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## Rekindling Military-to-Military Ties Between the U.S. and Myanmar

By Stanley A. Weiss

Less than a month after this nation won its independence from Great Britain in 1948, the Communist Party of Burma declared war against the Burmese government. Fighting between the two sides raged for more than four decades. The beginning of the end came 25 years ago this month, when Communist troops grew sick of the fighting and mutinied against their own leaders. By mid-April, the rebellion reached party headquarters, where insurgents smashed portraits of Lenin, Marx and Engels before seizing arms and ammunition. Aging party leaders fled to China. After 41 years of fighting, the Burmese Communist Party disintegrated, "defeated not by shrewd Burmese tactics," as historian Thant Myint-U has written, "but by the weariness of the local people."

There is another actor who helped bring about Communism's end in Burma, now known as Myanmar: the United States. From the moment Burma's Communists first declared war against its government, America supported the Burmese army. In the early days, it provided emergency aid and easy-to-land planes flown in by U.S. war veterans. When Chinese-backed troops crossed the border and attacked the Burmese army in 1968, American military support grew to include shipments of weapons and military trainers for the Burmese Air Force. In the 1980s, the U.S. financed \$4.7 million in military sales to Myanmar while paying for 167 Burmese soldiers to learn about democracy while attending U.S. military schools under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) security assistance program.

That support came to an immediate end in September of 1988, when the Burmese army crushed a Democratic uprising and seized power, giving way to a U.S.-led arms embargo. After the Communist Party of Burma fell, government troops continued to use American weapons and training in their campaign against many of Myanmar's 135 ethnic minority groups. Some of those battles continue to this day in the world's longest-running civil war. But as Myanmar approaches its second national election since efforts to liberalize the country were introduced in 2011, the question is being raised again: Should the U.S. military engage directly with Myanmar's military to help usher it into a new era? Or, put another way, would the U.S. have more influence by engaging the military, or not engaging?

The answer from Washington is: no engagement yet. While the Obama administration has pushed for restarting "non-lethal" defense training for Myanmar -- with top defense leaders making three trips to Myanmar while Washington allowed Naypyidaw to send observers to Cobra Gold, the largest U.S.-led multinational military exercise in the Asia-Pacific region -- Congress remains wary. Fresh reports of ongoing

human rights abuses by Myanmar's military, stories of child soldiers and alleged ties to North Korea have led some lawmakers to urge caution, insisting that "it is far too soon to initiate military engagement between the U.S. and Burma," as Rep. Steve Chabot, who chairs the House panel that oversees policy toward East Asia, put it recently.

But with a number of Western powers reportedly moving to re-engage the military, including the United Kingdom and France, there is little ambiguity among Western diplomats here and even less among local activists for democracy: it's time for the U.S. to re-engage.

"We need sophistication here because the military and other leaders don't know what is happening in the outside world," says a long-time democracy activist. "The U.S. military needs to interact with the Myanmar military. You still have these country folk colonels and such who don't know enough."

Respected Burman foreign policy thinker and blogger Min Zin, who took part in Myanmar's democracy movement as a student in 1988, argues that it makes sense for the U.S. to engage the military for one primary reason: China. "The Burmese military has long been aware of its over-dependence on China for equipment and training as well as political and economic support," he writes. "Since the mid-1990s, the Burmese army has been eager to diversify and reduce its dependence on China. But U.S.-led Western arms embargoes have prevented the military from doing so."

Adds a Western-trained venture capitalist, "It's important to engage the Myanmar military officers because we have to remember that they are open because they don't like China. The U.S. needs to engage them." As Deputy Chairman of the Myanmar Chambers of Commerce, Dr. Maung Maung Lay, tells me, the problem is that "Myanmar military leaders were only trained by the Chinese and Russians" -- neither of which have given them "the first clue" about how a restrained military should act in a democracy. A senior Western diplomat candidly admits that Myanmar and its military "didn't understand what a federalist army is," but now that Westerners have explained to them how a national military can co-exist with state militia, "they now understand." The solution, a senior Western ambassador tells me bluntly, is simple: "We need to train and teach the military."

While it is conventional wisdom in Washington that military leaders are resistant to change, the view here is the exact opposite. A high-ranking United Nations official here, described

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While it is conventional wisdom in Washington that military leaders are resistant to change, the view here is the exact opposite. A high-ranking United Nations official here, described by one ambassador as "the one Westerner who knows the military better than anyone, tells me, "I believe that the military is a force for good for democracy. I don't mean their behavior in the field. The military commander-in-chief says he wants democracy and will be retiring soon."

What benefits could direct contact bring? There are four.

First, the U.S. could open lines of communication to ethnic minorities while providing a roadmap for their integration into the larger Burman-only military, which is crucial to future reform. In particular, it would enable the U.S. to identify ethnic leaders who could participate in a revitalized IMET program, a vital step to ensure that ethnic militias -- who tend to live in remote rural border areas -- are exposed to democracy and human rights at a broader level to become a vibrant part of Myanmar's future. This new IMET program must include both Burman and non-Burman soldiers as a first step to fully integrate all ethnic groups in the country which is crucial for Myanmar to actually become a nation. Through this integration and increased exposure, future soldiers and citizens can one day think of themselves as citizens of Myanmar first and then as Shan, Chin, Kachin or any other ethnic identity.

Second, U.S. military advisers could help identify self-defeating policies, like the absurd 1997 military order which made each front-line battalion responsible for sourcing its own food. With many soldiers earning just \$10 a month, it has created a perverse incentive for troops to raid local villages for food.

Third, U.S. troops could facilitate the discussion with allies from other developing nations, like Indonesia, which went through a nearly identical transition to democracy 15 years ago.

Fourth, amending the constitution to enable greater freedoms won't happen without the military. Agus Widjojo, a retired, reformist Indonesian general with decades of experience says, unprompted, "The military is now starting to open up.

The training I received (through the IMET program) while an officer by the U.S. had a very big influence on me. And it can have a very big influence on them."

So, will military-to-military links be re-established? A senior Western ambassador tells me:

"It will evolve. We want to know them first and give them new models, ideas and have human rights and humanitarian discussions. The relationship with the Burma military has been exaggerated by the media and interest groups and they say we are training them but we're not even near that. The military has to be part of the peace process and turn a new leaf."

Here's hoping that it happens by the time the leaves start to change colors again in Washington.