

As China and India vie for power and influence, Burma has become a strategic battleground. Four Americans with deep ties to this fractured, resource-rich country illuminate its current troubles, and what the U.S. should do to shape its future.

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

Lifting the Bamboo Curtain



A SHAN REBEL on the Burma–Thailand border. (Photo by NIC Dunlop/Panos Pictures)

M

onsoon clouds crushed the dark, seaweed-green landscape of eastern Burma. Steep hillsides glistened with teak trees, coconut palms, black and ocher mud from the heavy rains, and tall, chaotic grasses. As night came, the buzz saw of cicadas and the pestering croaks of geckos rose through the downpour. Guided by an ethnic Karen rebel with a torchlight attached by bare copper wires to an ancient six-volt battery slung around his neck, I stumbled across three bamboo planks over a fast-moving stream from Thailand into Burma. Any danger came less

from Burmese government troops than from those of its democratic neighbor, whose commercial interests have made it a close friend of Burma's military regime. Said Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej recently: the ruling Burmese generals are "good Buddhists" who like to meditate, and Burma is a country that "lives in peace." The Thai military has been on the lookout for Karen soldiers, who have been fighting the Burmese government since 1948.

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"It ended in Vietnam, in Cambodia. When will it end in Burma?" asked Saw Roe Key, a Karen I met shortly after I crossed the border. He had lost a leg to a Toe Popper anti-personnel mine—the kind that the regime has littered throughout the hills that are home to more than a half-dozen ethnic groups in some stage of revolt. Of the two dozen or so Karens I encountered at an outpost inside Burma, four were missing a leg from a mine. Some wore green camouflage fatigues and were armed with M-16s and AK-47s; most were in T-shirts and traditional skirts, or *longyis*. Built into a hillside under the forest canopy, the camp was a jumble of wooden-plank huts on stilts roofed with dried teak leaves, with a solar panel and an ingenious water system. Beyond the camp beckoned perfect guerrilla country.

Sawbawh Pah, 50, small and stocky with only a tuft of hair on his scalp, runs a clinic here for wounded soldiers and people uprooted from their homes, of whom there have been 1.5 million in Burma. The Burmese junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has razed more than 3,000 villages in Karen state alone—one reason *The Washington Post* has called Burma a "slow-motion Darfur." With a simple, resigned expression that some might mistake for a smile, he told me, "My father was killed by the SPDC. My uncle was killed by the SPDC. My cousin was killed by the SPDC. They shot my uncle in the head and cut off his leg while he was looking for food after the village was destroyed." Over a meal of fried noodles and eggs, I was inundated with life stories like Pah's. Their power lay in their grueling repetition.

Major Kea Htoo, the commander of the local battalion of Karen guerrillas, had reddened lips and a swollen left cheek from chewing betel nut. Like his comrades, he told me he saw no end to the war. They were fighting not for a better regime composed of more enlightened military officers, nor for a democratic government that would likely be led by ethnic Burmans like Aung San Suu Kyi, but for Karen independence. Tu Lu, missing a leg, had been in the Karen army for 20 years. Kyi Aung, the oldest at 55, had been fighting for 34 years. These guerrillas are paid no salaries. They receive only food and basic medicine. Their lives have been condensed to the seemingly unrealistic goal of independence; since Burma first fell under military misrule in 1962, nobody has ever offered them anything resembling a compromise. Although the junta has

trapped the Karens, Shans, and other ethnics into small redoubts, its corrupt and desertion-plagued military lacks the strength for the final kill. So the war continues.

Endless conflict and gross, regime-inflicted poverty have kept Burma primitive enough to maintain an aura of romance. Like Tibet and Darfur, it offers its advocates in the post-industrial West a cause with both moral urgency and aesthetic appeal. In 1952, the British writer Norman Lewis published *Golden Earth*, a spare and haunting masterpiece about his travels throughout Burma. The insurrections of the Karens, Shans, and other hill tribes make the author's peregrinations dangerous, and therefore even more uncomfortable. He found that only a small region in the north, inhabited largely by the Kachin tribe, was "completely free from bandits or insurgent armies." Lewis spends a night tormented by rats, cockroaches, and a scorpion, yet wakes none the worse in the morning to the "mighty whirring of hornbills flying overhead." His bodily sufferings seem a small price to pay for the uncanny beauty of a country of broken roads and no adequate hotels, where "the condition of the soul replaces that of the stock markets as a topic for polite conversation." More than 50 years later, what shocks about this book is how contemporary it seems. A Western relief worker arriving in the wake of last spring's devastating cyclone could have followed Lewis's itinerary and had similar experiences. By contrast, think of all the places where globalization has made even a 10-year-old travel guide out of date.

But Burma is more than a place to feel sorry for. And its ethnic struggles are of more than obscurantist interest. For one thing, they precipitated the military coup that toppled the country's last civilian government almost a half century ago, when General Ne Win took power in part to forestall ethnic demands for greater autonomy. With one-third of Burma's population composed of ethnic minorities living in its fissiparous borderlands (which account for seven of Burma's 14 states and divisions), the demands of the Karens and others will return to the fore once the military regime collapses. Democracy will not deliver Burma from being a cobbled-together mini-empire of nationalities, even if it does open the door to compromise among them.

Moreover, Burma's hill tribes form part of a new and larger geopolitical canvas. Burma fronts on the Indian Ocean, by way of the Bay of Bengal. Its neighbors India and China (not to mention Thailand) covet its abundant oil, natural gas, uranium, coal, zinc, copper, precious stones, timber, and hydropower. China especially needs a cooperative, if not supine, Burma for the construction of deepwater ports, highways, and energy pipelines that can open China's landlocked south and west to the sea, enabling its ever-burgeoning middle class to receive speedier deliveries of oil from the Persian Gulf. These routes must pass north from the Indian Ocean through the very territories wracked by Burma's ethnic insurrections.

Burma is a prize to be contested, and China and India are not-so-subtly vying for it. But in a world shaped by ethnic struggles, higher fuel prices, new energy pathways, and climate-change-driven natural disasters like the recent cyclone, Burma also represents a microcosm of the strategic challenges that the United States will face. The U.S. Navy underscored these factors in its new maritime strategy, released in late 2007, which indicated that the Navy will shift its attention from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. The Marines, too, in their new "Vision and Strategy 2025" statement, highlight the Indian Ocean as among their main theaters of activity in coming years.

But toward Burma specifically, U.S. policy seems guided more by strategic myopia. The Bush administration, like its predecessors, has loudly embraced the cause of Burmese democracy but

has done too little to advance it, either by driving diplomatic initiatives in the region or by supporting any of the ethnic insurgencies. Indeed, Special Operations Command is too preoccupied with the western half of the Indian Ocean, the Arab/Persian half, to pay much attention to Burma, which lacks the energizing specter of an Islamic terror threat. Meanwhile, the administration's reliance on sanctions and its unwillingness to engage with the ruling junta has left the field open to China, India, and other countries swayed more by commercial than moral concerns.

But some Americans are consumed by Burma, and they offer a window onto different, and perhaps more fruitful, ways of engaging with its complex realities. I saw Burma through the eyes of four such men. In most cases, I cannot identify them by name, either because of the tenuousness of their position in neighboring Thailand, whose government is not friendly to their presence, or because of the sensitivity of what they do and whom they work for. Their expertise illustrates what it takes to make headway in Burma, while their goals say a great deal about what is at stake.



The Son of the Blue-Eyed Shan

While the mess in Iraq has made the virtues of cultural expertise newly fashionable, champions of such experience often conveniently forget that many of America's greatest area experts have been Christian missionaries. American history has seen two strains of missionary area experts: the old Arab hands and the Asia, or China, hands. The Arab hands were Protestant missionaries who in the early 19th century traveled to Lebanon and ended up founding what became the American University of Beirut. From their lineage descended the State Department Arabists of the Cold War era. The Asia hands have a similarly distinguished origin, beginning, too, in the 19th century and providing the U.S. government with much of its area expertise through the

early Cold War, when, during the McCarthy era, a number of them were unjustly purged. One American who counseled me on Burma is descended from several generations of Baptist missionaries from the Midwest who ministered to the hill tribes beginning in the late 19th century. His father, known as “The Blue-Eyed Shan,” escaped Burma ahead of the invading Japanese and was conscripted into Britain’s Indian army, in which he commanded a Shan battalion. Among my acquaintance’s earliest childhood memories was the sight of Punjabi soldiers ordering work gangs of Japanese prisoners of war to pick up rubble in the Burmese capital of Rangoon. With no formal education, he speaks Shan, Burmese, Hindi, Thai, and the Yunnan and Mandarin dialects of Chinese. He has spent his life studying Burma, though the 1960s saw him elsewhere in Indochina, aiding America’s effort in Vietnam.

During our conversation, he sat erect and cross-legged on a raised platform, wearing a *longyi*. Gray-haired, with a sculpted face and an authoritative, courtly Fred Thompson voice, he has the bearing of an elder statesman, tempered by a certain gentleness. “Chinese intelligence is beginning to operate with the antiregime Burmese ethnic hill tribes,” he told me. “The Chinese want the dictatorship in Burma to remain, but being pragmatic, they also have alternative plans for the country. The warning that comes from senior Chinese intelligence officers to the Karens, the Shans, and other ethnics is to ‘come to us for help—not the Americans—since we are next door and will never leave the area.’”

At the same time, he explained, the Chinese are reaching out to young military officers in Thailand. In recent years, the Thai royal family and the Thai military—particularly the special forces and cavalry—have been sympathetic to the hill tribes fighting the pro-Chinese military junta; Thailand’s civilian politicians, influenced by lobbies wanting to do business with resource-rich Burma, have been the junta’s best allies. In sum, democracy in Thailand is momentarily the enemy of democracy in Burma.

But the Chinese, the Son of the Blue-Eyed Shan implied, are still not satisfied: they want *both* Thailand’s democrats and military officers on their side, even as they work with *both* Burma’s junta and its ethnic opponents. “A new bamboo curtain may be coming down on Southeast Asia,” he worried. This would not be a hard-and-fast wall like the Iron Curtain; nor would it be part of some newly imagined Asian domino theory. Rather, it would create a zone of Chinese political and economic influence fostered by, among other factors, American neglect. While the Chinese operate at every level in Burma and Thailand, top Bush-administration officials have skipped summits of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. My friend simply wanted the United States back in the game.

“To topple the regime in Burma,” he says, “the ethnics need a full-time advisory capability, not in-and-out soldiers of fortune. This would include a coordination center inside Thailand. There needs to be a platform for all the disaffected officers in the Burmese military to defect to.” Again, rather than a return to the early Vietnam era, he was talking about a more subtle, more clandestine version of the support the United States provided the Afghan mujahideen during the 1980s. The current Thai administration would be hostile to that, but the government in Bangkok, and its policies, routinely changes. The military could yet return to power there, and even if it doesn’t, if the U.S. signaled its intent to support the Burmese hill tribes against a regime hated the world over, the Thai security apparatus would find a way to assist.

“The Shans and the Kachins near the Chinese border,” my friend went on, “have gotten a raw deal from the Burmese junta, but they are also nervous about a dominant China. They feel squeezed. And unity for the hill tribes of Burma is almost impossible. Somebody from the outside must provide a mechanism upon which they can all depend.” Larger than England and France combined, Burma has historically been a crazy quilt of vaguely demarcated states sectioned by jungly mountain ranges and the valleys of the Irrawaddy, Chindwin, Salween, and Mekong rivers. As a result, its various peoples remain distinct: the Chins in western Burma, for example, have almost nothing in common with the Karens in eastern Burma. Nor is there any community of language or culture between the Shans and the Burmans (the ethnic group, not the nationality, which is Burmese), save their Buddhist religion. Indeed, the Shans have much more in common with the Thais across the border.

But Burma should not be confused with the Balkans, or with Iraq, where ethnic and sectarian differences simmering for decades under a carapace of authoritarianism erupted once central authority dissolved. After so many years of violence, war fatigue has set in here, and the tribes show little propensity to fight each other after the regime unravels. They are more disunited than they are at odds. Even among themselves, the Shans, as my friend told me, have been historically subdivided into states led by minor kings. As he sees it, such divisions open a quiet organizing opportunity for Americans of his ilk.

The Father of the White Monkey

Tha-U-Wa-A-Pa, or “The Father of the White Monkey” in Burmese, is also the son of Christian missionaries, originally from Texas. Except for nine years in the U.S. Army, including in Special Forces, from which he retired as a major, he has been, like his parents, a missionary in one form or another. He also speaks a number of the local languages. He is much younger than my other acquaintance and much more animated, with a rosy, muscular body in perpetual motion, as if his system were running on too many candy bars. Whereas my other contact has focused on the Shan tribes near the Chinese border, the Father of the White Monkey—the sobriquet comes from the nickname he has given his daughter, who often travels with him—works mostly with the Karen and other tribes in eastern Burma abutting Thailand, though the networks he operates have ranged as far as the Indian border.

In 1996, he met the Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Rangoon, while she was briefly not under house arrest. The meeting inspired him to initiate a “day of prayer” for Burma, and to work for its ethnic unity. During the 1997 Burmese army offensive that displaced more than 100,000 people, he was deep inside the country, alone, going from one burned-out village to another, handing out medicine from his backpack. He told me about this and other army offensives that he witnessed, in which churches were torched, children disemboweled, and whole families killed. “These stories don’t make me numb,” he said, his eyes popping open, facial muscles stretched. “Each is like the first one. I pray always that justice will come and be done.”

In 1997, after that trip inside Burma, he started the Free Burma Rangers, a relief group that has launched more than 300 humanitarian missions and has 43 small medical teams among the Karens, Karennis, Shans, Chins, Kachins, and Arakanese—across the parts of highland Burma

that embrace on three sides the central Irrawaddy River valley, home to the majority Burmans. As he told it, the Free Burma Rangers is an unusual nongovernmental organization. “We stand with the villagers; we’re not above them. If they don’t run from the government troops, we don’t either. We have a medic, a photo-grapher, and a reporter/intel guy in each team that marks the GPS positions of Burmese government troops, maps the camps, and takes pictures with a telephoto lens, all of which we post on our Web site. We deal with the Pentagon, with human-rights groups ... There is a higher moral obligation to intervene on the side of good, since silence is a form of consent.

“NGOs,” he went on in a racing voice, “like to claim that they are above politics. Not true. The very act of providing aid assists one side or another, however indirectly. NGOs take sides all the time.” The Father of the White Monkey takes this hard truth several steps further. Whereas the Thais host Burmese refugee camps on their side of the border, and the ethnic insurgents run camps inside Burma for internally displaced people—even as the Karens and other ethnics have mobile clinics near Burmese army concentrations—the backpacking Free Burma Rangers operate *behind* enemy lines.

Like my other acquaintance, the Father of the White Monkey is a very evolved form of special operator. One might suspect that the Free Burma Rangers is on some government payroll in Washington. But the truth is more pathetic. “We are funded by church groups around the world. Our yearly budget is \$600,000. We were down to \$150 at one point; we all prayed and the next day got a grant for \$70,000. We work hand to mouth.” For him, Burma is not a job but a lifelong obsession.

“Burma is not Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge,” he told me. “It’s not genocide. It’s not a car wreck. It’s a slow, creeping cancer, in which the regime is working to dominate, control, and radically assimilate all the ethnic peoples of the country.” I was reminded of what Jack Dunford, the executive director of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, had told me in Bangkok. The military regime was “relentless, building dams, roads, and huge agricultural projects, taking over mines, laying pipelines,” sucking in cash from neighboring powers and foreign companies, selling off natural resources at below market value—all to entrench itself in power.

Once, not long ago, the Father of the White Monkey was sitting on a hillside at night, in an exposed location between the Burmese army and a cluster of internal refugees whom the army had driven from their homes. The Karen soldiers he was with had fired rocket-propelled grenades at the Burmese army position, and in response the Burmese soldiers began firing mortar rounds at him. At that moment, he got a message on his communications gear from a friend at the Pentagon asking why the United States should be interested in Burma.

He tapped back a slew of reasons that ranged from totalitarianism to the devastation of hardwood forests, from religious persecution of Buddhist monks to the use of prisoners as mine sweepers, and much else. But, ever the missionary, the Father of the White Monkey barely touched on strategic or regional-security issues. When I asked him his denomination, he responded, “I’m a Christian.” As such, he believes he is doing God’s work, engaged morally first and foremost, especially with the Karens, who number many Christians, converted by people like his parents. He is the kind of special operator the U.S. security bureaucracy can barely accept, for becoming one involves taking sides and going native to a degree. And yet, operatives

like him offer the level of expertise that the United States desperately needs, if it is to have influence without being overbearing in remote parts of the globe.

The Colonel

Timothy Heinemann, a retired Army colonel from Laguna Beach, California, does think strategically. He is also a veteran of Special Forces. I first met him in 2002 at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was the dean of academics. He now runs Worldwide Impact, an NGO that helps ethnic groups, as well as a number of cross-border projects, particularly sending media teams into Burma to record the suffering there. Another kind of special operator, Heinemann, with his flip-flops and his engaging manner, embodies the subtle, indirect approach to managing conflict emphasized in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, one of the Pentagon's primary planning documents. Heinemann says that he "privatizes condition-setting." He explains: "We are networkers on both sides of the border. We try to find opportunities for NGOs to collaborate better in supporting ethnic groups' needs. I do my small part to set conditions so that America can protect national, international, and humanitarian interests with real savvy. Our work is well known to various branches of the U.S. government. The opposition to the military dictatorship has no strategic and operational planning like Hezbollah does. Aung San Suu Kyi is little more than a symbol of the wrong issue—'Democracy first!' Ethnic rights and the balance of ethnic power are preconditions for democracy in Burma. These issues must be faced first, or little has been learned from the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq." Heinemann, like the Father of the White Monkey, also lives hand to mouth, grabbing grants and donations from wherever he can, and is sometimes reduced to financing trips himself. He finds Burma "exotic, intoxicating."

Burma is also a potential North Korea, he says, as well as a perfect psychological operations target. He and others explained that the Russians are helping the Burmese government to mine uranium in the Kachin and Chin regions in the north and west, with the North Koreans waiting in the wings to supply nuclear technology. The Burmese junta craves some sort of weapons-of-mass-destruction capability to provide it with international leverage. "But the regime is paranoid," Heinemann points out. "It's superstitious. They're rolling chicken bones on the ground to see what to do next."

"Burma's got a 400,000-man army [the active-duty U.S. Army is 500,000] that's prone to mutiny," Heinemann went on. "Only the men at the very top are loyal. You could spread rumors, conduct information warfare. It might not take much to unravel it." (Burmese soldiers are reportedly getting only a portion of their salaries, and their weapons at major bases are locked up at night.) On the other hand, the military constitutes the country's most secure social-welfare system, and that buys a certain amount of loyalty from the troops. And yet, "there is no trust by the higher-ups of the lower ranks," according to a Karen resistance source. The junta leader, Than Shwe, a former postal clerk who has never been to the West, is known, along with his wife, to consult an astrologer. "He governs out of fear; he is not brave," notes Aung Zaw, editor of *The Irrawaddy*, a magazine run by Burmese exiles in the northwestern Thai city of Chiang Mai. "And Than Shwe rarely speaks publicly; he has even less charisma than Ne Win," the dictator from 1962 to 1988.

Heinemann and Aung Zaw each recounted to me how the regime suddenly deserted Rangoon one day in 2005 and moved the capital north, halfway to Mandalay, to Naypyidaw, “the abode of kings,” which it built from scratch, with funds from Burma’s natural-gas revenues. The date of the move was astrologically timed. The new capital lies deep in the forest and is fortified with underground bunkers designed to protect against an American invasion. Heine-mann sees China, India, and other Asian nations jockeying for position with one of the world’s worst, weirdest, wealthiest, and most strategically placed rogue regimes, which is vulnerable to a coup or even disintegration, if only the United States adopted the kind of patient, low-key, and inexpensive approach that he and my other two acquaintances advocate.

Heinemann’s last job in the military was as a planner for the occupation of Iraq, and he was an eyewitness to the mistakes of a massive military machine that disregarded local realities. He sees Burma as the inverse of Iraq, a place where the United States can do itself a lot of good, and do much good for others, if it fights smart.

The Bull That Swims

And then there is Ta Doe Tee, or “The Bull That Swims,” another American, whom I met in his suite in one of Bangkok’s most expensive hotels. His impeccably tailored black suit barely masked an intimidating physique—the reason for his Burmese nickname—and his business card defines him as a “compradore,” an all-purpose factotum steeped in local culture, the kind of enabler who was vital to the running of the British East India Company. The Bull was a staff sergeant in Special Forces in the 1970s and now works in the security business in Southeast Asia.

He is of the Army Special Forces generation that was frustrated about having just missed service in Vietnam, with little to do overseas during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. Stationed at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, in the mid-1970s, he was mentored, commanded, and led by some of the Son Tay Raiders. “Dick Meadows, Greg McGuire, Jack Joplin, Joe Lupyak”—he recites their names with reverence—were SFs who stormed the Son Tay prison camp near Hanoi in 1970 in a failed attempt to rescue American prisoners of war. “Vietnam and Southeast Asia were all they ever talked about,” he told me.

But in 1978, Jimmy Carter’s head of the CIA, Admiral Stansfield Turner, fired or forced into early retirement almost 200 officers running agents stationed abroad who had been providing intelligence, and many of them were in Southeast Asia. The CIA’s clandestine service was devastated. As the Bull tells the story, many of the fired officers would not simply “be turned off,” and decided to maintain self-supporting networks, “picking up kids” like himself along the way, just out of Special Forces. They sent him to learn to sail and fly, and he became a certified ship’s master for cargo vessels and an FAA-certified pilot. In the 1980s, he became involved in operations in Southeast Asia, such as bringing equipment to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. He blurred the line between such controversial and shadowy government operations and the illegal means sometimes used to sustain them: in 1988, while trying to bring 70 tons of marijuana to the West Coast of the United States with a Southeast Asian crew under his command, he was boarded by the U.S. Coast Guard. He served five years in prison in the U.S. and has been back in Southeast Asia ever since.

The Bull put on reading glasses and opened a shiny black loose-leaf notebook to a map of the Indian Ocean. A line drawn on the map went from Ethiopia and Somalia across the water past India, and then north up the Bay of Bengal, through the heart of Burma, to China's Yunnan province. "This map is just an example of how CNOOC [the Chinese National Oil Company] sees the world," he explained.

He showed me another map, which zoomed in on Ethiopia and Somalia, with grid marks on the significant reserves of oil and natural gas in the Ogaden Basin on the Ethiopian-Somali border. A circle was drawn around Hobyo, a Somali port visited in the early 15th century by the Chinese admiral Zheng He, whose treasure fleets plied the same Indian Ocean sea lanes that serve as today's energy routes. "Oil and natural gas would be shipped from Hobyo direct to western Burma," the Bull said, where the Chinese are building a new port at Kyauk Phyu, in Burma's Arakan state, that will be able to handle the world's largest container ships. According to him, the map shows how easy it will be for the Chinese to operate all over the Indian Ocean, "tapping into Iran and other Persian Gulf energy suppliers." Their biggest problem, though, will be cutting through Burma. "The Chinese need to acquire Burma, and keep it stable," said the Bull.

There are other routes to energy-hungry inner China besides the one through Burma. The Chinese are also developing a deepwater port in Gwadar, in Pakistani Baluchistan, close to the Iranian border, and have plans to do the same in Chittagong in Bangladesh. Both ports would be closer than Beijing and Shanghai to cities in western China. But the Burmese route is the most direct from the Indian Ocean.

This whole development is part of the Chinese navy's "string of pearls" strategy, which—coupled with a canal that the Chinese may one day help finance across Thailand's Isthmus of Kra, linking the Bay of Bengal with the South China Sea—will give China access to the Indian Ocean. China is, in effect, expanding south, even as India, to keep from being strategically encircled by the Chinese navy, is expanding east—also into Burma.

Until 2001, India, the world's largest democracy, took the high road on Burma, condemning it for its repression and providing moral support for the cause of Aung San Suu Kyi, who had studied in New Delhi. But as senior Indian leaders told me on a recent visit, India could not just watch Chinese influence expand unchecked. Burma's jungles serve as a rear base for insurgents from eastern India's own *mélange* of warring ethnic groups. Furthermore, as Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of *The Australian*, has observed, India has been "aghast" to see the establishment of Chinese listening stations along Burma's border with India. So in 2001, India decided to provide Burma with military aid and training, selling it tanks, helicopters, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, and rocket launchers.

India also decided to build its own energy-pipeline network through Burma. In fact, during the 2007 crackdown on the monks in Burma, India's petroleum minister signed a deal for deepwater exploration. Off the coast of Burma's western Arakan state, adjacent to Bangladesh, are the Shwe gas fields, among the largest natural reserves in the world, from which two pipeline systems will likely emerge. One will be China's at Kyauk Phyu, which will take deliveries of oil and gas from as far away as the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa, as well as from Shwe itself. The other pipeline system will belong to India, which is spending \$100 million to develop the Arakanese port of Sittwe as a trade window for its own landlocked, insurgency-roiled northeast.

There is nothing sinister about any of this: it is the consequence of the intense need of hundreds of millions of people in India and China who will consume ever more energy as their lifestyles improve. As for China, it may not be a democracy, but little in its larger Indian Ocean strategy can be decried. China is not, and will likely never be, a truly hostile state like Iran.

But China's problems with Burma are actually just beginning, argues the Bull, and the United States must exploit them quietly. As he observed, the minutiae of tribal and ethnic differences can easily displace grand lines on a map and the plans of master strategists. Just look at Yugoslavia, at Iraq, at Israel-Palestine. Given the energy stakes, he sees the struggles of the Karens, Shans, Arakanese, and other minorities as constituting the "theater of activity" for his lifetime, something that the Turner firings had denied him. Burma is where the United States has to build a "UW [unconventional-war] capability," he said. Such would be the unofficial side of our competition with China, which should be forced over time to accept a democratic and highly federalized Burma, with strong links to the West.

Like the other three Americans, the Bull talked about the need to build and manage networks among the ethnic hill tribes, through the construction of schools, clinics, and irrigation systems. In particular, he focused on the Shan, the largest of the hill tribes, with 9 percent of Burma's population and about 20 percent of its territory. Allying with the Shans, he said, would give the United States a mechanism to curtail the flow of drugs in the area, and to create a balancing force against China right on its own border. In any Burmese democracy, the Shans would control a sizeable portion of the seats in parliament. More could be accomplished through nonmilitary aid to a specific Burmese hill tribe, he argued, than through some of the larger weapons and other defense programs the United States spends money on. The same strategy could be applied to the Chins in western Burma, with the help of India. Not just in Iraq, but in Burma, too, American policy in the coming years should be all about the tribes.

Winning the Endgame

But while the former Special Forces and other Asia hands I interviewed see Burma as central to American strategy, the active-duty Special Operations community does not, because it is under orders to focus on al-Qaeda. This, my acquaintances say, shows how America's obsession with al-Qaeda has warped its strategic vision, which should be dominated by the whole Indian Ocean, from Africa to the Pacific.

Larger U.S. policy toward the Burmese regime, meanwhile, has remained unchanged over several administrations. George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have all declared their support for Burmese democracy, even as they have demonstrated little appetite for supporting the ethnic insurgencies, however covertly. In that respect, American policy toward Burma can seem more moralistic than moral, and President Bush in particular, despite Laura Bush's intense interest in Burma, may seem prone to the same ineffectual preachiness of which former President Jimmy Carter has often been accused. Bush, by some accounts, should either open talks with the junta, rather than risk having the U.S. ejected from the whole Bay of Bengal region; or he should support the ethnics in an effective but quiet manner. "Right now, we get peanuts from the U.S.," Lian Sakhong, general secretary of the Burmese Ethnic Nationalities Council, told me.

American officials respond that they have in fact backed their affirmations of democracy with actions. The United States has banned investment in Burma since 1997 (though the ban is not retroactive, thereby leaving Chevron, which took over its concession from Unocal, free to operate a pipeline from southern Burma into Thailand). The United States added new sanctions in 2003 and 2007 and provides humanitarian aid through NGOs operating from Thailand. As for cross-border support for the Karen and Shan armies, officials note that the moment the word of such a policy got out, America's embassy presence in Burma would be gutted. Of course, it's unclear what good the U.S. diplomatic presence in Burma is doing.

Nevertheless, according to a top member of the nongovernmental-aid community, the United States is the only major power that sends the junta a "tough, moral message, which usefully prevents the International Monetary Fund and World Bank from dealing with Burma." As a result, Burma has less money to build dams and roads to further despoil the landscape and displace more people. U.S. policy, this source went on, "also rallies Western and international pressure that has led to cracks in the Burmese military." The regime will collapse one day, maybe sooner than later; when it does, America would presumably be in excellent stead with the Burmese people.

Though the prospect of another mass uprising excites the Western imagination, what's more likely is another military coup, or something more nuanced—a simple change in leadership, with Than Shwe, 75 years old and in poor health, allowed to step aside. Then, new generals would open up talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and release her from house arrest. Even with elections, this would not solve Burma's fundamental problems. Aung San Suu Kyi, as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and global media star, could provide a moral rallying point that even the hill tribes would accept. But the country would still be left with no public infrastructure, no institutions, no civil society, and with various ethnic armies that fundamentally distrust the dominant Burmans. As one international negotiator told me, "There will be no choice but to keep the military in a leading role for a while, because without the military, there is nothing in Burma." In power for so long, however badly it has ruled, the military has made itself indispensable to any solution. "It's much more complicated than the beauty-and-the-beast scenario put forth by some in the West—Aung San Suu Kyi versus the generals," says Lian Sakhong. "After all, we must end 60 years of civil war."

Burma must somehow find a way to return to the spirit of the Panglong Agreement of February 1947, the pact that the nationalist leader, General Aung San, negotiated among the country's tribes shortly before independence from Great Britain. It was based on three principles: a state with a decentralized federal structure, recognition of the ethnic chieftaincies in the hills, and their right of secession after a number of years. Failure to implement that agreement, which collapsed after Aung San's assassination that summer, has been the cause of all the problems since.

Meanwhile, the war continues. When I asked Karen military leaders in the Thai border town of Mae Sot what they needed most, they told me: assault rifles, C-4 plastic explosives to make Claymore mines, and .50-caliber sniper systems with optics to knock out the microwave relay stations and bull--dozers that the Burmese army uses to communicate and to build roads through Karen areas.

In his bunker in the jungle capital of Naypyidaw, Than Shwe sits atop an unsteady and restless cadre of mid-level officers and lower ranks. He may represent the last truly centralized regime in Burma's postcolonial history. Whether through a peaceful, well-managed transition or through a tumultuous or even anarchic one, the Karens and Shans in the east and the Chins and Arakanese in the west will likely see their power increased in a post-junta Burma. The various natural-gas pipeline agreements will have to be negotiated or renegotiated with the ethnic peoples living in the territories through which the pipelines would pass. The struggle over the Indian Ocean, or at least the eastern part of it, may, alas, come down to who deals more adroitly with the Burmese hill tribes. It is the kind of situation that the American Christian missionaries of yore knew how to handle.

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