Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion

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Most strategic analysts outside Myanmar dismiss an invasion of the country as a fantasy on the part of the military government, albeit one shared by some of its critics. In international relations, however, perceptions can be more important than objective facts. Fears of armed intervention by the United States, or a UN-endorsed coalition, have been strong influences on the ruling council's defence and foreign policies ever since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. In that sense, the regime's heightened threat perceptions constitute a strategic reality that must be taken into account by the international community. As seen after Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar in May 2008, failure to do so can make the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and the search for viable long term solutions to Myanmar's complex problems, much more difficult.

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After Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar (formerly Burma) in May 2008, the world was stunned at the response of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which initially refused to accept humanitarian assistance.¹ Even after international pressure forced the SPDC to modify its position, the regime imposed very restrictive conditions on aid delivery. Most of the official statements and public

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comments made about Naypyidaw's reaction to the cyclone dwelt on the military government's appalling human rights record, its obvious lack of concern for the cyclone victims and its blatant disregard for world opinion. A few observers, however, have tried to understand why the regime took the unusual approach it did. In their review of possible factors, they have drawn attention to the regime's long-standing concerns about foreign interference in Myanmar's internal affairs. In particular, they have pointed to the regime's deep-seated fears of armed intervention.

Most foreign observers dismiss an invasion of Myanmar as a regime fantasy, albeit one shared by some of its critics. In international relations, however, perceptions can be more important than objective facts. Fears of armed intervention by the United States and its allies, and of indirect interference in Myanmar's internal affairs, have been strong influences on the regime's defence and foreign policies ever since the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. In that sense, they constitute a strategic reality which must be taken into account in the consideration of any future approaches towards the military government.

The 1988 Invasion Scare

Myanmar is no stranger to armed invasion, and invasion threats. Shifting geopolitical boundaries and name changes aside, since the thirteenth century Myanmar has suffered multiple invasions by China, India and Thailand. During the nineteenth century, the British Empire invaded Myanmar in three stages, defeating it in 1826, 1852 and 1885. Japan invaded Myanmar in late 1941 and early 1942, with the backing of Myanmar nationalists, and was only evicted after Allied forces re-invaded the country in late 1944 and 1945. Barely a year after Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in 1948, the new Union was invaded by remnants of the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Kuomintang*, or KMT). Three of these invasions have occurred within living memory. Through their schooling, military indoctrination programmes or direct experience, all have had a profound impact on those servicemen who suppressed the 1988 uprising, or who exercise power today.

During the uprising, there were calls to the international community for help in ending military rule. These requests were not unusual. They had also been made in 1974, for example, when activists appealed to the United Nations (UN) to help them honour the memory of former UN Secretary-General U Thant, and restore

democratic rule. In 1988, however, the demonstrations were much larger, received greater publicity and prompted a higher level of international interest. They also aroused greater concerns on the part of the military government. Some demonstrators seized weapons from the security forces and others approached foreign embassies requesting arms to fight the regime. The new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) feared an alliance between the pro-democracy movement in the cities and the insurgent groups then operating in Myanmar's countryside. Such a development would pose major problems for the armed forces (or *Tatmadaw*). This link would be more problematic if it was supported by "foreign elements". An even more worrying prospect was direct intervention by other countries in support of the opposition movement. At the time, Myanmar's military leaders were convinced they faced threats from all these quarters.

The feared upsurge in insurgent activity in 1988 was publicly linked to external influences. SLORC Chairman General Saw Maung claimed that "ethnic rebels" had "taken advantage of misunderstandings" between some foreign governments and the new military regime to attack Tatmadaw outposts "in an attempt to receive more foreign aid".² His exact meaning was unclear, but he may have been referring to the humanitarian aid that was starting to trickle through to the thousands of refugees who had fled across the Myanmar-Thailand border. Saw Maung's comments took on greater significance in November, after comments by US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, whose reported ambition was "to institutionalize US assistance to freedom fighters around the world".³ After visiting an insurgent training camp inside Myanmar, he described the students and others he met there as "heroes in our time", whose goals he admired. Rohrabacher also said he would lobby for these exiles to receive economic aid and medical supplies. While it was "far too soon" to consider other forms of assistance, he reportedly did not rule out the provision of military aid from the United States.⁴

Such a provocative remark would have set alarm bells ringing in Yangon (formerly Rangoon). Despite the relatively muted response to events in 1988, however, the regime feared even stronger foreign action. The deployment of a US naval task force to Myanmar sparked rumours that an invasion fleet was being sent to help the protesters. The regime's fears grew after 12 September, when five US naval vessels, including the aircraft carrier *USS Coral Sea*, were detected off Myanmar's coast. The authorities lodged an official complaint with the United States and sought an explanation from its embassy

in Yangon. They were reportedly told that the fleet was for the evacuation of embassy staff. This failed to convince the generals, however, as nearly 300 people, including some US embassy personnel, had already been evacuated by chartered aircraft.⁵ The US embassy issued a statement the following day stating that reports of a US fleet in Myanmar waters were false. As the fleet was sighted some 90 nautical miles south of Yangon, and therefore in international waters, this statement may have been technically correct, but it did not stem the rumours which were then gathering force.

During this period, activists in Myanmar distributed leaflets stating an invasion was imminent. They even made pennants printed with "US Marine Corps", to wave as the foreign troops arrived. Some Yangon residents were sufficiently concerned about these rumours that they began to dig air raid shelters. At one stage, it was reported that US paratroopers had landed around Mandalay. This prompted a panicky phone call from the Defence Ministry to the US Defence Attaché, seeking his assurance that Myanmar was not being invaded. (The Attache suggested that the Ministry ring Tatmadaw units in the reported landing zones, and ask them to look out the window.)⁶ There is still some confusion surrounding these events, but the regime's concerns about a US invasion were clearly genuine. The generals remembered the pressure brought to bear against India in 1971, when a US naval task force was sent to the region during Bangladesh's war of independence.⁷ Saw Maung was later quoted as saying that "a superpower country" had sent an aircraft carrier into Myanmar waters at the height of the 1988 crisis "causing fears in Rangoon that the city would be attacked".⁸ Despite US denials of any hostile intent, and the failure of any attack to eventuate, these developments made a deep impression on the regime.

There were other indications that the threat of armed intervention was taken seriously at the time. Despite the fact that Myanmar's foreign exchange reserves in 1988 were very low, the SLORC hastily took steps to replenish the Tatmadaw's armouries. In early October, a consignment of arms was sent to Yangon from Singapore. Another shipment followed in early 1989.⁹ Some of these acquisitions may have been to replenish stocks used in the regime's counter-insurgency campaigns, and to prepare for the fighting expected during the 1988–89 dry season. They may have also been in anticipation of further civil unrest. However, the SLORC's first arms orders included search radars and air defence weapons. Neither of these weapon systems is needed to protect a government from unarmed demonstrators in the cities or lightly armed guerrillas in the countryside, either

acting independently or together. The only logical explanation for these purchases is that they were made to help the regime resist a foreign invasion force.

It is possible that the SLORC was not the only government that feared a US invasion of Myanmar in 1988. Maung Aung Myoe has claimed that during the pro-democracy uprising China was prepared to invade Myanmar itself, should the US militarily intervene.

At the same time, there were movements of troops from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China along the Myanmar border. Several PLA brigades were deployed along the border and put on alert. The Tatmadaw authorities in Yangon informed the Chinese military attaché that the situation would be under control in a fairly short period of time. They even sent a delegation to the Myanmar border to meet senior PLA officer and to verify the situation and assure that no foreign power would interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs. There had been some reports that the PLA was quite prepared to take the Shan state, by using the [Communist Party of Burma] as a front, if the US fleet or troops landed in Myanmar [sic].¹⁰

Given the turmoil in Myanmar that year, it would not have been surprising for China to increase troop deployments along its shared border, as a precautionary measure. There were also reports of military and police movements along the Thai and Indian borders, to prevent any spillover of the unrest and to manage increased refugee flows. However, this is the first time that anyone has suggested China planned to invade Myanmar in 1988.

It is conceivable that Beijing gave some thought to the creation of a protective buffer zone along its southern border, using local communist insurgents as proxies, but the threat of an invasion probably existed more in the minds of Myanmar's jittery military leaders, than in China's.

Continuing Fears of Invasion

The SLORC's fears of an invasion in 1988 ultimately proved groundless, but this did not persuade the regime that it was immune from future armed intervention by foreign powers, either acting alone or in a coalition. The regime took careful note of the military operation against Iraq in 1990–91, and even placed anti-aircraft artillery around Yangon in case a similar effort was made against Myanmar.¹¹ In 1991, the Tatmadaw was reportedly placed on alert against a possible invasion when a US amphibious task

force returning from the Gulf War diverted to Bangladesh, to assist in recovery efforts after a powerful cyclone devastated that country. There were other indications that Myanmar remained fearful of an attack. Following the UN-sponsored landings of US troops in Haiti in 1994, there were rumours in Yangon that an attempt would be made by America or a UN coalition to force the SLORC to accept the results of the 1990 elections, which were convincingly won by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD).¹² There were unconfirmed reports at the time that China had pledged its support for Myanmar in the event of any international intervention.¹³

There were concerns too that Myanmar might be a target for Islamic countries angered by the regime's harsh treatment of the Rohingyas, Muslims of South Asian extraction who lived in Rhakine State. In 1991, over 250,000 Rohingyas fled across the Bangladesh border to escape the depredations of the Myanmar Army. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution expressing concern at the "grave human rights situation in Burma" and lobbying began for the Security Council (UNSC) to authorise UN intervention.¹⁴ In 1992, the regime was alarmed by remarks made by Prince Khaled Bin Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz, the commander of Saudi Arabian forces during the first Gulf War. During a visit to Bangladesh, he called on the UN to do for the Rohingyas "just what it did to liberate Kuwait".¹⁵ Most observers interpreted this to be a call for another Operation Desert Storm, directed this time against the SLORC. Later, there were reports that Rohingya insurgents were receiving funds from the Middle East to buy arms. There were also rumours that Myanmar's Muslims had declared a *jihad* or "holy war" against the regime and were being assisted by Islamic fundamentalists from abroad.¹⁶

Throughout the 1990s the regime — renamed the SPDC in 1997 — continued to feel insecure and vulnerable. As it consolidated its domestic position it became more confident of its ability to resist international pressures, but it was still sensitive to calls for regime change and to other perceived threats to Myanmar's independence and national sovereignty. For example, after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared Myanmar to be "an outpost of tyranny" in 2005 — along with other "rogue states" such as Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe and Belarus — the SPDC reportedly gave renewed attention to ways in which it might resist US intervention. According to the *Asia Times Online*, a secret Tatmadaw document identified three ways in which the US might "invade" Myanmar:

“through agitating its citizens, in an alliance with insurgents and ceasefire groups or through a multinational coalition-led invasion”.¹⁷ This document reportedly identified US ally Thailand as Myanmar’s “nearest enemy”. The regime has long been worried that the US might use its annual “Cobra Gold” military exercises with Thailand as cover for an attack against Myanmar.

Other straws in the wind suggest that the regime remains worried about armed intervention. The thinking behind the move of Myanmar’s capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw in 2005 is unclear, but one possible explanation is that the new city was considered more secure from an invasion launched from the sea.¹⁸ A few hundred kilometres makes little difference to a modern force armed with missiles and long-range aircraft, but this could have been an element in the SPDC’s thinking. Similar considerations prompted the Tatmadaw’s decision in 2002 to move the headquarters of its Western Command from Sittwe (on the Rhakine coast) to Ann, further inland.¹⁹ Also, in 2006 *The Irrawaddy* magazine claimed to possess a secret document in which SPDC Chairman Senior General Than Shwe instructed his military commanders “to prepare for the worst and hope for the best”. He warned against a “destruction plan” being implemented by the Central Intelligence Agency. This document reportedly quoted a senior military officer saying that, if the US bombed Yangon or Mandalay, all members of the NLD would need to be killed, to prevent them being used as “stooges” by an occupying military force.²⁰

Similar concerns arose in September 2007, during the so-called “saffron revolution”. The protests that month were largely spontaneous reactions to unexpected events, but the SPDC immediately suspected the hand of “internal and external destructionists”, and behind them “foreign powers” determined to install a “puppet government” in Myanmar.²¹ In support of this claim, the regime cited the training given by expatriate groups in Thailand to more than 3,000 Myanmar citizens — including Buddhist monks — in strategies of non-violent resistance and community mobilization.²² Rather than acknowledge the largely unplanned nature of the popular unrest and its root causes, Myanmar’s police chief claimed that it was the result of months of systematic planning. The regime may have painted the disturbances as a foreign-instigated plot in order to quell unease within the armed forces, particularly after they were ordered to take tough action against demonstrating Buddhist monks. There is little doubt, however, that the regime genuinely feared the disturbances were inspired — if not assisted — by the United States and other

foreign countries.

It was partly in response to these perceived threats that, since 1988, the regime has undertaken an ambitious programme to expand and modernize the armed forces, consistently reserving about 35 per cent of the national budget to this end. After decades of being essentially a small, lightly armed infantry force geared to regime protection and counter-insurgency, Myanmar now boasts a very large, reasonably well-armed defence force increasingly capable of conventional military operations. The Tatmadaw still faces a number of serious internal problems, but it is now able to mount a much stronger defence of Myanmar territory.²³ These enhanced military capabilities raise the stakes faced by a hostile neighbour and help act as a deterrent against invasion. In addition, most civil servants have received paramilitary training, specifically to help resist an invading US force until support arrives from Myanmar's allies.²⁴

Thus, for the past twenty years, Myanmar's generals have faced the possibility of armed intervention by foreign powers. Added to that was a long history of external support for insurgent groups and dissidents, dedicated to the overthrow of the military government. It was in this atmosphere of fear and suspicion, and against a background of persistent security threats — both real and imagined — that the SPDC faced the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

The Impact of Cyclone Nargis

Nargis was the most powerful cyclone to strike Myanmar within living memory. On the night of 2–3 May 2008, torrential rain and winds exceeding 190 kilometres per hour swept across Lower Myanmar. The cyclone was accompanied by a 3.5 metre tidal surge, and left devastation in its wake. The coastal areas of low-lying Ayeyarwady (formerly Irrawaddy) Division were the hardest hit. Villages were destroyed, crops were flattened, paddy fields were flooded with salt water and tens of thousands of farm animals were killed. The final number of casualties is still unknown, but by the end of July estimates of the dead and missing had reached 140,000. The SPDC declared an emergency across five administrative regions: Yangon, Ayeyarwady and Bago Divisions, and Kayin and Mon States. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, 65 per cent of Myanmar's rice, 80 per cent of its aquaculture, 50 per cent of its poultry and 40 per cent of its pig production came from these five regions.²⁵ It was immediately apparent that a large scale and long term relief effort was needed, along the lines of the response

to the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

The international community was quick to offer sympathy and support, but it was also quick to state its high expectations of the SPDC. In the circumstances, some were quite unrealistic. Despite its natural riches, Myanmar is still a poorly developed country, with few modern facilities, particularly outside the main population centres. Despite major improvements since 1988, the transport and communications infrastructure is very weak. In addition, while it exercises enormous power, the government is not the efficient and well-resourced military machine that is sometimes portrayed. All major decisions must be referred to the senior leadership in Naypyidaw, which is often shielded from real conditions in the country. Even so, any Myanmar government, democratically elected or not, would have found it very difficult to cope with the massive human suffering, property damage and economic problems caused by the cyclone. Far richer, technologically more advanced and socially more cohesive countries have experienced difficulties in responding to such natural disasters.

Yet, by any measure, the SPDC's response to Cyclone Nargis was sadly wanting, particularly when it had the means to take immediate action. The Tatmadaw is the only organization in Myanmar with the command structure, internal communications, manpower, resources and expertise to respond quickly to such a catastrophic event. The armed forces were not called out, however, and they did not make a real contribution to relief efforts until some days had passed. Even then, the response was patchy and weak. It is not known why the regime's response was so slow, but it was probably due — at least in part — to Naypyidaw's preoccupation with its constitutional referendum, scheduled for 10 May. The referendum was postponed for two weeks in the worst cyclone-affected areas, but arrangements for the poll in all other parts of the country went ahead, despite the national emergency. This decision prompted widespread criticism, but it was the SPDC's initial refusal to accept aid donations and to allow foreign aid workers into the country, which caused the greatest concern.

Immediately after the cyclone struck, a massive international relief effort began. Within a week, 24 countries had pledged financial support totalling US\$30 million.²⁶ It was not until 6 May, however, that the regime agreed to accept foreign assistance, and only on the basis that it could control aid distribution. Even then, the SPDC was slow to issue visas to foreign specialists and to allow aid into Myanmar. Essential supplies piled up in neighbouring countries

as UN agencies, non-government organizations (NGO) and others waited for clearances. It was only days later, and after considerable international pressure, that the regime made it easier for aid workers and supplies to enter Myanmar. The SPDC still insisted, however, that foreign governments and NGOs “negotiate” access. It was also made clear that only “friendly” countries would be allowed into Myanmar. The United States, Britain and France sent naval vessels loaded with aid supplies, but they were denied permission to land in Myanmar, or to deliver any supplies by helicopter. Inside the country, the movement of foreign aid workers was restricted and relief distribution was tightly controlled by the authorities. As Brian McCartan observed, the regime seemed to view the crisis “more as a national security issue than a humanitarian operation”.²⁷

The regime’s resistance to international aid and the entry of foreign aid workers attracted widespread criticism. On 9 May, a spokesman for the World Food Programme described the SPDC’s attitude as “unprecedented in modern humanitarian relief efforts”.²⁸ On 12 May, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon registered his “deep concern and immense frustration at the unacceptably slow response to this grave humanitarian crisis”.²⁹ On 16 May, UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown declared that: “A natural disaster is being made into a man-made catastrophe by the neglect and the inhuman treatment of the Burmese people by a regime that is failing to act.”³⁰ Other world leaders and senior officials expressed similar sentiments. There were also accusations that the regime had failed to forewarn Myanmar’s citizens about the cyclone. This appears to have been incorrect, but some observers have claimed that the regime deliberately withheld details of the storm to weaken the opposition movement’s support in the Ayeyarwady delta, or to punish the large ethnic Kayin community in the region.³¹

Such claims lack evidence, but there was no doubting the regime’s refusal to permit the free flow of aid and expertise into Myanmar, and its determination to play down the extent of the disaster. On 7 May, Senior General Than Shwe stated that the situation was “returning to normal”. Barely three weeks after the cyclone, when bloated bodies were lying in ditches and tens of thousands of victims were still waiting for assistance, Than Shwe declared that relief efforts had ended and the reconstruction phase had begun. Aid agencies greeted these statements with disbelief, and there followed further criticism of the regime’s indifference to the suffering of its people. Following a visit to Naypyidaw in late May by Ban Ki-moon, and the organization of a relief effort

coordinated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), supplies began to flow more freely and foreign aid workers were allowed greater access. Even so, aid delivery to Myanmar was still hampered by government regulations, interference from local officials and a refusal to allow foreign personnel and aircraft into the cyclone affected areas except under strict conditions. The US, UK and French naval vessels departed in early June, having failed to get permission to unload any aid supplies.

Such was the level of frustration over the situation in the Ayeyarwady delta, and the regime's unhelpful attitude, that some members of the international community began to consider extraordinary measures to deliver aid to the cyclone victims.

Aid and the "Responsibility to Protect"

After the 1988 takeover, aid to Myanmar — including humanitarian assistance — was reduced by donor countries, in the belief that this would help put pressure on the new military government. Some is still provided, mainly through NGOs, but the regime has put numerous obstacles in their way. This seems to be due to a reluctance to expose Myanmar's weaknesses, and concerns about the spread of foreign influences. In 2004, various measures were introduced which made aid delivery even more difficult. These regulations were further tightened in 2006.³² All these restrictions caused widespread concern, but were reluctantly accepted by NGOs and others as the price of doing business in Myanmar. The regime's resistance to international aid efforts after Cyclone Nargis, however, so outraged some countries that they began to consider ways of helping the cyclone victims regardless of the regime's regulations and stated wishes.

The most outspoken proponent of coercive humanitarian intervention was the French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Bernard Kouchner. On 7 May, he announced that:

We are seeing at the United Nations whether we can implement the Responsibility to Protect [principle], given that food, boats and relief teams are there, and obtain a United Nations [Security Council] resolution which authorizes the delivery [of aid] and imposes this on the Burmese government.³³

The "responsibility to protect" principle (R2P) had been unanimously endorsed by 150 heads of government and state at the 2005 UN World Summit, in an effort to prevent a repeat of events like the

1994 Rwanda massacres. According to an UNGA resolution later that year, the principle was established to help protect vulnerable populations from “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”³⁴ It offered a legal basis for countries to act collectively, if such action was endorsed by the UNSC, and to consider the question of when atrocities by governments should justify overriding the rights of sovereignty.

The R2P doctrine did not specifically address responses to natural disasters like Cyclone Nargis, but the French proposal initially found guarded support. European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana agreed that the UN should use “all means necessary” to ensure that aid reached those who needed it most.³⁵ Germany indicated that it might consider forcible delivery of assistance if the SPDC continued to reject help from foreign aid workers.³⁶ The Director of the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance revealed that an air drop of aid supplies was an option being considered by Washington. The UK initially dismissed the French approach as “incendiary” and likely to be entirely counter-productive. According to later reports, however, London did not take it off at the negotiating table.³⁷ Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said the world needed to “bash the doors down in Burma”, a statement interpreted as support for an R2P intervention.³⁸

There was never any likelihood, however, that this initiative would get far. The French proposal was immediately rejected by China and Russia. Supported by some ASEAN members, the two powers stated that the UNSC was not the proper forum for consideration of issues like disaster relief. No doubt with their own interests in mind, they felt that an intervention under R2P was a gross violation of Myanmar’s sovereignty. Predictably, this was also the view of the SPDC. After Kouchner stated, on 10 May, that Paris could not wait any longer for UN approval and would be sending a naval vessel to deliver aid directly to the cyclone victims, the SPDC reacted angrily. Myanmar’s UN Representative strenuously objected to the despatch of a French warship and rejected the claim that, under international law, foreign aid could be delivered to anyone in Myanmar without Naypyidaw’s permission. The French Government quickly backed down and “clarified” the Minister’s remarks.

In any event, it was apparent that an R2P intervention was highly impractical and unlikely to succeed in achieving its aims. This was the view of the UN’s Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, one shared by the US Defence Secretary.³⁹ Indeed, arguments for and against the application of the R2P principle in Myanmar’s

case were dismissed by many observers as a distraction from the central issue, which was not whether or not such intervention was legal, but whether or not it would improve the situation on the ground. In that regard, most aid agencies were quick to point out that simply dropping supplies would be of little assistance without a structured long term plan for aid delivery and the presence on the ground of specialists able to manage such a massive relief effort.⁴⁰ More to the point, without the active support of the Myanmar Government, such a proposal was simply not feasible. It did not take very long for coercive humanitarian intervention to be ruled out as a viable option.

The idea that foreign countries were entitled under international law to force their way into Myanmar doubtless caused consternation in Naypyidaw. As this debate unfolded at the UN, there was also a high level of comment in the news media, on internet blog sites and among activist groups, discussing whether such action was justified. Some activists and commentators saw the cyclone as an opportunity for even more drastic action, and canvassed the option of getting rid of Myanmar's military regime once and for all.

Renewed Fears of Invasion

Myanmar government is quite opaque and it is always difficult to know why particular policies are adopted. However, a number of issues immediately presented themselves as likely factors in the regime's response to the relief effort.

Faced with the prospect of a sudden influx of foreigners, in a rural area where its own resources were limited, the regime seems to have been worried that its tight grip on the population would be loosened. Large numbers of aid workers, officials and journalists would be difficult to monitor. Assisted by the international news media, they would undermine the regime's efforts strictly to control what its citizens see, hear and, as far as possible, think. Millions could be exposed to what the regime calls "alien cultural influences", leading in turn to "social instability". In addition, the provision of clearly identifiable foreign aid packages would emphasise the regime's own failure to provide assistance, and the country's relative lack of development. To the regime's way of thinking, such factors had the potential to encourage renewed political unrest along the lines of the 2007 disturbances. Indeed, this was already threatened by increases in the price of fuel, food and other staples following

the cyclone.

There were other concerns. According to Josef Silverstein, the regime was convinced that foreign aid workers would smuggle in weapons to arm the civilian population, and precipitate a popular uprising.⁴¹ Even if this was not the case, civil unrest could be encouraged simply by the presence of large numbers of foreigners. For example, dissident groups might feel that the regime would be reluctant to use force against them if their brutal methods were going to be widely exposed, and possibly even attract UN intervention to protect foreign nationals. Also, the SPDC probably realized at an early stage that a significant aid effort would need to be sustained over a long period, as occurred after the 2004 tsunami. There was thus the prospect of a large foreign presence in Myanmar well after the cyclone had passed, with all its attendant problems of surveillance and control. This could disrupt the regime's plans to introduce a "discipline-flourishing democracy" by 2010. The SPDC's greatest concern, however, was that the United States and its allies might use disaster relief efforts as cover for an invasion.

Such fears clearly contributed to the regime's refusal to permit the US, UK and French naval forces to enter Myanmar. The regime stated that the "strings attached to the relief supplies carried by the warships and military helicopters are not acceptable to the Myanmar people".⁴² It was not explained what these "strings" were, but the state-run news media hinted that the United States could use the disaster as a pretext to invade and take control of Myanmar's oil reserves. This was despite the fact that the Commander of US Pacific Command, Admiral Timothy Keating, assured the regime that the US "had no military intentions" and would leave Myanmar as soon as it was told to do so.⁴³ Keating also gave an undertaking that no US military personnel or aircraft would stay on Myanmar soil overnight, unless requested to do so. The US Navy even invited Myanmar civilian or military officials to inspect the aid supplies on its warships and to ride in the helicopters or landing craft delivering these supplies. However, these assurances did not allay the regime's suspicions of a secret agenda.

Referring to this problem on 8 May, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that "It is not a matter of politics, it's a matter of a humanitarian crisis."⁴⁴ Yet, only the day before the cyclone struck, President Bush had renewed US sanctions against Myanmar for another year and expanded the authorities that allowed the US to target those supporting a regime that "exploits and oppresses the people of Burma". At the same time, the President condemned the

SPDC's proposed new constitution as "dangerously flawed", and re-stated his commitment to help the Myanmar people "in their struggle to free themselves from the regime's tyranny".⁴⁵ On 5 May, US First Lady Laura Bush was highly critical of Myanmar's military government. It would not have escaped Naypyidaw's attention that on 6 May, the same day that the President called for US access to the cyclone affected areas, he signed a law awarding opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi the US Congressional Gold Medal, its highest civilian honour. In these circumstances, there was little chance that the SPDC would feel inclined to divorce politics from other factors.

In trying to win the SPDC's trust, Washington had to overcome the results of two decades of aggressive rhetoric, an increasingly harsh sanctions regime and consistent support for the military government's opponents. This was always going to be difficult.

No one knows what might have happened, had the international community attempted to deliver aid without Naypyidaw's agreement. It is likely, however, that the Tatmadaw would have resisted any incursions into Myanmar air space and any unauthorised landings on Myanmar territory. This may have even taken the form of military action, including an exchange of fire and possible casualties. Activists have questioned the loyalty of Myanmar's armed forces in such circumstances, but there would have been at least some servicemen prepared to resist such a blatant challenge to the country's independence and sovereignty. It would only have taken one person prepared to fire a surface-to-air missile at a foreign helicopter to spark a much larger conflict. In such circumstances, the plight of the cyclone victims would have become even worse.

In the event no forcible action was taken, but as long as warships loitered off Myanmar's coast, the SPDC felt that it faced the possibility of an armed incursion. Its fears were probably heightened by the emotive reports appearing in the news media and on blog sites. On 10 May, for example, the *Asia Times Online* argued:

Many have speculated that Myanmar's notoriously paranoid junta abruptly moved the national capital 400 kilometres north from Yangon to its mountain-rung redoubt at Naypyidaw in November 2005 due to fears of a possible pre-emptive US invasion, similar to the action against Iraq. Now Cyclone Nargis and the government's woeful response to the disaster have suddenly made that once paranoid delusion into a strong pre-emptive possibility, one that

Bush's lame-duck presidency desperately needs.⁴⁶

The author claimed that China could not resist such an invasion, which would put the "globally respected and once democratically elected" Aung San Suu Kyi into power. *The Australian* claimed "It's time for an aid intervention", and even *Time* magazine felt that "it's time to consider a more serious option: invading Burma".⁴⁷ Such stories were often marked by factual inaccuracies and weak strategic analysis, and a failure to look beyond an assumed military victory, but to Naypyidaw they would have been seen as further evidence that its suspicions about the West's intentions were justified.

Cyclone Nargis thus posed a major challenge to the SPDC, not just in terms of relief, reconstruction and economic recovery, but also in relation to Myanmar's independence, sovereignty and self-reliance. The international community was quick to respond to Myanmar's plight and generous in the aid it offered, but its high level of interest also reawakened the regime's fears of external intervention. Such fears encompassed not just a loss of control over the civilian population and a popular uprising, but an invasion of Myanmar by the United States and its allies. Ironically, many of the factors which contributed to the regime's fears and its uncooperative attitude stemmed — at least in part — from the uncompromising policies adopted by many of the same countries twenty years before, and reinforced since. Whether or not this episode will persuade the US and other "hard line" countries to change their approach to Myanmar remains to be seen, but this stark demonstration of the regime's peculiar worldview must warrant closer examination.

Myanmar's Strategic Thinking

Before 1988, perceptions of security in Myanmar were predicated upon the belief that "the greatest threat to the continuity and independence of the state came from internal sources".⁴⁸ After 1988, external threats became more important, but opinions on their significance were mixed. In 1998, for example, Tin Maung Maung Than wrote that:

Myanmar does not perceive external threats in the form of hostile states bent on conflict and conquest. Yangon's primary concern is with external actors who seek to intervene in the internal affairs of the state to influence the way in which Yangon deals with its domestic problems.⁴⁹

Others have agreed that, after the uprising, the regime's security

concerns were primarily domestic, but suggested that external threats loomed larger around 2000. For example, Samuel Blythe has claimed that Myanmar's defence orientation shifted that year, and external threats "took on new significance" as a result of frictions with Thailand.⁵⁰ Since Cyclone Nargis, a broad consensus seems to have emerged that external threats play a significant role in the regime's strategic thinking.

However, since 1988 such threats — including the fear of an invasion — have always been important elements in the worldview of Myanmar's military leaders and the strategic calculations of the country's defence planners. This fear has fluctuated over the past twenty years, but it has never gone away.

To most observers, the idea that Myanmar might be invaded by the United States or a multinational force seems bizarre. Such a step has never seriously been contemplated, nor is likely to be. As long as the regime enjoys the support of China and Russia, the UNSC cannot endorse an attack against Myanmar, either by the US or a coalition of "willing" countries. The likelihood of ASEAN endorsing armed intervention against a member state is equally remote, and many other countries would see military action against the SPDC as an undesirable precedent. The US could go it alone, but its armed forces are already over-stretched. Besides, Washington needs China's support in its dealings with North Korea, and Beijing's restraint is important in the Taiwan Straits. An invasion of Myanmar is simply not on the cards. Viewed from the perspective of Myanmar's embattled military leadership, however, it is not difficult to see why the SPDC is nervous about external intervention. As former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir is said to have remarked, "even paranoids have enemies", and the generals in Naypyidaw have ample evidence before them of hostile states and extant security threats.

Ever since 1988, the world's foremost superpower, with its long record of clandestine and open interventions in the internal affairs of other countries, has made no secret that it would like to see Myanmar's military regime replaced with a government more to its liking. To this end, Myanmar has suffered a range of economic and other sanctions. In addition, numerous countries and NGOs have provided recognition and support to a wide range of activist groups, most of which have as their primary goal the regime's downfall. There is clear evidence too that activists have returned to Myanmar from abroad in order to organize protests and publicize the regime's failings. Armed insurgent groups, some of which may

have received foreign support, openly challenge the regime's authority in rural areas. In addition, numerous bombs have been planted in Myanmar's population centres, probably by anti-regime groups.

Few on either side of the current political divide dispute these facts. The opposition movement offers its own interpretation of such developments but, to the regime, they are evidence of a serious threat to the military government, and even to Myanmar itself. For, in the minds of the generals, threats to the regime are conflated with threats to the country. This view can be supported by reference to the aggressive rhetoric that has been levelled against the regime since 1988. Myanmar exiles, foreign activists and other commentators have repeatedly called for foreign intervention including, at times, an invasion. These groups wield little real power or influence, but some of the world's most powerful countries have lent them moral, financial and practical support. A few states have referred publicly to the need to intervene in Myanmar's internal affairs, or in other ways made clear that they consider the fall of the regime necessary. The United States, for example, has repeatedly grouped Myanmar with other notorious "rogue states" against which it has contemplated, threatened or taken military action.

Public statements by Myanmar's leaders need to be weighed carefully, to isolate serious expressions of concern from political rhetoric, self-serving excuses and outright propaganda, but the SPDC seems to believe that the United States wants to replace it for strategic reasons. The regime rejects the claims of its critics that they simply wish to see democracy flourish in Myanmar. As stated in one government newspaper, "A certain Western power has been raising and using the expatriates and fugitives with the cloak-and-dagger political aim to install a puppet government under its control in Myanmar."⁵¹ This "puppet government" is clearly a NLD administration led by Aung San Suu Kyi. To the SPDC's way of thinking, such a government would be friendly to the West, to the extent of selling out Myanmar's political and economic independence. More importantly, as a US ally — or "puppet" — such a government would help to "contain" China, a strategic competitor of the United States with the potential to dominate the Asia-Pacific region. According to this scenario, the US already has allies in the Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and India, so Myanmar would help complete China's encirclement.

Presented with a strategic assessment along these lines,

there are few governments that would not feel obliged to take it seriously. Several standard intelligence warnings have been tripped. If the measure of an external security threat is the combination of hostile intent and military capability, then Myanmar's enemies have demonstrated enough in both categories for the regime to pay them close attention. Other governments have implemented major policy changes and introduced far-reaching security measures on the basis of much less hard evidence than that available to the generals in Naypyidaw. Indeed, the SPDC's interpretation of the available data and its analysis of international developments over the past two decades have had a major impact on its strategic calculations and prompted new thinking about its security policies. For example, the resulting worldview has encouraged a closer relationship with Beijing and Moscow, which are able to protect Myanmar in the UNSC. It is not clear why the usually introverted military government agreed to join ASEAN in 1997, but one factor was probably the continued hostility shown towards Myanmar by the US and other Western countries.

In light of the regime's heightened threat perceptions and consequent actions, carefully considered and far-sighted policy formulation by other countries would seem to be essential, particularly if any progress is to be made in breaking the current diplomatic impasse and improving the lot of the Myanmar people. Yet it would appear that, on both sides, policies have been based on an imperfect understanding of the other's views and a misreading of the strategic environment.

Fantasy or Reality?

Activists are fond of portraying Myanmar's military leaders as oafs in uniform, unschooled in international diplomacy and determined to cling to power by any means to safeguard their ill-gotten gains and escape retribution for past actions. Journalists too are quick to describe the regime as "ridiculously paranoid", and consisting of "reclusive, xenophobic generals who despise the western world".⁵² These caricatures ignore the fact that the regime contains intelligent officers who are close observers of the international scene. Also, the Tatmadaw includes many genuinely committed individuals who have thought carefully about the defence of their country. While outsiders — and many within Myanmar — may see them as misguided — even deluded — they consider themselves patriots, responsible for protecting the country from its enemies, foreign and

domestic. Indeed, since 1988 they have been quite successful in exploiting Myanmar's important geo-strategic position and managing the international forces arrayed against it.⁵³

Attempts to describe a country's strategic culture are always risky, but the regime's mindset seems to be a complex amalgam of personal, professional, historical and cultural influences. To varying degrees, all seem to play a role in determining the attitudes and priorities of key members of the regime, both as individuals and a ruling elite. Such factors also shape their worldview, and thus their responses to specific developments, both within Myanmar and further afield. Critical among these issues is their perception of threats to the country, dating back at least to the KMT invasion. As Morten Pedersen has written, "It would be a mistake ... to underestimate the continuity in military thinking since the immediate post-independence period and the deep sense of insecurity that continues to drive the current government's priorities and behaviour."⁵⁴ Even if Myanmar's current leaders ignored historical events and confined themselves to developments since 1988, it would not be difficult for them to construct a coherent, internally consistent picture of an existential threat that was supported by empirical evidence.

Such an analytical construction would still be flawed, but in international relations perceptions can be more important than reality. Despite the recommendations of popular pundits and the wishful thinking of some activists, an invasion of Myanmar by America or a UN coalition has always been a fantasy. The regime's recurring fear of such a development, however, is quite genuine. Warnings on government billboards against "foreign nations interfering in the internal affairs of the State" are not just examples of self-serving propaganda. The regime's abiding concern about armed intervention, and its effect on Myanmar's defence and foreign policies, makes this fear a strategic reality. Unless this is understood by the international community, and is taken into account when formulating approaches towards Myanmar's military government, there is a real danger that the policies adopted will be misdirected at best, and counter-productive at worst. Indeed, this situation may have already arisen.

As David Steinberg has pointed out, aggressive rhetoric and the imposition of punitive measures against a regime like the SPDC can have the opposite effect to that intended.

... if there is one approach that would unite the peoples of Myanmar in a close authoritarian bond and justify this continua-

tion of the garrison state it would be the threat of physical foreign intervention into Burmese affairs. There is always the danger, as we have seen in typical garrison state situations, that a regime may invoke, erroneously believe, or create the impression of external threats justifying continuity of power and repression in the interests of the national security — foreign powers aligning with minorities or opposition elements.⁵⁵

Myanmar would not be alone in responding to external pressures by bunkering down and becoming even more determined to survive, despite the costs. Another danger is that some activist groups might be persuaded by the strength of the rhetoric employed against the regime that external support would be forthcoming for an attempt to overthrow it by force. This could only have tragic consequences.

Trying to understand the SPDC's peculiar worldview is not the same as sharing it, and taking it into account when formulating policies towards Myanmar does not mean condoning the regime's brutal behaviour. Yet, unless the generals' perspective — and in particular their deeply rooted fears of external intervention — are included in the consideration of future policies towards the military government, then the continued delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Myanmar people, and the search for viable long term solutions to the country's many complex problems, will be much more difficult.

NOTES

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