the new arms and equipment facilitating this military expansion and modernisation programme have come from China, assisted by the provision of generous loans, special 'friendship' prices and barter deals. More than 600 Burmese servicemen have undertaken training courses in China, and up to 100 People's Liberation Army (PLA) instructors have been posted to Burma at different times to teach Burmese armed forces personnel how to use their new weapon systems.⁵⁷ Some have returned to Burma from time to time, in an effort to rectify persistent problems being experienced with some of this new equipment.⁵⁸ China also seems to have negotiated a comprehensive intelligence cooperation arrangement with Burma, which may even extend to the operation of joint signals intelligence posts scattered around Burma's long coastline.⁵⁹ In addition to its comprehensive military ties with the Rangoon regime, since 1989 China has also played a major role in the development of Burma's civil and military infrastructure (including in the sensitive northern border region), and made strong inroads into the Burmese domestic economy.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*. For a detailed estimate of Burma's current order of battle, see Andrew Selth, *Burma's Order of Battle: An Interim Assessment*, Working Paper No. 351 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000).

⁵⁶ William Ashton, 'Burma's armed forces: preparing for the 21st century', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.10, No.11, November 1998, pp.28-31; and Selth, *The Burmese Armed Forces Next Century*.

⁵⁷ Aung Myoe, *Officer Education and Leadership Training in the Tatmadaw*, p.5. Also interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Bertil Lintner, 'Enter the Dragon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 December 1994, pp.22-4. Also interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

⁵⁹ 'Sino-Burmese Pact', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 January 1997, p.12. See also 'China and Burma strengthen ties with military agreement', *Australian Financial Review*, 24 January 1997.

⁶⁰ Selth, 'Burma and the Strategic Competition Between China and India'. See also Mya Maung, 'On The Road to Mandalay: A Case Study of the Sinonization of Upper Burma', *Asian Survey*, Vol.34, No.5, May 1994, pp.447-59. Also of interest is *Overseas Chinese*

This dramatic departure from Burma's traditional neutrality in international affairs, and its new strategic partnership with a major power like China, has sent ripples of concern around the region. There are fears that Burma may eventually become a 'satellite' or 'client state' of China, and provide support to Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean, act as a 'stalking horse' for Chinese interests in regional councils such as ASEAN, or even assist China to mount attacks against India.⁶¹ China clearly has considerable influence over Burma, but these fears appear at times to be rather exaggerated, and fail to take into account Burma's passionate nationalism and deep-seated suspicions of China's long-term intentions.⁶² Some of these fears may in fact be politically inspired by countries like India, in an effort to discredit China and garner favour with the members of the ASEAN group.⁶³ Even so, real concerns remain, including in Singapore, that China is developing such a hold on Burma's economy and armed forces that it will constrain the Rangoon regime's ability to act independently in the future.

Despite numerous public statements to the contrary from statesmen like senior minister Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore is acutely conscious of China's growing economic strength and strategic influence. It has watched China's behaviour in the region, including its rapidly growing political, economic and military links with Burma, with some concern.⁶⁴ In order to avoid pushing the Rangoon regime further into the arms of the Chinese, Singapore and the other ASEAN states have refused to join in the widespread condemnation of the

Business Networks in Asia (East Asia Analytical Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 1995), pp.60-4.

⁶¹ See, for example, Mohan Malik, 'Sino-Indian Rivalry in Myanmar: Implications for Regional Security', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.16, No.2, September 1994, pp.137-56.

⁶² Kay Merrill, 'A closer look at Sino-Burmese military links', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.9, No.7, July 1997, p.323; and Kay Merrill, 'Myanmar's China connection: A cause for alarm?', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, Vol.24, No.1, Annual Reference Edition, 1998, pp.20-1.

⁶³ William Ashton, 'Chinese Bases in Burma - Fact or Fiction?', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.7, No.2, February 1995, p.86. See also Dinesh Kumar, 'Sino-Myanmar ties irk Delhi', *Times of India*, 20 November 1992.

⁶⁴ See, for example, William Branigan, 'As China Builds Arsenal and Bases, Asians Fear a "Rogue in the Region"', *Washington Post*, 31 March 1993; and Don Pathan, 'The China Threat: empty legacy or legitimate fear?', *The Nation*, 24 February 1995. Also of interest is Yossef Bodansky, 'The PRC Surge for the Strait of Malacca and Spratlys Confronts India and the US', *Defense and Foreign Affairs*, 30 September 1995, pp.6-12.

SLORC and SPDC for their abuses of human rights, and have undertaken instead to 'constructively engage' the military government.⁶⁵ Indeed, it could be argued that concerns about Burma's growing bilateral relationship with China were a key reason why the ASEAN states permitted Burma to join the association in 1996.⁶⁶ All ASEAN members have included in their efforts to engage Burma the pursuit of commercial opportunities, and in some cases modest defence exchanges have occurred, but for Singapore a close (albeit hidden) strategic partnership appears to be a very high priority. For, as a senior Singaporean Ministry of Defence official is reported to have said, 'We now view defence with more dimensions and more subtlety'.⁶⁷

Of all the ASEAN countries, Singapore is perhaps best placed to pursue this particular policy. Singapore has no laws or regulations preventing arms sales, and is less likely to face the kinds of domestic political pressures which in 1988 forced Germany to reconsider its support for Burma's defence industries. Also, there have been occasional bilateral frictions over fishing rights, but Singapore is not one of Burma's immediate neighbours, and therefore does not have to cope with the territorial disputes, refugee outflows and armed incursions which tend to characterise Burma's difficult relations with Thailand. In foreign policy terms, Singapore does not seem to give a high priority to human rights issues, including the plight of the ethnic and religious minorities in Burma which has occasionally troubled Muslim ASEAN states like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.⁶⁸ Also, Singapore has developed one of the region's most advanced armed forces, and its 'substantial, relatively sophisticated and largely state-

⁶⁵ See, for example, K.S. Balakrishnan, 'ASEAN's Constructive Engagement Policy and Political Liberalisation in Myanmar', *Asian Defence and Diplomacy*, November 1998, pp.23-6.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Kay Moller, 'Cambodia and Burma: The ASEAN Way Ends Here', *Asian Survey*, Vol.38, No.12, December 1998, pp.1088-94.

⁶⁷ Cited in Robert Karniol, 'Extending the spider's web', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 24 June 1995, p.32.

⁶⁸ In rare departures from their usual policies of not commenting on Burma's internal affairs, both Malaysia and Indonesia expressed concerns in 1992, after the *Tatmadaw* launched Operation Peezaya ('Prosperous Country') in Arakan State, which forced many members of Burma's Muslim Rohingya minority to flee to Bangladesh. See, for example, 'Malaysia alarmed by Burma's treatment of Moslem minority', *Financial Times*, 11 March 1992; and 'Indonesia warns Burma over Muslims', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1992.

owned defence industry is the most diverse and capable in South-east Asia'.⁶⁹ Singapore is thus in a position to offer Burma's military regime a number of inducements which other ASEAN countries would find very hard to match.

As Singapore's UN representative stated, Singapore has a number of immediate and concrete reasons for wanting to develop a close working relationship with Burma. These relate mainly to Singapore's own political and commercial interests. Less obvious, perhaps, is Singapore's perceived need to cultivate better links with a regional country which is rapidly expanding its military capabilities and broadening its external contacts after decades of self-imposed isolation. In the final analysis, however, it is China's shadow which falls constantly across Singapore's relationship with Burma, and it would appear to be concern about China's future role in the Asia-Pacific region which has prompted many of the steps taken by Singapore in recent years to consolidate its special relationship with the military regime in Rangoon. While this remains the case, Singapore will continue to be very sensitive about any publicity which may complicate its long-term plans. These include a two-track approach of cultivating close relations with China, while hedging Singapore's bets against it by supporting an independent Burma within ASEAN.

⁶⁹ A.T.H. Tan, 'Singapore's Defence: Capabilities, Trends and Implications', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.21, No.3, December 1999. See also Tim Huxley and Susan Willett, *Arming East Asia*, Adelphi Paper No.329 (Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford, 1999), p.40.

BURMA AND ISRAEL

Since the creation of the SLORC in 1988, there have been persistent rumours in Burma and elsewhere in Southeast Asia that Israel too has developed a secret defence partnership with the government in Rangoon.¹ Despite repeated denials by Israeli officials in places like Rangoon, Bangkok and Singapore, reports continue to surface that Israel is closely involved in the military regime's ambitious programme to expand and modernise Burma's armed forces. According to a few of these reports, some aspects of Israel's current relationship with the *Tatmadaw* come close to assisting the military regime to retain its grip on political power.

Historical Links

Burma's ties with Israel are of long standing. Israel was one of those few countries to which Burma turned for assistance and advice after it regained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. As a former British mandate, Israel shared a certain identity with Burma. It had similar administrative procedures, educational methods and public service organisation. Prime minister U Nu's young, struggling government related closely to Israel's attempts to build up a modern state from many diverse peoples, with limited resources and surrounded by enemies, but united by a common religion.² Both governments had strong socialist and democratic ideals. (At the Asian Socialist Conference held in Rangoon in 1953, for example, Burma and Israel were the only two countries in Asia in which a Socialist Party was in power.) Also attractive to Rangoon was Tel Aviv's formally 'non-aligned' status in world affairs, which fitted in well with Burma's avowed neutrality in the rapidly growing strategic competition

¹ William Ashton, 'Myanmar and Israel develop military pact', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.12, No.3, March 2000, pp.35-8. See also William Ashton, 'Israel sets sights on Myanmar', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, Vol.25, No.1, Annual Reference Edition, January 1999, p.23.

² Ironically, U Nu's 1961 legislation to make Buddhism Burma's state religion considerably added to the disaffection felt by the country's minority hill peoples, many of whom were animist or Christian.

between the two global superpowers.³ For its part, Israel, threatened on all sides by hostile Arab countries, was anxious to find friends who could provide diplomatic support in international forums like the United Nations.⁴

Burma recognised the newly created state of Israel on 7 December 1949, the first Asian state to do so. By 1953 diplomatic relations had been established and a 'highly appreciated' Israeli aid programme had begun. Dozens of Burmese officials and technicians subsequently received training in Israel, and more than 100 Israeli technical experts (mainly economists, engineers, architects, doctors and agricultural specialists) served in Burma.⁵ By the mid-1950s bilateral ties had become very close. U Nu's visit to Israel in 1955 was the first to be paid to Israel by the prime minister of any foreign country, a gesture which was deeply appreciated by the Tel Aviv government. In December the same year a three-year trade agreement was signed on a barter basis, with Burmese rice being exchanged for Israeli goods. In 1956 an economic cooperation agreement was reached which contained provisions for the construction in Burma of a rubber tyre factory, a ceramic and glassware factory, a paint and varnish plant, and for a US\$30 million agricultural development in Shan State.⁶

However, while Burma was keen to obtain Israeli advice and technical assistance, particularly in areas like construction and agriculture, its initial interest centred on Israel's armed forces.

Israel was a special source of interest for the young officers attempting to develop the Burmese armed forces, then divided and disorganised, into a much more professional organisation. Just as the Burmese government saw parallels with Israel's political situation, so members of the *Tatmadaw* saw certain congruences with Israel's armed forces. As Mary Callahan has pointed out:

In terms of intra-army policies and practices, mission reports of the 1950s identified the Yugoslav army as well as the Israeli

³ Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of The First Years of Independence* (Oxford University Press, London, 1957), pp.361-2.

⁴ R.J. Kojechi, 'Burma and Israel: A Study in Friendly Asian Relations', *Middle Eastern Affairs*, Vol.10, No.3, March 1959, pp.109-12.

⁵ F.N. Trager, *Burma, From Kingdom to Republic: A Historical and Political Analysis* (Pall Mall Press, London, 1966), p.327. See also Kojechi, 'Burma and Israel' p.112.

⁶ Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, p.192.

army as unique in bringing together the two contradictory thrusts of the reorganizing *Tatmadaw* - one drawing on the guerrilla warfare skills army leaders acquired in the wartime resistance and the other emphasising the construction of coordinated, standing formations capable of withstanding foreign aggression.⁷

In 1954 a Burmese military mission visited Israel to study the most suitable structure for a national defence force, with reserves. This and later Burmese delegations also looked at Israel's national service scheme, with a view to its eventual introduction into Burma.⁸ During his visit to Israel in 1955, U Nu took great interest in the kibbutz system of self-defended frontier settlements. Four villages modelled on this system were later built in the Shan State, west of the Salween River, about 125 miles from the Chinese border. Another was established at Putao, in Kachin State. Over fifty Burma Army families were sent to Israel to be trained in the scheme.⁹ The *Pyu Saw Hti* town and village defence scheme (introduced into central Burma in October 1955) also borrowed several features from the defence of collective settlements in Israel.¹⁰ This scheme later evolved into the People's Militia. Burma also copied the structure of the Israeli Women's Auxiliary Force, as a way of bringing women into the Burmese armed forces.¹¹

In a different vein, the Defence Services Institute (DSI), an independent commercial organisation established by the *Tatmadaw* in 1951 to supplement the official defence budget, established a number of joint projects in Burma with Israeli construction and housing companies.¹²

⁷ M.P. Callahan, 'The Origins of Military Rule in Burma', unpublished PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1996, p.451.

⁸ A national service scheme, based on the Israeli model, was introduced into Burmese law by Ne Win's 'caretaker' military government in 1959, but has never been implemented.

⁹ Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, p.191. See also William C. Johnstone, *Burma's Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1963), p.144 and p.327, n.19.

¹⁰ Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, pp.60,333.

¹¹ Callahan, 'The Origins of Military Rule in Burma', p.448.

¹² The original purpose of the DSI was to cater for the welfare of the troops and maintain their morale, but it quickly became an independent and very powerful business

Other military links between the two countries were more direct. In 1954, for example, Israel sold Burma 30 second-hand Supermarine Spitfire fighters, with related equipment, machine gun ammunition, bombs, rockets and spare engine parts. This was one of the earliest recorded arms sales by the new state of Israel. The Israel Armed Forces (IAF) trained six Burmese pilots in the operation of these aircraft, in Israel. Later the IAF sent two technical teams to Burma, each for a year, to instruct Burma Air Force mechanics how to maintain the Spitfires, and to help overhaul them.¹³ Later, a small number of BAF pilots were sent to Israel for advanced flying training.¹⁴ Israel also sent a small number of IAF instructors to Burma, 'to help modernise the Burma Army', and sold it 50,000 rifles.¹⁵ It is believed that some of the training courses provided by Israel at the time covered aspects of military intelligence. So close did the relationship become that, in 1958, Israeli chief of staff of the defence forces, Major-General Moshe Dayan, and director-general of the defence ministry, Shimon Peres, visited Burma. The following year General Ne Win paid an official visit to Israel, both as prime minister of Burma's interim 'caretaker' government, and as chief of the country's defence forces.¹⁶ In 1959 Israeli president Yitzhak Ben-Zvi visited Burma, and was followed by prime minister David Ben Gurion in 1961.

Israel considered the development of diplomatic ties with Burma during this early period a major diplomatic success, 'as extensive as it was unexpected'.¹⁷ As one Israeli scholar has noted:

conglomerate under the *Tatmadaw's* control. See Selth, 'Burma's Defence Expenditure and Arms Industries', pp.39-40.

¹³ The most comprehensive account of the sale and delivery of the Spitfires to Burma, dubbed by the IAF Operation Orez (Rice), is Shlomo Aloni and P.R. Arnold, 'From Israel to Burma', *Air Enthusiast*, No.78, November/December 1998, pp.34-9 (Part 1), and No.79, January/February 1999, pp.2-11 (Part 2). See also B. Cull, D. Nicholls and S. Aloni, *Wings Over Suez* (Grub Street, London, 1996), pp.57-9.

¹⁴ Colonel F.P. Serong, 'Report on Visit to Burma, June-August 1957', Australian Archives A4311/1, Item 10 (declassified from Top Secret).

¹⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History* (William Morrow, New York, 1998), p.288. See also A.S. Klieman, *Israel's Global Reach: Arms Sales as Diplomacy* (Pergamon, Washington, 1985), p.18.

¹⁶ Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, p.193. From November 1958 until February 1960 Burma was administered by the *Tatmadaw*, pending fresh elections for a new civilian government.

¹⁷ Benjamin Ben-Hallahmi, *The Israel Connection: Who Israel Arms and Why* (Pantheon, New York, 1987), p.25.

The alliance with Burma was for Israel a dream come true in that it had managed to reach beyond the Arab encirclement and gain acceptance in an important part of the Third World.¹⁸

Indeed, Israel's relations with Burma initially served as a model for Tel Aviv's later diplomatic efforts in other countries. Despite all the professional and personal contacts which were established, however, bilateral ties dramatically declined under the Revolutionary Government which seized power in Rangoon in 1962. They further diminished after 1974, as Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party government continued to shun most contacts with the outside world.¹⁹ Only limited, formal links were maintained during this time, almost exclusively through resident embassies in Tel Aviv and Rangoon. Because of its earlier defence assistance to the *Tatmadaw*, however, Israel still enjoyed a special place in the minds of many of Burma's top military leaders.

Assistance to the SLORC

Since the SLORC took over Burma in 1988, ties between Burma and Israel seem to have strengthened considerably. While clearly not yet back to the levels they once enjoyed, Israel has developed a special relationship with the new military government - at least in the defence field. Indeed, in the face of persistent condemnation of the regime by the United Nations, and sanctions against Burma by the Western democracies, Israel is considered by the regime to be 'an open door to Western countries'.²⁰ Details are very difficult to obtain, but between 1988 and 2000 a wide range of arms, military equipment and defence-related expertise seems to have come through this door.

As already noted above, one of the first arms shipments received by the *Tatmadaw* after the SLORC's takeover was a diverse collection of weapons and ammunition from Belgium and Israel, which arrived in Rangoon by sea in August 1989.²¹ Arranged through

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Since the Second World War the Jewish community in Burma has been very small. While monitored by the Israeli embassy in Rangoon, it has not played a significant part in the development of the bilateral relationship. Interviews, Rangoon, April 1995 and November 1999. See also R.F. Cernea, 'End of the Road: The last Burmese Jews', *International Jewish Monthly*, June-July 1988, pp.26-30.

²⁰ Halle, 'Burma's Rulers See Israel as "Door to West"'.
²¹ Lintner, 'Consolidating power', p.23.

a joint venture between Burma and Singapore, this weapons shipment reportedly included second-hand 40mm RPG-2 grenade launchers, and 57mm anti-tank guns of Eastern-bloc origin. Bertil Lintner has stated that:

Pictures of the equipment indicate that they came from Palestinian stocks captured by Israel when it invaded southern Lebanon in 1983. Given the vast amounts of weaponry that entered the international arms market via Israel after the war in Lebanon, intelligence sources say [it] is perfectly possible that [the] Israeli government may have been unaware of the final destination of the cargo.²²

Even if this particular shipment escaped the notice of the Israeli authorities, there have since been several other reports that Israel has transferred arms and weapons technology to the *Tatmadaw*. If these reports are true, then it is difficult to see how these transfers could have occurred without the knowledge or even the support of the Israeli government.

According to a Western diplomat based in Rangoon in 1991, an Israeli team visited Burma that year, specifically to sell the SLORC 9mm Uzi submachine guns.²³ These weapons only seem to have been distributed to specialist units. For example, they have been observed on issue to the bodyguards who provided close protection to the members of the SLORC, and who now surround senior members of the SPDC when they venture out into public areas. It is possible that Uzis may also be used by the special anti-terrorist unit formed by the Burma Army in 1986 to protect foreign embassies, and to respond to incidents like aircraft hijackings.²⁴ There has been an unconfirmed report that the *Tatmadaw* may have tried to develop its own indigenous

²² Lintner, 'Myanmar's Chinese connection', p.26. See also Bertil Lintner, 'Using the aid weapon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 November 1988, p.34; and Ron Corben, 'Arms deals tighten Burma junta's grip', *Herald*, 9 December 1990.

²³ Interview, Canberra, May 1995. An official Israeli spokesman, however, has denied that this sale ever took place, commenting that Uzi submachine guns (made and exported by Israel Military Industries) are also manufactured under licence in several other countries, including the United States. Interview, Rangoon, November 1999.

²⁴ There has been one report, however, of Uzi submachine guns being used by Burma Army soldiers in the field, to guard a foreign visitor. See Angus McDonald, *The Five Foot Road: In Search of a Vanished China* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1995), p.177.

version of this particular weapon, to be known as the BA-94.²⁵ If this report is true, then the effort does not seem to have come to much, but Burma has clearly had greater success in drawing on Israeli expertise in its efforts to develop a whole new family of 5.56mm infantry weapons. The MA (probably 'Myanmar Army') series of assault rifles and light machine guns, for example, which is now in serial production at a new factory in central Burma, appears to include several elements of the Israeli 5.56mm Galil AR.²⁶ While the factory itself came from Singapore, it was apparently built with the help of consultants linked with Israeli Military Industries (IMI), the manufacturers of both the Uzi and Galil weapons. It is not known, however, whether the Israeli consultants involved in the Singapore deal were current or former employees of IMI.²⁷

Research recently carried out for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines suggests that the Burma Army may have also imported some Israeli landmines for use in its wars against ethnic insurgent groups.²⁸

Other military developments in Burma have sparked additional rumours about Israeli activities in the country, and consequent reports in the news media. For example, there have been persistent rumours in Rangoon that, at different times, Israel's Central Institute for Intelligence and Security (otherwise known as Mossad) has provided training, technical advice and other forms of assistance to the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence, which is responsible for both internal security and support for military operations.²⁹ As the SLORC progressively upgraded Burma's military communications

²⁵ Interviews, Canberra, June 1995; and Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, pp.33-4.

²⁶ These weapons were first publicly displayed at the 27 March 2000 Armed Forces Day parade in Rangoon. Also, personal observations, Rangoon, November 1999; and interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999. See also Klieman, *Israel's Global Reach*, pp.79-80.

²⁷ Hawke, 'Myanmar making small arms in imported factory', p.14. IMI is Israel's principal ordnance manufacturer, and second largest defence employer, with 31 factories throughout Israel. IMI's links with Burma go back as far as the sale of 30 Spitfire fighters and 50,000 rifles in 1954.

²⁸ Personal observation, Rangoon, November 1999; and correspondence with ICBL researcher, March 2000. See also Selth, *Landmines in Burma*.

²⁹ Interviews, Rangoon, April 1995 and December 1999. See also Selth, 'Burma's Intelligence Apparatus', p.53; and Ashton, 'Myanmar: Foreign military training a mixed blessing', pp.9-11.

network, including its signals intelligence capabilities, additional stories surfaced about possible Israeli involvement. It has been suggested, for example, that like Singapore, Israel has provided the Burma Army with specialised intercept and encryption equipment, together with training packages.³⁰ Also, the Israeli army (or perhaps ex-IAF specialists) have reportedly provided training to Burma's élite counter-terrorist squads.³¹

These reports of arms sales, technology transfers and other ties to the military regime in Rangoon have been repeatedly and strenuously denied by official Israeli representatives in the region.³² They have correctly pointed out that many of the accusations levelled at Israel after 1988 have been based on unsubstantiated rumours, speculation in the international news media, and purely circumstantial evidence. Since the Rangoon regime re-invented itself as the SPDC in November 1997, however, military contacts between Israel and Burma have become much more difficult to deny. Regardless of whether or not these earlier contacts took place, it is now clear that all three arms of the *Tatmadaw* are receiving direct help from Israeli firms. Given its sensitive nature, it is difficult to see how any of this assistance could be given to Burma without the active involvement, or at least the full knowledge and support, of the Israeli government.

Assistance to the SPDC

In August 1997 it was revealed that the Israeli firm Elbit Systems was proposing to upgrade Burma's (then) three squadrons of Chinese-built F-7 fighters and FT-7 trainers.³³ The F-7 is a derivative of the Mikoyan MiG-21 'Fishbed' jet fighter. The FT-7 is the export version of the GAIC JJ-7, itself a copy of the MiG-21 'Mongol-B' trainer. Since they began to be delivered by China in 1991, the Burma Air Force has progressively acquired about 54 of these aircraft, the latest arriving at Hmawbi air base in central Burma only last year.³⁴ In related sales, the

³⁰ Selth, 'Burma's Intelligence Apparatus', p.58. See also Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets*, p.92.

³¹ Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, p.53.

³² Interview, Rangoon, December 1999.

³³ 'Myanmar', *Military Procurement International*, Vol.7, No.15, 1 August 1997, p.3; William Ashton, 'New deal possible in Asia', *Jane's Pointer*, February 1988, p.9; and Ashton, 'Israel sets sights on Myanmar', p.23.

³⁴ Interview, Rangoon, November 1999.

BAF has also acquired about 350 PL-2A air-to-air missiles (AAM) from China, and at least one shipment of the more sophisticated PL-5 AAMs.³⁵

Since their delivery to Burma, these new fighters (and the NAMC A-5 ground attack aircraft also purchased from China since 1988) have caused the BAF considerable problems. For example, several aircraft (and pilots) have already been lost through accidents, raising questions about the reliability of the Chinese technology. There have been reports that the F-7s were delivered without the computer software to permit the AAMs to be fired in flight.³⁶ Also, the BAF has complained that the F-7s are difficult to maintain, in part reflecting major differences between the structure and underlying philosophy of the Burmese and Chinese logistics systems. Spare parts have been in very short supply. In addition, the BAF seems to have experienced difficulties in using the F-7 (which was designed primarily for air defence) in a ground attack role.³⁷ These and other problems appear to have prompted the BAF to turn to Israel for assistance.

According to reliable sources in the international arms market, it was expected that the 36 aircraft (30 F-7s and six FT-7s) would receive similar upgrades to those provided by Elbit under the Romanian 'Lancer' programme, with Romanian firm Aerostar. This included retrofitting the aircraft with the Elta EL/M-2032 air-to-air radar, Rafael Python 3 infra-red, short-range, air-to-air missiles, and Litening laser designator pods.³⁸ One source has widened the scope of this deal to include 'a new cockpit and avionics'.³⁹ In a related deal, Israel was also to sell the BAF at least one consignment of laser-guided bombs. Since the Elbit contract was negotiated in 1997, the BAF has acquired at least two more squadrons of F-7 and FT-7 aircraft from China, but it is not known whether the original Israeli-backed upgrade programme will now be extended to include the additional aircraft. Burma's critical

³⁵ Andrew Selth, 'The Myanmar Air Force Since 1988: Expansion and Modernisation', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.19, No.4, March 1998, p.400. See also *Jane's Air Launched Weapons*, Issue 27 (Jane's Information Group, Coulsdon, 1997).

³⁶ Interview, Canberra, September 1997.

³⁷ Selth, 'The Myanmar Air Force Since 1988', pp.404-8.

³⁸ 'Myanmar', *Military Procurement International*, p.3.

³⁹ Robert Wall and Geoffrey Thomas, 'Defense Contractors Target Asian Military Market', *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, 21 February 2000, p.91.

shortage of foreign exchange will probably be a major factor in the SPDC's decision.⁴⁰

The Burma Army too has benefited from Burma's new closeness to Israel. As part of the regime's military modernisation and expansion programme, considerable effort has been put into upgrading the BA's artillery capabilities. The number of artillery battalions has reportedly grown since 1988 from seven to 43, with an additional 37 independent artillery companies attached to regional commands.⁴¹ In keeping with its practice of never abandoning any equipment of value, the army clearly still aims, as far as possible, to keep its older weapons operational. The vintage British, American and Yugoslav guns in the *Tatmadaw's* inventory, however, have been supplemented over the past 10 years by a wide range of new towed and self-propelled artillery pieces. Purchased mainly from China, they include 122mm howitzers, anti-tank guns, 57mm Type 80 anti-aircraft guns, 37mm Type 74 anti-aircraft guns and 107mm Type 63 multiple rocket launchers.⁴² In a barter deal brokered by China last year, the SPDC has also managed to acquire about 20 130mm Type 59 (Soviet M 1946) field guns from North Korea.⁴³ Despite all this new firepower, however, the Burma Army has still looked to Israel to help equip its new artillery battalions.

Some time around 1998, Burma negotiated the purchase of about 16 Soltam 155mm towed howitzers, possibly through a third party like Singapore.⁴⁴ These guns appear to be second-hand pieces no longer required by the Israeli Army. Last year, ammunition for these guns (including both high-explosive and white-phosphorous rounds)

⁴⁰ There has recently been an unconfirmed report that the original contract is now in doubt, for the same reason. Interestingly, the BAF contract was not included in a comprehensive list of major projects undertaken by Elbit Systems, which was published in *Aviation International News*, 22 February 2000, p.58.

⁴¹ The latter figure is a little misleading, as it appears to include army formations armed with recoilless rifles. See Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, p.175; and Maung Aung Myoe, *The Tatmadaw in Myanmar Since 1988: An Interim Assessment*, Working Paper No.342 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999), pp.14-15.

⁴² Andrew Selth, 'The Myanmar Army Since 1988: Acquisitions and Adjustments', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.17, No.3, December 1995, pp.237-64.

⁴³ Interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999. See also Bruce Hawke, 'Rice buys artillery for Myanmar', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 5 August 1998, p.19.

⁴⁴ Interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

was purchased from Pakistan's government ordnance factories.⁴⁵ Before the purchase of the new Chinese and North Korean weapons, Burma's largest artillery pieces in service were 105mm medium guns provided by the United States almost 40 years before.⁴⁶ Even though they are not being deployed or used to full effect, acquiring these Israeli weapons thus marks a major capability leap for Burma's army gunners.⁴⁷ It is possible that Israel, or possibly even Pakistan, has also provided instructors to help the Burmese learn to use and maintain these new weapons.

Nor has the Burma Navy missed out on Israeli assistance. There have been several reports, for example, that an Israeli firm (or firms) is playing a crucial role in the construction and fitting out of three new warships which are currently being built in Rangoon.⁴⁸

Burma's military leaders have long wanted to acquire two or three frigates to replace the country's obsolete *PCE-827*- and *Admirable*-class corvettes (which were formally decommissioned in 1994), and its two 1960s-vintage *Nawarat*-class corvettes, which have been gradually phased out since 1989. As military ties with China rapidly grew during the 1990s, the SLORC set its sights on two or three *Jiangnan*- or *Jianghu*-class frigates, to help the BN recover control of Burma's extensive territorial seas and to protect its maritime resources from poachers.⁴⁹ Vessels from a number of countries, notably Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, regularly took advantage of the BN's low capabilities, illegally to exploit the rich Burmese fishing grounds. Unfortunately for the SLORC, it could not afford even the special 'friendship' prices for the frigates being asked by Beijing.⁵⁰ As a compromise, the SPDC has now purchased three Chinese hulls, and is currently fitting them out as corvettes in Rangoon's Sinmalaik shipyard, which was upgraded by

⁴⁵ Interview, Rangoon, December 1999.

⁴⁶ The Burma Army had been given some used 1940s-vintage 5.5 inch (140mm) medium guns by the UK not long after Independence, but these weapons have not been used for many years.

⁴⁷ One well-informed observer in Rangoon believes that these 155mm guns are being deployed in small numbers, thus losing the benefits derived from concentrated battery fire. Interview, Rangoon, December 1999.

⁴⁸ Interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

⁴⁹ Interview, Rangoon, April 1995.

⁵⁰ Andrew Selth, 'The Burma Navy Under the SLORC', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol.29, No.2, 1999, pp.227-47.

China mainly for this purpose. The first of these new warships will probably be commissioned and commence sea trials this year.

According to reliable reports, the three new vessels will each be about 75 metres long and displace about 1200 tonnes dead weight. Despite the European Community embargo against arms sales to Burma, the ships' main guns are being imported (apparently through a third party like Singapore) from Italy.⁵¹ Based on the information currently available, they are likely to be 76mm OTO Melara Compact guns, weapons which (perhaps coincidentally) have been extensively combat-tested by the Israeli Navy on its *Reshef*-class fast attack missile patrol boats. The Burmese corvettes will probably also be fitted with anti-submarine weapons, but it is not known what, if any, surface-to-surface missiles (SSM) and surface-to-air missiles the ships will carry. Given Burma's very close relationship with China, however, the SPDC's continuing shortage of foreign exchange, and the fact that the Burma Navy already seems to have C-801 SSMs on its six *Houxin*-class patrol boats, it would not be surprising if Chinese missile systems were also fitted to the three corvettes.⁵²

Israel's main role in fitting out these corvettes is reportedly to provide their 'electronics suites'. It is not known exactly what the contract will cover, but it could include the provision of the fire control system, sensor and surveillance systems, or navigation systems. It is expected that each vessel will have at least an air-search radar, a surface-search radar, a fire-control radar, a navigation radar and a hull-mounted sonar.⁵³ This would be the customary fit for vessels of this class, and the minimum necessary for the corvettes to be fully operational in the role envisaged for them in the seas around Burma.

Wider Concerns

While Burma remains a pariah state, and is subject to comprehensive sanctions by the United States and European Community, it is unlikely that Israel will ever admit publicly to these and other military links with the *Tatmadaw*. Until it does, the reasons

⁵¹ Interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

⁵² William Ashton, 'Myanmar Navy acquires SSM capability', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, Annual Reference Edition, Vol.25, No.1, January 2000, p.24. See also William Ashton, 'Myanmar Navy boosts sea power with corvettes', *Jane's Navy International*, Vol.105, No.8, October 2000, p.39.

⁵³ Interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

for Israel's secret partnership with the Rangoon regime will remain unclear. A number of factors, however, have probably played a part in influencing policy decisions in Tel Aviv.

There is clearly a very strong commercial imperative behind some of these ventures.⁵⁴ From a regional base in Singapore, with which it shares a very close relationship, Israel has already managed to penetrate the lucrative Chinese arms market.⁵⁵ It is now aggressively seeking new targets for the sale of weapons and military equipment in the Asia-Pacific.⁵⁶ These sales are sometimes supported by offers of technology transfers and specialised technical advice. This approach has led to fears among some countries that Israel will introduce new military capabilities into the region which could encourage a mini arms race, as others attempt to catch up. The weapon systems being provided to the Burmese armed forces are not that new, and the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis has dramatically reduced the purchasing power of many regional countries, but Israel's current activities in Burma will doubtless add to those concerns.⁵⁷

Israel has a very large number of private arms companies but, given the nature of some of the reported sales to Burma, and other probable forms of military assistance to the Rangoon regime, these initiatives would appear to enjoy the strong support of the Israeli government.⁵⁸ In addition to the ever-present trade imperative, one reason for this support could be a calculation by senior Israeli officials that closer ties to Burma could reap long term diplomatic and intelligence dividends. For example, Burma is now a full member of

⁵⁴ For the range of Israeli arms sales to Southeast Asia since 1975, see Gill and Mak (eds), *Arms, Transparency and Security in South-East Asia*, pp.101-40.

⁵⁵ Singapore's armed forces were originally based, and are still largely modelled, on the Israeli armed forces. The close ties which exist between the SAF and IAF have been matched by close links in the defence industrial sector. Tan, 'Singapore's Defence', pp.454-7. See also Bert-Hallahmi, *The Israeli Connection*, pp. 25-6; and Huxley and Willett, *Arming East Asia*, pp.36-7.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Barbara Opall-Rome, 'Tel Aviv Flexes Military, Commercial Muscles', *Defense News*, 17 January 2000.

⁵⁷ Ashton, 'Israel sets sights on Myanmar', p.23.

⁵⁸ Israel ranks fifth among the world's top arms exporting countries, with more than 2,000 individuals and companies registered with the Israeli Ministry of Defence as approved arms dealers. See Opall-Rome, 'Tel Aviv Flexes Military, Commercial Muscles'; and Barbara Opell-Rome, 'Israelis Call for Export Shake-up', *Defense News*, 14 February 2000.

ASEAN which, despite the 1997-98 economic crisis, is still a considerable influence in a part of the world which has received much closer attention from strategic analysts since the end of the Cold War. Israel's regional base will remain Singapore, but it is possible Tel Aviv believes that Burma can provide another avenue for influence in ASEAN, and a useful vantage point from which to monitor critical strategic developments in places like China and India.

In particular, Israel is interested in the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the transfer of technologies related to the development of ballistic and other missiles. Burma has close military relations with China and Pakistan, both of which have been accused of transferring sensitive weapons technologies to rogue Islamic states like Iran. Burma is also a neighbour of India, another nuclear power which has resisted international pressure to curb its proliferation activities. Despite the secretive nature of the Rangoon regime, which has an extraordinarily wide definition of 'national security', Burma could still be seen by Israel as a useful listening post from which to monitor and report on these other countries. Also, despite accusations over the years that Burma has developed chemical and biological weapons, and more convincing arguments that Israel has a sizeable nuclear arsenal of its own, both countries share an interest in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Burma's support for anti-proliferation initiatives in multilateral forums like the United Nations General Assembly and the Committee on Disarmament would seem to be worth a modest investment by the Israeli government in bilateral relations with the SLORC and SPDC.⁵⁹ In addition to training Burmese agriculturalists in Israel and providing a few foreign ministry scholarships each year, assisting the *Tatmadaw* to upgrade its military capabilities seems a sure way of getting close to the Rangoon regime.⁶⁰

Israel has long used its small diplomatic mission in Rangoon to monitor the mood and international connections of Burma's Muslim communities, as well as Burma's official relations with the Islamic

⁵⁹ See, for example, Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction*.

⁶⁰ Fifty Burmese agricultural officers are now sent to Israel for training each year, and a small number of other Burmese officials attend courses under the sponsorship of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Halle, 'Burma's Rulers See Israel as "Door to West".'

world.⁶¹ The international reaction to the latest Rohingya crisis in Arakan State was no doubt of considerable interest to Israel, particularly the suggestion that some Islamic countries or militant groups (including mujahideen from Afghanistan) were prepared to train and equip Muslim guerrillas in Bangladesh and Arakan State for a jihad (or holy war) against the Rangoon regime.⁶² Also, from time to time senior Saudi Arabian officials and Saudi newspapers have expressed concern over the plight of Burma's Muslims, and sought to arouse the interest of the international community in taking action to support them. While some of these calls are simply for political action, for example by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, more direct military measures have also been mooted.⁶³ While perhaps not a reason in itself to develop special defence ties with the SLORC and SPDC, any incidental benefits to this broader diplomatic and intelligence agenda from closer bilateral ties with Burma would no doubt be welcomed by Israel.

Israel's repeated denials of any military links with Burma are not unexpected. Israel has never liked advertising such ties, particularly with countries like Burma, South Africa and China, which over the years have been condemned by the international community for various abuses of human rights. As one study has noted, in East Asia generally, 'many Israeli sales are clandestine, and the country's trade with the region has a low profile'.⁶⁴ Even Israel's very close military ties with Singapore since the 1960s are routinely played down

⁶¹ One Israeli diplomat posted to Rangoon in the 1960s wrote a detailed academic study of Burma's Muslim community. See Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Otto Harrassowitz, Weisbaden, 1972).

⁶² 'Muslims in Myanmar Plan "Jihad"', *Asian Defence Journal*, June 1995, p.69; and 'Afghans Training Burmese Freedom Fighters', *Asian Defence Journal*, May 1993, p.85.

⁶³ For example, during a visit to Bangladesh in 1992 the commander of the Saudi Arabian forces during the 1990-91 Gulf War called on the United Nations to assist the Rohingyas, as it did the Kuwaitis. This was widely interpreted as a call for another multinational military operation. One Saudi newspaper has recently called for the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to take stronger action against Burma. See John Bray, 'Ethnic minorities and the future of Burma', *The World Today*, August/September 1992, p.147; and 'Where is the OIC', *Jeddah Al-Madinah* (in Arabic), 30 April 2000.

⁶⁴ Huxley and Willett, *Arming East Asia*, p.36. The recent criticisms of Israel by the United States, for trying to sell the Phalcon airborne early warning (AEW) system to China, are not likely to encourage greater openness about Israel's defence links with countries like Burma. See, for example, Arie Egozi, 'Pressure put on Israel over AEW sale to China', *Flight International*, 18-24 April 2000, p.17.

or denied by both sides.⁶⁵ Independent studies of Israeli arms sales around the world, for example by Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, are apparently discouraged by the Israeli government.⁶⁶ Yet there seems little room for doubt that, after the 1988 takeover, Israel started to develop close links with the SLORC, and these links are continuing to grow under the SPDC. Israel never permanently discards an asset and, in these circumstances, it would be surprising if it was not looking for an opportunity to restore the kind of mutually beneficial bilateral relationship which was established when both countries became independent modern states in 1948.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Huxley and Willett, *Arming East Asia*, p.37.

⁶⁶ Opall-Rome, 'Tel Aviv Flexes Military, Commercial Muscles'.

⁶⁷ See Ben-Hallahmi, *The Israel Connection*, pp.22-37.

BURMA AND PAKISTAN

At first sight, Pakistan seems an unlikely defence partner for Burma. Bilateral relations have never been very close and Pakistan itself has long been preoccupied with its own serious internal problems. Yet a mixture of economic necessity, shared strategic concerns about India and possibly even their common links with China seems to have helped encourage secret military ties. Over the past 12 years these ties have not grown dramatically, but they have been consolidated in several important ways.¹

Arms Sales

After the 1988 massacres of pro-democracy demonstrators in Rangoon, and the creation of the SLORC, Pakistan was quick to step in with offers of assistance. In January 1989 a senior official from Pakistan's government arms industry reportedly visited Rangoon to offer the regime military supplies.² Two months later, a group of senior *Tatmadaw* officers led by Burma Air Force commander-in-chief Major General Tin Tun made an unpublicised visit to Islamabad. Also on the delegation were Burma's director of ordnance and director of defence industries. According to Bertil Lintner, an agreement was quickly reached for Pakistan to sell the SLORC 150 machine guns, 50,000 rounds of ammunition and 5,000 120mm mortar bombs.³ (There were also some reports that the deal included 76mm and 130mm mortar bombs, but Burma is not known to have possessed mortars of either calibre.⁴) Not long after the first deliveries were made, Karen insurgents intercepted references to Pakistani munitions in BA radio traffic, and unexploded mortar bombs bearing the marks of the

¹ William Ashton, 'Myanmar's military links with Pakistan', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.12, No.6, June 2000, pp.27-9.

² Interview, Rangoon, April 1995.

³ Bertil Lintner, 'The Islamabad Link', *India Today*, 10 September 1989, pp.60-1. See also Daljit Singh, 'The Eastern Neighbour: Myanmar', *Indian Defence Review*, October 1992, p.33.

⁴ Alan Boyd, 'Burma arms itself against rebels in secret', *Australian*, 18 May 1990.

government-owned Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) were recovered by the KNLA along Burma's eastern border.⁵

On the same visit, the *Tatmadaw* delegation also inspected Pakistan's aviation industry complex, leading to accusations by Karen insurgents the following May that Pakistan was training Burma Air Force pilots, possibly as part of a comprehensive deal to sell Pakistan-built combat aircraft to the SLORC.⁶

In August 1989 Colonel David Abel, Burma's minister of trade and finance (and a former Burma Army director of procurement), met with representatives from the Pakistan Ordnance Factories in Bangkok.⁷ Possibly as a result of this meeting, other sales followed. For example, it was probably Pakistan which provided Burma with its new 106mm M40 A1 recoilless rifles, a number of which the *Tatmadaw* mounted on its jeeps.⁸ According to reliable sources, Pakistan also sent the SLORC a diverse collection of mortars, rocket launchers, assault rifles and ammunition valued at about US\$20 million. Some of these weapons were made in China and Eastern Europe. Until the practice was stopped by the United States, many of these weapons were reportedly siphoned off shipments sent to Pakistan for use by the anti-Soviet mujahideen in Afghanistan.⁹ Arms sales to the Rangoon regime were halted for a period by prime minister Benazir Bhutto, but after the 1990 Pakistani general elections they were resumed under her successor, Nawaz Sharif. There have been reports that these sales included a number of artillery pieces.¹⁰ Indeed, the arms shipments which took place in those critical months of 1989 can now be seen to have marked the beginning of a secret military partnership with Burma which has continued to this day.

Over the past ten years a number of additional reports have surfaced, to the effect that both the armed forces and defence industries of Pakistan and Burma have developed a close working relationship. For example, only last year the State Peace and Development Council purchased two shiploads of ammunition from

⁵ Lintner, 'The Islamabad Link', pp.60-1.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.60; and Boyd, 'Burma arms itself against rebels in secret'.

⁷ Lintner, 'Consolidating power', p.23.

⁸ Personal observation, Rangoon, April 1995.

⁹ Bertil Lintner, 'Hidden reserves', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 June 1991, p.12.

¹⁰ Lindsay Murdoch, 'Burma, wild card of Asia', *Age* (Melbourne), 20 February 1992.

the Pakistan Ordnance Factories.¹¹ These shipments, reportedly valued at US\$3.2 million, included a wide range of military materiel. For example, there was .38 calibre revolver ammunition, 7.62mm machine gun ammunition (and spare barrels for the *Tatmadaw's* MG3 machine guns), 77mm rifle-launched grenades, 76mm, 82mm and 106mm recoilless rifle rounds, 120mm mortar bombs, 37mm anti-aircraft gun ammunition, 105mm artillery shells and ammunition for Burma's new 155mm long-range guns.¹² As noted above, the latter included both high-explosive and white-phosphorous rounds. One shipment even included ammunition for the Burma Army's vintage 25-pounder field guns, provided by the United Kingdom in the 1950s. In addition, Pakistan has provided Burma's arms factories with components for ammunition manufacture such as primers, fuses and metallic links for machine gun belts.¹³

In July 2000 SPDC Secretary One, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt, paid a well-publicised visit to the POF, accompanied by an 18-member delegation. The Burmese inspected the range of products made by the POF and were shown various manufacturing processes. In the past, such high-profile visits have helped to consolidate ties considered important to the Rangoon regime. Often, they have preceded further arms sales.¹⁴ There have since been rumours in Rangoon that Khin Nyunt purchased a quantity of Stinger surface-to-air missiles, which had earlier been provided to Pakistan by the United States, for use by the mujahideen against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has also been associated with Burma's recent purchase of jet trainers from China. In June 1998 it was revealed that China would finance a US\$20 million sale of seven NAMC/PAC Karakorum-8 trainers to the Burma Air Force.¹⁵ An order for additional K-8 aircraft soon followed. A total of twelve of the two-seater jet trainers have

¹¹ Interview, Rangoon, December 1999.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ 'Myanmar Delegation Visits Pakistan Ordnance Factories', *The Nation*, 11 July 2000.

¹⁵ Bruce Hawke, 'Myanmar is first export customer for K-8 trainer', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 24 June 1998, p.14.

already been delivered to Burma's Shante air training base.¹⁶ Burma is the first customer outside China and Pakistan to receive this aircraft. Its acquisition considerably increases the Burma Air Force's ability to train pilots for its expanding fleet of Chinese F-7 interceptors and A-5 ground attack aircraft. Like Burma's Yugoslavian G-4 Super Galeb jet trainers, now grounded due to a lack of spare parts, the K-8 can also be configured for ground attack, with a 23mm gun pod under the fuselage and external storage points. It can carry PL-7 air-to-air missiles, a 12-round pod of 57mm rockets or bombs weighing up to 250kg.¹⁷

The K-8 is manufactured in China, but the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex has a 25 per cent interest in the project. Indirectly, the sale of these aircraft to Burma significantly boosts the level of Pakistan's support for the *Tatmadaw's* expansion and modernisation programme.

These arms shipments can only have been made with the full knowledge and support of the Pakistan government. According to the chairman of the Pakistan Ordnance Factories, the POF only supplies arms and ammunition to those countries which are cleared by the Pakistan ministry of defence, and ministry of foreign affairs. In addition to 'national considerations', as a general rule this 'automatically excludes nations that are under a UN-mandated international ban'.¹⁸ Pakistan presumably interprets this stricture literally, and does not recognise the UN General Assembly's repeated condemnation of the Rangoon regime for its human rights abuses as a formal UN-mandated ban on arms sales.

Training and Intelligence

Pakistan seems also to have provided Burma with a wide range of military training. For example, during the early 1990s there were a number of reports that Pakistan had helped members of the *Tatmadaw* to learn how to operate and maintain those Chinese weapon systems and items of equipment which were also held in Pakistan's

¹⁶ 'Myanmar', *Air International*, January 2000, p.4. The Namchang Aircraft Manufacturing Company (NAMC), which was making the K-8, has recently been renamed the Hongdu Aviation Industrial Group (HAIG).

¹⁷ *Jane's All The World's Aircraft 1997-98* (Jane's Information Systems, Coulsdon, 1998), p.65.

¹⁸ 'POF Enters the 21st Century', *Military Technology* No.3, 2000, p.68.

inventory.¹⁹ For example, it was rumoured that the Pakistan Air Force (which also operates F-7s and A-5s) was helping its Burmese counterpart come to grips with its new Chinese fighter aircraft. Also, the Pakistan Army was reportedly happy to pass on advice to the Burma Army about its newly acquired Type-69, Type-63 and Type-59 tanks, and its Chinese-sourced artillery. Around the same time, there were a number of reports that Pakistan had sent a number of instructors to Burma for a period, to help train Burmese special forces and airborne personnel at the Burma Army's airborne school at Hmawbi.²⁰

While these reports still cannot be confirmed, they are given greater credence by the fact that since 1988 more than 40 members of the *Tatmadaw* have been sent to Pakistan for specialised military training. For example, between 1990 and 1999, 34 Burmese officers attended Pakistani military schools. Sixteen came from the army, 11 from the navy and seven from the air force.²¹ A number of Burma Army officers are currently in Pakistan undergoing artillery and armour training. Others are attending staff colleges there. The Burma Air Force and Burma Navy also have officers undergoing training in Pakistan at present. One credible report has even suggested that Burma Navy officers were receiving 'submarine training' in Pakistan.²² (This is presumably training in anti-submarine warfare, as the likelihood of the Burma Navy acquiring and being able to operate a submarine of its own in the foreseeable future is extremely remote.)

While training packages are usually included in Chinese arms deals, it is also possible that Pakistani military personnel have been sent to Burma to help the *Tatmadaw* learn to operate and maintain its new K-8 jet trainers, and Pakistan may be helping the BA with the 155mm artillery pieces which it acquired from Israel last year.

Given all these contacts, it comes as no surprise that some well-informed observers have recently suggested that the main intelligence agencies of Burma and Pakistan have developed a good working relationship.²³ Indeed, there is some evidence that Pakistan's initial

¹⁹ Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw*, p.57.

²⁰ Ashton, 'Myanmar: Foreign military training a mixed blessing', pp.9-11; and 'Air Forces Survey: Myanmar', p.34.

²¹ Aung Myoe, *Officer Education and Leadership Training in the Tatmadaw*, p.5.

²² Interview, Rangoon, December 1999.

²³ *ibid.*

arms shipments to the SLORC in 1989 may have been facilitated by Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), representing senior members of the Pakistan armed forces.²⁴ It is possible that these arms were sent to Burma without the knowledge of prime minister Benazir Bhutto, who had some sympathy for Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. (There have also been suggestions that the ISI is recruiting Burmese Muslims to spy against India, but this policy is unlikely to be supported by DDSI, which already has enough to fear from militant Islam.²⁵)

Pakistan's obvious price for its assistance to Burma would include greater access to information about India, developments along India's troubled eastern border, and events in Bangladesh. Even if bilateral intelligence ties now amount to little more than periodic exchanges of broad assessments, and discussions about the activities of the major regional powers, such contacts are still important symbols of shared strategic interests.

Regional Issues

In some respects, Pakistan's efforts to increase its military ties with Burma, and the Rangoon regime's interest in encouraging such ties, are not unexpected.

For a long time after Burma regained its independence in 1948, its relations with Pakistan were quite strained. A treaty of peace and friendship was signed in 1952, but frictions along Burma's border with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), territorial disputes, smuggling, illegal immigration and suspected Pakistani aid to Muslim insurgents in western Burma (known as *Mujahids*) all served to aggravate tensions.²⁶ In the early 1960s the Ne Win regime's attempts to expel people of sub-continental extraction from Burma, and to nationalise most of the country's commerce and industry, added to pressures on the bilateral relationship. In 1972 Rangoon's early recognition of the new state of Bangladesh was in the face of strong criticism from Islamabad, which at one stage even threatened to break off diplomatic relations.²⁷ Burma's harsh treatment of its Muslim population has exacerbated

²⁴ Lintner, 'The Islamabad Link', p.60.

²⁵ 'Myanmarese trained by ISI', *Asian Recorder*, 10-16 September 1998, p.27561.

²⁶ Liang, *Burma's Foreign Relations*, pp.138-9.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp.140-1.

these tensions. In addition, while Burma tried to remain strictly neutral in the India-Pakistan dispute, the Ne Win regime's fear of its massive neighbour in the west meant that it usually gave good relations with India a high priority. This was sometimes seen by Pakistan to be at its expense.²⁸

Under such circumstances, the likelihood of close military ties developing between Burma and Pakistan was low. Despite some superficial similarities, the origins and development paths of the Pakistan and Burma armed forces were quite different, and they had little in common.²⁹ While some useful lessons were learnt, and later incorporated into *Tatmadaw* training manuals, these differences seem to have been recognised by a Burmese delegation sent to Pakistan in the early 1950s to study its military training programmes. Before 1962 *Tatmadaw* officers would occasionally attend the Pakistan Staff College at Quetta, but even those contacts were broken after Ne Win seized power and imposed his isolationist and xenophobic policies on the country.³⁰

Pakistan's offer of assistance to the SLORC in early 1989 was clearly an opportunistic move by the Islamabad government to take advantage of Burma's straitened circumstances and to outflank India, which under Rajiv Gandhi strongly supported Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese pro-democracy movement.³¹ Although New Delhi later reversed its policy and sought to improve relations with Rangoon, both Burma and Pakistan have since come to recognise a number of common interests. In particular, they both have close political and military ties with China, and share strategic concerns about India. Burma can also provide intelligence about developments in India and Bangladesh. In return, Pakistan can help deflect criticism of Burma in multilateral forums like the United Nations. For example, during the late 1980s Pakistan joined China in opposing resolutions against

²⁸ Interviews, Rangoon, November and December 1999.

²⁹ See, for example, Hugh Tinker, *South Asia: A Short History* (F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1966); and Tai Ta Van, 'The Role of the Military in the Developing Nations of South and Southeast Asia, with special reference to Pakistan, Burma and Thailand', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 1965, pp.184-9.

³⁰ Tinker, *The Union of Burma*, p.327.

³¹ See, for example, Dipankar Banerjee, 'Myanmar and Indian Security Concerns', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.19, No.5, August 1996, pp.691-705.

Burma in the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC).³² To a lesser extent, Pakistan is also in a position to help protect Burma's interests with the Islamic countries, which on a number of occasions have expressed concern about the treatment of Muslims in Burma, including the plight of the Rohingyas in Arakan State.³³

However, to the SLORC, and now the SPDC, perhaps the greatest practical benefit arising from Burma's ties with Pakistan is that of having a willing (albeit secret) supplier of ammunition and spare parts for the *Tatmadaw's* varied inventory of Chinese and Western arms. Many of the weapon systems used by Burma and Pakistan are now the same. Both countries are heavily reliant on Chinese military technology, arms and equipment. The arms inventories of Burma and Pakistan are also similar in that they both contain German-designed automatic rifles, light machine guns, and ammunition - all of which are manufactured locally.³⁴ Both countries still use (and in some cases manufacture) older US and UK arms and ammunition, a legacy of their shared colonial heritage and former links to the Western powers.³⁵ Because of these similarities, and its more advanced technical development, Pakistan is also in a position to provide Burma's armed forces with the kind of arms, specialist technical advice and military training which is no longer on offer from the Western democracies.

Burma's military ties with Pakistan, however, while reasonably modest, are not without cost. Politicians and strategic analysts in India, for example, have been quick to point out that the strongest thread which links Rangoon and Islamabad is a close relationship with China, which is still seen as India's greatest long-term threat. It has been suggested, for example, that China is using its ties with Pakistan and

³² Lintner, 'The Islamabad Link', p.61.

³³ These concerns had been expressed on several occasions since 1948, but rose to a pitch in 1991, when Islamic countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East protested about Burma's treatment of the Rohingyas. See, for example, Bertil Lintner, 'Distant exile', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 28 January 1993, p.23; and Bray, 'Ethnic minorities and the future of Burma', p.147.

³⁴ For details of Pakistan's defence industries, see Ian Anthony, *The Arms Trade and Medium Powers: Case studies of India and Pakistan, 1947-90* (Harvester/Wheatsheaf, New York, 1992), chapters 7 and 9. Also, 'POF Enters the 21st Century'.

³⁵ See, for example, the entries for Burma and Pakistan in *The Military Balance 1999-2000* (Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Oxford, 1999), pp.166-7,199-200.

Burma to surround India with compliant states. Indeed, some Indian observers believe that in 1988 Pakistan was actually instructed by China to develop relations with Rangoon, to meet these wider Chinese strategic imperatives.³⁶ Other commentators have gone so far as to suggest that, in the event of a major confrontation between China and India, Pakistan and Burma could be called upon to provide China with military support, including troops.³⁷ Needless to say, such claims have been dismissed by the SLORC and SPDC as fanciful, flying as they do in the face of Burma's deep commitment to independence and neutrality in world affairs. After one characteristic outburst by Indian foreign minister Fernandes, who openly accused Burma of hosting Chinese military facilities, the Rangoon regime invited Indian observers to visit a number of Burmese military bases, to satisfy themselves that China has not established PLA units there. So far, however, India has not accepted this offer.³⁸

Even so, evidence of continuing military links between Burma and Pakistan, as represented by the most recent arms sales to the *Tatmadaw*, will add to the fears of Indian strategic analysts and others with an interest in the region's future stability.

³⁶ Singh, 'The Eastern Neighbour', p.33.

³⁷ This issue is examined in Selth, 'Burma and the Strategic Competition Between China and India', p.218.

³⁸ Interview, Rangoon, December 1999. See also Sadanand Dhume, 'Speak Softly ...', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 July 1998, p.20; and Bertil Lintner, '... But Stay on Guard', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 July 1998, p.21.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be a number of reasons why this diverse group of countries has sought to develop defence ties with Burma since 1988, despite the pariah status of the Rangoon regime and the diplomatic risks of being seen to flout the arms embargo imposed by the Western democracies.

There is an obvious economic motive, deriving simply from the wish to make money from the sale of weapons and military technology to the *Tatmadaw*. In Germany's case, for example, this would appear to have been the prime motive for its interest in Burma ever since it began building arms factories for the U Nu government in the late 1950s.¹ Other countries appear to give a higher priority to broad strategic considerations. Singapore, for example, is clearly anxious to take advantage of Burma's new 'open door' economic policies, but also has a strong strategic motive, relating in large part to its concerns about China's long-term intentions in the region. Israel doubtless has both commercial and strategic motives in developing ties with Burma, but the latter are less clear cut. Pakistan sees direct advantages in developing defence links with another of India's neighbours, which can not only provide intelligence about its rival but might also exert diplomatic pressure on India in any future confrontation between Islamabad and New Delhi.

While Singapore, Israel and Pakistan all have links of different kinds with China, and are anxious to develop them further, this does not seem to be a common factor behind their ties with Burma. Each is pursuing commercial opportunities and closer strategic links with Rangoon for its own purposes, and not at the behest of the larger power. China is no doubt pleased to see its Burmese friend and ally being supported by these three countries, and this shared approach may grease the wheels of diplomacy in Beijing, but it would be grossly

¹ It has been suggested that West Germany saw its commercial defence links with Burma in part as a way of helping keep Burma out of the Eastern bloc. This may have been a factor in the Bonn government's thinking, but the Ne Win regime was never likely to depart from its strictly neutral foreign policy stance.

exaggerating the connection between them to say that Beijing is in any way directing or coordinating the policy initiatives which are being taken in Singapore, Tel Aviv or Islamabad. Similarly, care needs to be taken not to draw too strong a conclusion from the fact that all three countries are developing intelligence relationships with Rangoon. These links vary greatly in strength and value, and are part of a much wider effort by Burma's military regime to develop ties with the intelligence services of many countries. While sometimes of direct, practical benefit, they also satisfy the *Tatmadaw's* penchant for secret diplomacy, and supplement more open efforts at reducing Burma's political and economic isolation.

Whatever the reasons why these three countries want to provide arms and defence technology to Burma, the Rangoon regime has been more than ready to accept their offers of assistance. The SLORC, and later the SPDC, have been keen to fill the *Tatmadaw's* armouries with the weapons and ammunition it needs to retain its grip on power in Rangoon, wear down rural insurgents and keep its perceived external enemies at bay.² It has also wanted to obtain the arms, technology and expertise required for its massive military expansion and modernisation programme. While China and a number of other countries have provided a large volume, and wide range, of arms and other defence-related supplies, this has not been enough. The *Tatmadaw* has needed modern Western technology and replacement parts for its old Western equipment. It has needed new equipment and raw materials for its defence industries, and assistance in freeing itself from reliance on its traditional arms suppliers. Above all, the Rangoon regime has wanted to diversify the sources of its military supplies, so that it will never again face the problems which occurred in 1988 when it was crippled by the arms embargo imposed by the Western democracies.

Although Burma can offer its new partners little in return, it seems to be enough for the time being. Despite its chronic foreign exchange problems, the SPDC seems able to cover many of its debts (although the Chinese are still waiting for millions of dollars in unpaid loans and the Singaporeans have reportedly lodged complaints about the failure of some Burmese joint ventures to pay dividends). The

² For the regime's persistent sense of being under siege from a range of threats, see Selth, 'Burma's Military Expansion Program: Plans and Perceptions'.

Rangoon regime has been very clever in exploiting its critical geostrategic position at the crossroads of South, East and Southeast Asia. It has also been able to use its relationship with China to gain attention in important councils, and attract support from some influential regional countries. Burma recognises its growing importance in the changing strategic environment, and as a potential ally against an aggressive India or expansionist China. The right noises in diplomatic forums and modest intelligence exchanges with its new partners seem to be sufficient at present to meet their concerns. The extraordinary secrecy which normally surrounds anything to do with security in Burma also helps to hide the defence ties which these countries share with Burma, and thus the diplomatic embarrassment some would feel if their activities were publicly disclosed.

One key question that needs to be asked is whether these defence relationships significantly contribute to the military regime's continuing grip on power in Rangoon, as German assistance clearly did before 1988. The ties which Singapore, Israel and Pakistan currently share with Burma pale into insignificance when compared with China's contribution to the development of the *Tatmadaw's* military capabilities. Yet, in some key areas of both military technology and expertise, these other countries probably have made a difference, and are continuing to do so. More importantly, they add to the Rangoon regime's sense of security, and its confidence that it can survive the sanctions imposed by the Western democracies. In this way, these relationships underwrite the plans held by the *Tatmadaw* to remain in power, by one means or another, for the foreseeable future. In that sense, the arms, ammunition, technology and training being provided by Burma's secret military partners have a significance well beyond their immediate military value. They play a role in the country's internal affairs and contribute to the staying power of the military regime in the face of considerable pressure - both internal and external - for fundamental political and economic changes in Burma.

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BURMA'S SECRET MILITARY PARTNERS



SINCE the armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*) took back direct control of the country in 1988, Burma has consistently been branded a pariah state by the Western democracies, and made to endure a wide range of political, economic and military sanctions. As a result, the Burmese armed forces have lost much of the access they once enjoyed to the arms, training and military technology of their traditional suppliers, such as the United States of America and the Federal Republic of Germany. Some countries, however, have deliberately ignored this body of international opinion and developed close defence relations with the Rangoon regime. While a few, such as the People's Republic of China, have barely troubled to conceal such ties, there are other smaller and diplomatically more vulnerable countries which have attempted to hide the links that now exist between their armed forces and arms industries, and those of Burma. Three countries which stand out most strongly in this latter group are Singapore, Israel and Pakistan, all of which currently enjoy significant military partnerships with Burma. Suggestions that Germany has quietly resumed its former links with the *Tatmadaw*, however, remain unconfirmed.