

Myanmar (Burma): Nationalism and International Ideology Trumps emic Norms of Interaction and Governance

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Abstract

Burma also known as Myanmar is presently best known for political repression and extreme poverty, yet at one point it was a powerful Southeast Asian Kingdom and a thriving part of the British Empire. This chapter interprets Burma's post-independence history through the lens of the Mode of Harmony through Holistic Engagement and concludes that the model fails to explain the country's foreign policy. Burma's foreign policy behavior does not fit the model due to the influence of a virulent type of Nationalism influenced by international ideological trends imposed first by the leaders of the independence movement and later on by military leaders. The chapter concludes that Burma's best hope for stability and development is a transition to a truly emic form of nationalism that is more attuned to local values and less reliant on sharp dichotomies.

Introduction

Burma's history is one of glory and decline punctuated by periods of isolation and forced engagement. Located at the border of Southeast Asia and neighboring India and China, Burma is a country with a rich cultural heritage and a great diversity of peoples (CIA, 2010). Early Indian influence brought Buddhism to the country in addition to many Brahmin practices which influenced kingship and values regarding power and authority. On the North, Chinese minorities moved seamlessly between the two realms, and on the West, Siam (Thailand) grew to become the country's traditional rival (Wyatt, 2003). It should be noted that early Southeast Asian realms lacked clear borders and power emanated from centers of power. This proto-states or realms were multiethnic and multilingual.

Burma is no exception and it is a highly diverse society with less than sixty percent of the population belonging to the majority Bamar ethnicity (CIA, 2010). Even among the majority ethnic group many intermarry with other groups, further diluting the border between ethnic groups. Nevertheless, Burma has suffered one of the longest civil wars between the different ethnic groups and the Bamar controlled central government (Katanyuu, 2006). Long periods of military rule have alternated with brief openings to democracy (Keling, Saludin, Feigenblatt, Ajis, & Shuib, 2010). This has resulted in a long isolation of the country, particularly from the West, and to prolonged sanctions (Clapp, 2010). Recent developments have resulted in an easing of restrictions, a movement towards democracy, and a rapprochement to the West. Nevertheless, Burma continues to be one of the least developed countries in the world (UNDP, 2009). Ethnic and religious tensions continue to be a pervasive reality.

The following sections focus on the country's foreign policy.

Burma's Foreign Policy: Ideology and Nationalism

Burma's history as a colonial outpost of the British Empire had a profound effect on its subsequent history (Winfield, 2010). The country was integrated in the British Empire as a part of India and thus its economy and borders were open to influence and commerce from the rest of the Empire (Lockard, 2009). Population movement was allowed inside of the empire and because of that there was considerable immigration from India. This resulted in a sharp change in demographics and a dilution of the Bamar majority. The capital's population, Yangon, was actually controlled by people from other parts of the Empire, giving it a very foreign flavor (Falco, 2003; Than & Thein, 2007). Due to this the country achieved certain periods of economic prosperity. High rice prices and access to the wide market provided by the British Empire resulted in a sector of the population achieving great wealth.

As in other colonies of the British Empire, the ethnic majority did not benefit as much from trade as other minorities and thus suffered a relative loss of power (Winfield, 2010). In the case of Burma, ethnic Indians, Chinese, and Europeans controlled the most successful business enterprises while most Burmese continued to focus on agriculture and subsistence farming. The Burmese elite served at the bottom rungs of the civil service. Ethnic tensions and economic disparities simmered during the colonial period until they finally exploded after independence.

It should be noted that the British allowed considerable autonomy to minority ethnic groups and favored Indian and Western traders in the capital. Due to this, and to the ideological currents popularized by Woodrow Wilson and others, independence leaders centered their movement on opposition to Imperialism and the West. Burma's experience during World War II under Japanese occupation had a profound effect on the future ideology of the ruling elites (Togo, 2005). The Japanese promised the Burmese independence and socialized them into a racial ideology promoting the equality and in many cases superiority of the Asian races over Europeans and others (Smith, 1997). It is also important to remember the role played by the post-independence elite during the Japanese occupation. Many future leaders including the so-called father of Burmese independence, Aung San, was a Japanese collaborator who later on switched sides when the tide of war was turning against the Japanese (Heidhues, 2000; Keling et al., 2010).

The end of the War and return to British rule did not eliminate former Japanese collaborators due to the weakness of the United Kingdom after the War as well as the needs of a very critical period during the early years of the Cold War (Lockard, 2009). One of the consequences of this was that the elite that took over control of the country after independence reflected socialist and even fascist ideological currents. An extreme nationalism combined with a yearning for a socialist utopia set the scene for the early years of independence.

The first regime of independent Burma was formally a democracy yet it was controlled by a few strong figures ruling a country with very little to no political training in democratic governance (Keling et al., 2010). It is also important to note that the important role played by the military in expelling the Japanese at the end of World War II and subsequently in fighting the many insurgencies, strengthened its position vis a vis civilian politicians. The power of the military became increasingly evident in the 50s and 60s (Keling et al., 2010).

In terms of foreign policy, Burma refused to join the Commonwealth after independence. This was a move based on pure ideology rather than on practical needs. As a colony, Burma had benefitted from access to the large British Empire as a market. Choosing to opt out of the Commonwealth would mean that Burma had to depend on its own market. This problem was further exacerbated when the Cold War divided the world into two competing blocks. While Burma was sympathetic to the Communist bloc due to its socialist leanings, its military leaders decided to follow the path of non-alignment (Heidhues, 2000). Thus, Burma joined the Non Aligned Movement in a further attempt to strengthen its nationalist credentials.

The Burmese military attempted to follow an ideology blending nationalism, socialism, and traditional Burmese culture (Keling et al., 2010). Nevertheless Burmese Generals had to satisfy certain needs and thus established strong relationships with the People's Republic of China and with other countries in NAM (Frankel, 2011; Kim, Fidler, & Ganguly, 2009; Lin, 2009; Peneau, 2013; Weitz, 2011). This made Burma highly dependent on supplies, in particular military ones, from the PRC (Selth, 2009). In the 1990s the Junta decided to explore the possibility of strengthening relations with other countries, in particular Western ones. Nevertheless this attempted rapprochement was hampered by issues of human rights and in particular with the failure to show progress towards democracy (Katanyuu, 2006). Due to this, the military regime decided to call for elections, expecting its preferred candidates to win. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National Front for Democracy won the election but was not allowed to take power and was instead put in house arrest. This move prompted Western states to renew sanctions and further pushed Myanmar into China's sphere of influence. Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 which brought greater attention to political repression in Myanmar (Peneau, 2013).

The military regime was focused on regime survival over issues of foreign relations. Military leaders were not willing to unleash the forces of democracy due to their fear of losing power. Nevertheless, military leaders were acutely aware of the disadvantages of relying on a single power as the source of trade and foreign direct investment. The regime's fear for its survival is evident in its decision to move the country's political capital to Naypyidaw, a new city hundreds of miles away from Yangon. The expensive move and construction of a new city was clearly due to security reasons.

Another example of the regime acting based on survival was its rejection of considerable foreign aid in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis (JICA, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). In 2008 Myanmar was hit by one of the worst natural disasters in its history. With thousands of people displaced and in dire need of aid, the government slowed the provision of aid from international organizations due to security reasons. The regime was widely criticized for putting its security ahead of the needs of the people which led to an important change of direction by the regime (Simon, 2008).

Partly due to foreign pressure as well as considerable internal pressure, the military regime, conducted a referendum in 2008 about the possibility of changing the constitution in order to move towards democracy. The transition was described the regime as a gradual transition to “a disciplined democracy”. Although a democracy, the term “limited” implies continued military supervision. Nevertheless the Military Junta was abolished in 2011 and elections were held in 2010. Elections were peaceful but with some irregularities. The government supported party won with 80% of the vote (Peneau, 2013).

The importance of the elections is that the gradual opening and the participation of Aung Saan Suu Kyi resulted in Western countries removing sanctions of Myanmar. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited the country and marked the beginning of a rapprochement with the Southeast Asian country (Peneau, 2013). Continued Western support is partly contingent on a measure of stability but also on increasing trade and security relations between them and Myanmar (Than & Thein, 2007). Increasing tensions with China have resulted in a greater need for Western countries, and in particular the United States, to entice Myanmar away from the PRC’s sphere of influence (Peneau, 2013). Notwithstanding the importance of human rights and democracy in American foreign policy rhetoric, security issues are also a core concern (Evans, 2011; Santander & Martínez, 2010). This is clearly visible in terms of the United States’ relationship with Thailand during the multiple military coups the country has suffered (Dalpino, 2011; Glassman, 2005; Ockey, 2007).

Interpreting Myanmar’s Foreign Policy through the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement

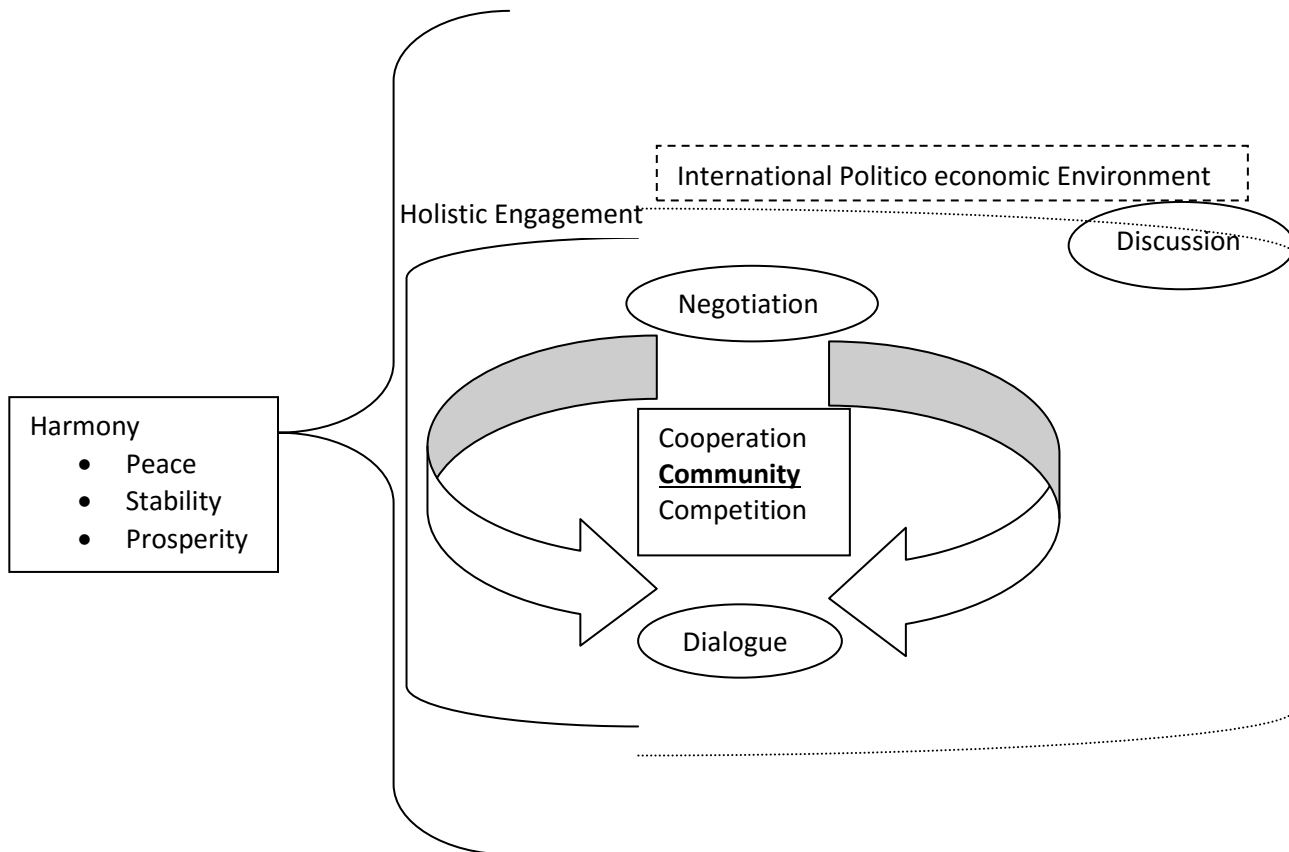


Figure 1. Harmony through Holistic Engagement: A Grounded Substantive Theory of Greater East Asian Regionalism.

Myanmar's foreign policy has followed ideological considerations rather than pragmatic ones for most of its history (Falco, 2003). European influence in terms of both an extreme nationalism and socialism were combined with the influence of the Japanese occupation and its philosophy of Pan-Asianism. Although there is nothing inherently incompatible in terms of the role of external forces in influencing foreign policy, as posited in the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement, the early years of Burmese independence were dominated almost completely by ideological considerations and therefore do not fit well with the emic nature of the Model of Harmony through Holistic Engagement. Nevertheless, developments after the fall of the Soviet Union and the rapprochements with the West show that Burmese foreign policy has returned to a more natural flow which more closely fits the Model in question.

As described and explained in previous sections of this chapter, the early years of Burmese independence were marked by a virulent nationalism and socialism. Foreign policy was guided mostly by the ideological preferences of the ruling regime and by the imperative of maintaining independence. This resulted in Burma forgoing membership in the British Commonwealth and eventually in joining the Non Aligned Movement. Nevertheless, participation in the Non-Aligned Movement shows that the Burmese leadership wanted to be engaged with the international community through both cooperation and competition. The challenge of the Burmese leadership was the marginalized nature of the countries belonging to NAM. Other than moral and rhetorical support, they had little to offer in terms of aid or trade. Moreover, belonging to NAM meant virtual exclusion from the American sphere of influence. Thus Myanmar suffered from exclusion from the first world and the second world and a marginal existence in the third world.

Subsequent efforts to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provide clear evidence that the ruling elite in Myanmar became more pragmatic and started to normalize its foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Increased visits to neighboring countries by high profile members of the government and attempts to join regional efforts also testify to the movement from a purely ideologically driven foreign policy to one based on a process of holistic engagement with the goal of achieving harmony and development.

Starting in 2008, the Military Junta announced that eventually elections would be held and that a new constitution would be drafted and approved by a popular referendum. The Junta followed through with its promised and free elections were held in 2010. Several opposition parties won seats in parliament but approximately a quarter of the seats were appointed by the military. Nevertheless the move towards democracy was interpreted by the international community as a wish to re-engage with the rest of the world. The United States and the European Union started a gradual process of lifting economic and political sanctions and opened several avenues of cooperation with the Southeast Asian nation.

The recent foreign policy of Myanmar fits the model of Holistic Engagement in that it includes both competition and cooperation with the West in addition to dialogue and strong ties with China. Therefore, it is a possibility that Burma's long ideology driven foreign policy was actually an anomaly rather than the norm and that the country is returning to a more emic path of development and foreign policy behavior due to the waning influence of ideology. High level visits by Western leaders, concurrent dialogue with China, cooperation with ASEAN neighbors, and competition all point to an emic approach to international relations based on harmony and holistic engagement.

Conclusions

It can be concluded from Myanmar's historical development that the country suffered a long anomalous period of ideology driven foreign policy. The experiences of the first cohort of pro-independence leaders' experiences with colonialism and their indoctrination in then popular political ideologies limited the foreign policy options of the country for decades. External forces such as the Cold War reinforced ideology driven policy decisions and thus further constraint the policy options of the ruling regime. The end of the Cold War and the spread of economic globalization eased the way for an easing of tensions with the West and opened a myriad of new and unexplored policy directions. This weakening in the grip over policy of foreign inspired ideological straightjackets allowed emic cultural norms and mores to permeate the halls of decision makers and slowly to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to international relations.

Myanmar's elite wants the country to enjoy prosperity and peace, this is particularly pressing due to the country's painful experience with internal insurgencies and violence.

The business community wants a stable environment in order to grow and prosper, and the average villager wants peace and safety in order to continue with their lives. Moreover, the country's strategic location between South Asia and Southeast Asia brings it into contact with a vast array of cultures, development models, and threats. In an uncertain environment Myanmar's governing elite wants to have as many options as possible in order to steer the country clear from unnecessary conflicts with its powerful neighbors. Rigid ideological alliances clearly hamper the country's ability to take advantage of the international environment in terms of cooperation and competition. Burma is now ready to fully engage with the world on its own terms.

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