

Episode 10 - Myanmar in a PodShell

Stein Tønneson, Tony Waters: Myanmar in a Podshell 10: No Chance for Peace - Myanmar's long History of Violence. Eds.: Hans-Bernd-Zöllner, Tim Schröder, Rodion Ebbighausen.

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Rodion: Welcome to Myanmar in a Podshell. Today I would like to discuss the topic with Stein Tønneson, who is a historian and peace researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). His research has focused on Vietnam, Peace in East Asia and Conflict in the South China Sea and in Myanmar. His work on Myanmar has been published in the "Journal of Contemporary Asia", "Small Wars and Insurgencies", "PRIO policy briefs" and as PRIO blogs.

Tony Waters, our second guest, is a professor of sociology who has taught in California, Thailand and Germany. While in Thailand, he worked closely with PhD students from Myanmar developing research topics about peace in that country. He is also an occasional contributor to the "Irrawaddy Magazine", criticizing the nature of international aid to the Myanmar peace process between 2015 and 2021.

Thank you very much for joining us today. And let's start with the discussion.

So, the coup of February 1st, 2021, can be seen as an opening of a new chapter in the long history of violence in Myanmar. And according to your assessment, Tony, what makes this chapter different from previous ones?

Tony: Well, part of it is that we are in the internet age. We've had a period of ten years in Myanmar when there's relatively openness with the Thein Sein government relaxed a bit, and finally, when the NLD had some power. During that time there was an internet revolution and Myanmar people became very much part of the larger world in ways that they had not been before. Previously there were the isolationist government policies from the military governments, but also because the technology was just not there. Right now, I'm still in contact with my students in Yangon. I talk to friends and people in Myanmar all the time, something that would have been unthinkable prior to 2011 or so. The Myanmar government, for all its reputation for being an all-seeing eye, doesn't seem capable of controlling things like they have in the past. So, in that way I think it's different.

Rodion: And Stein, would you say there are also some similarities and continuities which we see coming up again?

Stein: Absolutely. But first, I agree with Tony that the biggest change has been the internet revolution that came about when the Thein Sein government invited bids for telecom providers and you got competition. But the main constant is the presence of the Tatmadaw, the armed forces of Myanmar, which has been an extremely brutal military all

the time since the Second World War and has been fighting various groups.

During that time, the Tatmadaw was engaged for a long time in fighting both ethnic armed groups and communist forces. But the communist rebellion ended in 1989 and dissipated into several ethnic armed groups. What is really new after the coup in the conflict pattern is that there is now, in addition to the wars between the Tatmadaw and various ethnic armed organizations, also a war between the Tatmadaw and the Bamar ethnic majority population in central areas of the country.

Rodion: Now I would like to take a step back. Maybe this might be a naive question, but why is peace so important? And are the interests or reasons of actors in Myanmar to strive for peace the same? Or do they have different interests?

Stein: Well, I definitely have some views on that because I led a big program on East Asian peace, funded by the Swedish Riksbankens Jubileumsfond 2011-2017, where I looked into the reasons why East Asia, which had the world's worst wars during the first phase of the Cold War, developed into a region with relative peace and then also obtained an enormous economic growth. In the East Asian region, I found some exceptions and they were mainly in areas of the Philippines, South Thailand and above all, Myanmar. So Myanmar is an exception in its region. It has never adopted the kind of policies that the other East Asian countries applied when they made their transition to peace and economic growth.

But the military leaders in Myanmar became aware of this in the 1990s first, and then started developing a project for developing a constitutional transition to constitutional rule. And that was what happened under Thein Sein when he became president. He was a former general in 2011. And in that phase, I think Myanmar made an attempt to join the East Asian peace and therefore also gain part in the kind of prosperity that has characterized the rest of the region.

Rodion: So, you mentioned that after peace comes prosperity and peace brought prosperity to most East Asian countries. Tony, what are the interests or why are people striving to achieve peace in Myanmar? Are the reasons the same for everybody?

Tony: Saying peace is an absence of violence so that prosperity can take place is one way to look at it. But peace is also rooted in how people see themselves, how they see their identities, and who they see themselves as being. Maybe it's a little bit fresh on my mind, but I'm working with a manuscript right now from one of my students, which has to do with the nature of Burmanization policies adopted in the 1960s by General Ne Win. Burmanization policies were among among the more harsh of the nationalistic policies among the newly independent countries. After all, in the 1950s, Burma was just another Southeast Asian country. But then Burma took a hard turn with the Ne Win coup. Ne Win came in and said, "we have to reach back to the glories of the great Burma kingdoms and go forward from there, because we are the greatest people. And by the way, the people who are in the Highlands, they can be part of us, but they have to be on our terms. We will be a Burmanized society."

To raise up the Burmese he also going to expel the Indians, Chinese others who were not Burmese, and sealed the borders from further meddling by East or West.

What my student is writing about is the Burmanized schooling system and the Burmanized culture he grew up in after General Ne Win shut down the country in 1962, The Burmanization was undertaken with the disciplined military precision General Ne Win brought from his military experience in World War II, the Burmese Civil War (1949-1950), and from fighting the Chinese Nationalists and Communists, the American CIA, and ethnic insurgencies in the highlands during the 1950s

My student believes Burmanization is the source of many of Myanmar's problems today. Why the NLD and the military can't de-Burmanize the society quickly is that there's this ingrained 30, 40, 50 year school curriculum, government structures, and especially military structures all focused by, as Stein mentioned, the Burmese-speaking military. The military was the key to Ne Win's Burmanization policies. And my student asks: Can we really address Myanmar's ethnic problems without addressing the habits of Burmanization? Now, implicit to this is what Stein just mentioned was that the other Southeast Asian countries have more or less transition to some place, except in in the northern Philippines and southern Thailand. Why can't Burma do that? And part of the reason is the Burmanization policies and how resistant they are to change.

Rodion: I would like to pick up this interesting point. Obviously, there is a history which we have to always think about if we think about

peace in Myanmar. So there has not been a time since the end of the colonial period in 1948 when there was peace countrywide. What explains this ongoing perpetual state of affairs that fluctuates between civil war, local conflict, extending and going back and forth, and maybe how this is connected to the colonial era? Tony, you mentioned some reasons. Maybe, Stein, as you are a historian, can you say something more about this?

Stein: Well, Myanmar is exceptionally diverse ethnically with many ethnic groups, and the domination by the Bamar is not as strong as it is by the Han Chinese in China or by the Viet in Vietnam. So the Bamar have, all the time, been obliged to engage with other ethnic groups within what they consider their national territory, particularly in the border areas.

The system that Tony described that was established under Ne Win (1962-88) involved Bamar domination and also Bamarization of schooling, education and administration. Ne Win's military government also established rigid ethnic categories. This strengthened the conception that belonging to one ethnic group in opposition to others was of great importance. And it also often involved a quest for defining ethnic homelands. Ethnic identity building on many levels led to much suspicion between ethnic groups because political representation and territorial control depends on ethnicity This was exacerbated by the prevalence of armed violence, mostly perpetrated by the Tatmadaw, which made it necessary for the various ethnic groups to build their own armies to defend local interests. So this is one of the explanations for the absence of peace in Myanmar. After the 2021 coup there have been some changes in the pattern that may bring better inter-ethnic

relations. Bamar-dominated People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and several ethnic armed groups are now engaged in a shared struggle against the junta.

Rodion: Definitely we would like to pick this up. Maybe someone can say in Myanmar, we can observe a very extreme kind of identity politics which has been played out over decades. I would like to go back a little bit more to the history. There has been this divide and rule by the British colonial power. So, would you say that this is part of the legacy the country faces today? Maybe, Tony?

Tony: Yes, I would definitely take it back to the British times and the ethnic categories where really emerged and used by the British censuses in the early 1900s. They would go through and say: "What are you?" And then classify accordingly. They went up into the Highlands and said, "If you classify as being Shan or Kachin or Karen, then you have your own semi-independent state and a different relationship with the British colonial powers. If you're Bamar in the lowlands, you're going to be ruled directly by the Indo-British administration from Calcutta. So in the lowlands and we're going to bring in our British officers and their Indian subalterns to rule because we don't trust you."

I think it's also important to remember that the time of total British colonialism in Myanmar was fairly brief. It was really from 1885 when the conquest was finished until 1947, with an interregnum in for the Japanese of about four years (1942-1945). At independence, the memories of what the palace was in Mandalay and Ava were still quite fresh. And in the time before the British invasion began in 1823

Myanmar was actually a regional power. You know, they had just conquered Arakan (1784) and Thailand (1767-1768). After those conquests, Burma successfully repulsed invasions from China the Chinese and so on. I don't know that the armies of the Konbaung Dynasty saw themselves as "Bamar" or rather part of a dynasty, But Ne Win's government definitely saw themselves as their heir, and Burmese. After all, the others paid tribute to them and The Chinese sent embassies.

Rodion: I would like to make a jump to the Thein Sein time. In 2015, the government under Thein Sein negotiated the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). And how would you assess this Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement?

Stein: I have a positive assessment of the peace process that started under the Thein Sein government, and that was led mainly by Minister of the President's Office Aung Min. The multiple ceasefire talks between various armed groups and the government, including the military, were initially promising. The signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement – so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement – in 2015 was, however, a big mistake.

It was not inclusive. It included only a limited number of groups, and it did not include the group that had engaged most thoroughly with the process: The Kachin Independence Organization or Kachin Independence Army. The reason why it was concluded before it was ready was that the Thein Sein government faced an election and needed to show results. Thein Sein's party lost the election, and a new government was formed under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who put heavy

brakes on the peace process. So, a relatively promising period was followed by a period with big meetings but little progress. That's my point of view.

Rodion: And how do you assess the NCA and what happened, Tony?

Tony: I think it was good to have tried, probably. But obviously it was not enough. I think that the central problem in Myanmar today is the Tatmadaw with the army being dominant. They did not and they do not negotiate as equals. The Tatmadaw were negotiate as representatives of the globally recognized government. The NCA was coordinated through the government and when ceasefires were signed, and demobilization exercises undertaken, the assumption was, well, that means the Kachin and the Karen and the Shan, they demobilize while the Tatmadaw maintains their control and controls international relations.

This is, I think, a flaw in how UN organizations negotiate – the UN and other organizations. always assume there is a nation-state to organize peace negotiations. They always start with the nation-state. But in Myanmar, there's not really a nation-state. There's this fragmentation. Some things are nations and a lot of things are not states, but they're all players in the drama, including the Tatmadaw. So I still see this Tatmadaw as being the central problem.

Stein: Yes. In this in this process toward the NCA, there was an agreement to go for federation. That was a positive aspect of it, I think. Federation is not a solution, but it's a kind of formula that you can use for establishing

solutions on many levels. Once you have agreed to think in federal terms, there is room for establishing flexible arrangements. But let me just say something about the Tatmadaw. As I said, it has been an extremely brutal military force all the time, since its inception, continuously engaged in internal armed conflicts in shifting parts of the country. It has all the time focused more on its internal enemies than on potential external threats. Yet there was a process within the Tatmadaw in the 2000s and up until 2011 that aimed at a transition to constitutional rule. Not democratic. Not with and independent judiciary. Definitely not with civilian control of the military. But with a parliament and with some division of power. When the Thein Sein government was formed, interestingly, the military leaders started to openly rival each other in a way that might have provided a starting point for competitive, democratic decision-making.

Than Shwe, the dictator, stepped down and he gave Min Aung Hlaing the military forces, Thein Sein the government and Shwe Mann the parliament. They were not on the same line. So you started to get a more diversified politics with former military officers playing rival public roles, but leaving the military itself to a secluded existence outside of the new processes, but with full autonomy and a propensity to continue its use of violence in ethnic minority areas. The process bears resemblance with what happened in Indonesia when it made its transition from military dictatorship to more democratic and decentralized governance. An interesting example of the change relates to the Myitsone dam. Thein Sein suddenly announced that he would suspend this dam project, which China had invested in heavily. Among his reasons for

taking this dramatic initiative was his rivalry with Shwe Mann as speaker of the parliament, If Thein Sein had not suspended the dam project, Shwe Mann might have used the mood in the the parliament to put pressure on him to do so. The interplay between parliament and government was extremely interesting in the Thein Sein period. This ended in 2016 when Aung San Suu Kyi's party had won its crushing electoral victory and she became State Counsellor. Instead of a rivalry between a lively and policy-making parliament on the one side and a reform-oriented government on the other, you got a parliament which was completely controlled by Aung San Suu Kyi, and a civilian government in a hidden stalemate with Min Aung Hlaing's military. Instead of lively debates and dam cancellations you now got a genocidal attempt by the military to expel the country's most vulnerable ethnic minority to Bangladesh. Min Aung Hlaing never gained any political experience, but concentrating on pursuing the same repressive functions as the Tatmadaw had done in the past. A hidden stalemate between the NLD and Tatmadaw replaced the open politics that had emerged under Thein Sein.

Rodion: If I got you right, you would say that, in a way, the election came at the wrong time.

Stein: There was also an additional thing about that election, and that was that Myanmar's first-past-the-post electoral system, which had previously favoured the military-controlled political party USDP, now led to a vast over-representation by the NLD. The NLD's percentage of votes was somewhere around 60, but its share of parliamentary seats became almost 80%. The USDP was almost eradicated as a political force although it had

gained will over 20% of the votes. If the ethnic minority parties had got better representation and the NLD had won less than 50% of the seats, then Myanmar might have developed further in the direction established under Thein Sein. Aung San Suu Kyi could have formed a coalition government or served as leader of a powerful opposition. The USDP would have maintained a political role. Now, instead, the military was mainly represented in parliament by the 25% members in uniform who are appointed, under the 2008 constitution, by the commander-in-chief. They always voted as a bloc and rarely opened their mouths. The results of the 2015 election destroyed parliament as a positive force.

Rodion: Maybe, Tony, you can jump in here. When Aung San Suu Kyi took over in 2016, she started this big peace initiative, the second Panglong conference. According to your assessment, what was the result of these meetings?

Tony: Well, I'm very intrigued by Stein's suggestion that the structure of Parliament itself is part of the problem. His point is interesting. I haven't heard the problem of federalism framed that way before.

I have real doubts about whether Myanmar is set up to be a federal country in which there's sharing of power between semi-independent entities. I mean, it seems like this perhaps comes from me living in Thailand a long time. There you have a very centralized government. You also have a peaceful and prosperous country in many places, except perhaps the far South. People respect the central government, even though they are often critical of how it is run on a day-to-day manner. Parliament, the

military and the civil service are underneath the King who's a constitutional monarch. In other words, there is a strong military just like in Myanmar. Thailand is not a complete democracy in the way that Japan is, but it is also not collapsing like Myanmar. There is a trust in the legitimacy of the Thai government, its schooling system, use of the Central Thai language, health care system, finance, transport system, etc. It is not Myanmar.

When I talk to my students from Burma, especially the ones from the KNU areas, I don't see them ever able to compromise in a manner that you would expect of a federal union where you delegate some powers, and reserve others for the central government. Their main concern, their main fears are of the Tatmadaw and the lack of trust that's there. So I really wonder whether there's room for real compromise. I know a less about the Shan areas too. I've met Sai Khuensai several times. And I have real doubts about whether, given the independence, that these entities have enjoyed – defacto independence – for the last decades and the fact that they have their own standing militaries, how far they can go with compromising with the Burmanized center. Making the compromises necessary for federalism, which is just kind of a question mark, I guess.

Rodion: I would like to pick up a thought, Tony, you have had two questions ago. You said that in a way that Tatmadaw sees itself as a representative of the whole nation. But you would rather put it like the Tatmadaw is one big force in the country and there are others as well. Which, I think, leads to my next question. Myanmar has never been a nation or a nation state in the sense of a unified nation. So, my

question would be, and maybe it's a chicken and egg problem, but do you have a nation first and then peace or do you have to have peace first and then get a nation? So what would be your take on that?

Tony: Chicken and egg is a good way to put it! I just don't know for Myanmar. I haven't reached a final conclusion, and I'm an academic, so I don't need to reach conclusions, right away!

So I just don't know what the path forward is in a place like Myanmar. Again, coming from Thailand, I look at Thailand and see relative unity. If you had gone back to the time of the British came into Myanmar, you would have found Thailand to be a very similar Buddhist kingdom with a lot of the same ethnic factions. But over the period from, say, 1880s until 1960s or even the 1980s Thailand created a modern nation-state. So sometimes opposition was crushed violently, but much came through peaceful coercion and peaceful policies, especially extending schooling, health services, roads and the central Thai language. Myanmar with its history of colonialism and then World War II never had a chance for those unified structures to emerge, and they did not.

Again I don't see anything inherently wrong with a centralized government like Thailand, France or any number of other countries. And I don't see anything inherently wrong with the federal system. Both work in a lot of places. I just don't know what is right for Myanmar.

Rodion: And can you help us solve the chicken and egg problem, Stein?

Stein: I tend to look for something that gives hope. I have great difficulties with that in Myanmar, partly when I'm exposed to strong hatred and suspicion between ethnic groups, and above all, when I face and see the extreme violence that the Tatmadaw has used since the coup. And also how the resistance against the Tatmadaw has moved into a more and more violent phase.

But there were surveys done during the Thein Sein period of people showing that they have an All-Burma or All-Myanmar national sentiment in addition to their ethnic identity when they face competition with other countries. One survey revealed that many people in Rakhine, Kachin, Kayin, and other ethnic state, even when having a strong non-Bamar ethnic identity, declared themselves willing to fight for Myanmar if facing an external enemy. And the famous kickboxer from Kachin [Aung La N Sang, the eds.], is admired in the whole country as someone from Myanmar. So, the kind of sports identification with the nation as a whole clearly exists.

Let me now say where I really see some hope. Those who resisted the military, those who formed or who support the National Union Government and the National Unity Consultative Council have gone through a process of seeking to reconcile – at least on a leadership level – the different ethnic groups. This has to do with the fact that the Bamar resistance depends on help from the ethnic armed organizations and because they need respect internationally. Yet it is not just that. I think many of them are developing a genuine sense of solidarity. They have embraced the federal idea and engaged themselves in defending the rights of the Rohingya in a way

that we have not seen before. So, I see an attitudinal shift among the new generation, Generation Z, that has come up with the internet revolution and also new leaders coming up after the NLD was "liberated" from the "autocratic" and controlling behavior of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Rodion: And Tony, do you have a similar optimistic assessment that there is a kind of new unity and maybe trust, which might, in the long run, lead to peace within the NUG, the NUCC. Because I would say, like major stakeholders are still missing. Maybe they will come on board? And I see here and there are some cracks within the NUG and the NUCC. But do you have a similar optimistic assessment as Stein has?

Tony: I see the Tatmadaw's almost being separate from what we think of being as the Bamar people. Most Bamar are not embedded in the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw have withdrawn to Naypyidaw. They have their own schools. They have their own hospitals. They have their own institutions. And they don't necessarily mix with other Bamar people that much. They take in young men when they're quite young and they socialize them to be soldiers for life, and then their families are drawn into it. And so it's almost as if it's an ethnic group within an ethnic group, a minority within a majority. And they wield that monopoly over power that the UN grants a nation-state, that they have a monopoly over the legitimate what the international community views as legitimate and the Bamar and ethnic people do not.

I've had the same experience with Stein where I have people I really like and I've talked to them

and they will admit: "When I hear a bomb go off, I think, 'good, somebody just died from the other side.'" And that's a tragedy to have to have kind people like this think that way. "See, I like it when bombs go off." No, that's not good. And they can no longer project themselves into the hearts of the mothers of those soldiers, police, or villagers who just died. Because the hatred is so deep. And these are Bamar people, these are not just ethnics. Ethnics have had this experience for a longer time, and the hatred and lack of empathy is more deeply ingrained.

So that's why I'm a little bit more pessimistic than Stein. Though, I agree with him that you have to always look for the way forward. Myanmar will be peaceful one day. These things don't go on forever. One odd thing is that they talk about civil war since 1949, but even before that, in the British and especially the Japanese period, Myanmar was extremely violent. It's not just a 70 year civil war. It goes it goes deeper than that. People are used to fighting. They're used to pulling within themselves to defend themselves and cultivating these fears of the other.

Stein: The pro-military party USDP got some 20 to 23% of the votes. You don't often see the percentage of votes because in most reports on the elections, you get only the share of seats in parliament. But that gives a false impression of public opinion. Around one fifth of the population supported the pro-military party. And then you have almost 80% supporting mostly the NLD, but also to a great extent ethnic parties, particularly in Shan and Rakhine states, where the ethnic parties are strong.

But I agree with Tony that the Tatmadaw are likely to have lost much support from the 20% as well because of its behavior after the coup. And now in the areas where most of the fighting is taking place in Sagaing and Magway region, which are mainly Bamar areas, the soldiers from the Tatmadaw are outnumbered by 1 to 5 or something like that because the People's Defense Forces are so strongly embedded in the local society.

The Tatmadaw is a hierarchical, highly controlled organization with generals at the top whose main mission is to keep the military forces as the dominant institution in the country. And then it has soldiers who, to a great extent, voted for the NLD. The common soldiers are influenced by their families and are unlikely to share the opinion of their superior officers. Yet they face great risk if they defect or desert. Still quite a few have done just that.

I think the Tatmadaw is now in perhaps the worst situation it has experienced since 1948 when it almost lost Yangon to the Karen Army. It faced a big crisis also in 1988–91, of course. But it's even deeper now. I would not exclude the possibility that something will happen on the inside of the Tatmadaw if the NUG and the ethnic armed groups are able to work closely together. Unfortunately, the various armed groups have found it hard to co-ordinate their struggles in the past. Today also, some of the strongest ethnic armed groups stay consciously out of the struggle and leave the fighting to the Bamar, Chin, Kayin, Kachin, and Kayah. The NUG clearly seeks, however, to represent all groups in the country.

Tony: Stein, do you think that one day you might get the NUG army marching onto

Yangon or Naypyidaw or something like that? Is that how it would end, or will there be some negotiation?

Stein: I think some negotiation. I think that if the NUG becomes militarily stronger, then something will happen within the Tatmadaw that allows for negotiations. I don't see the NUG being able to build an army that can march into the cities. That could happen if it got support from the United States of the same kind that you see now going into Ukraine, but US weapons support to NUG would be anathema for China. The NUG sends delegations out in the world to try get weapons. But I think their vision is to show their force by e.g., shoot down some airplanes and make an impression on the Tatmadaw. That could lead to a psychological change in the military ranks, so there can be negotiations on terms acceptable to the NUG.

Rodion: So maybe this could lead to my next question, like the role of external actors. We have seen that China said that "we stand with Myanmar", they are supporting the Tatmadaw or they at least work together with them. And there are others who are very reluctant to, for example, recognize the NUG or to send weapons, as we have seen in Ukraine. Maybe, Tony, you can start and say something about like how important are these external factors and how do you assess the different actors? And I think Thailand plays a big role because most of the resistance, especially the leadership, are in the Burma-Thai border area. And Thailand plays a major role, I think, in this conflict. So how would you assess this position?

Tony: Thailand plays a major role by not playing a major role. Thailand – from a national

security standpoint – does not want the Tatmadaw on their border. And a way to keep them away is to fund the KNU, the Shan and in the past the Mon to keep the border soft. Thailand historically has tried to protect the Chao Phraya River drainage. And the way to do that has always been to keep adversaries between the big Vietnamese army that was to in Cambodia until the 1990 fighting in Cambodia. And as for the Burmese army which invaded Thailand in 1767, it is the subject of Thai television dramas even today. The Thai concern is to keep any big major army from invading Thailand. And the Thai do that by using their neighbors. They did that in the east with Cambodia, right up until the negotiated peace in 1990. And this policy from a Thai perspective, very effective.

The amazing thing that Thailand has created from this policy is that Thailand and Cambodia as normal neighbors with a normal border. Now, you may not like today's Cambodian government. Hun Sen is a dictator. But his government is not the Khmer Rouge, nor is the Vietnamese army occupying Cambodia any more. Now it's a fairly normal border. And it wasn't in the past.

The Thai are not in a position to do anything similar with the Myanmar border as long as the Tatmadaw is so large and aggressive. So they're not going to go and recognize Karen State and provoke the Tatmadaw to invade. That would be foolish on the Thai part. So let things go on as they have in the past—maintain the KNU, and Shan militaries as buffers against the Tatmadaw, meaning not powerful enough to declare independence, but powerful enough to maintain themselves as a buffer between Thailand and Myanmar.

Thailand wants to keep the Tatmadaw away. And so that's why for the last 60 or 70 years, the weapons for those border areas have all come through Bangkok. The port in Bangkok is more important in eastern Burma than the port in Yangon. And that reflects the established Thai military policy going back probably a decades and perhaps longer.

Rodion: Stein, can say something about the big neighbor to the north, China, and maybe something to the so-called western perspective or of the U.S.?

Stein: Myanmar's neighbor states are all careful not to choose sides. They navigate because they know that Myanmar will be there for the future and they don't know who is going to come out on top. This goes for Thailand, India, Bangladesh as well as China. The more distant and democratic Japan is also discreet and keeps contact with the military.

China is the most influential of all as Myanmar's most important trading partner and investor. It had almost a monopoly on economic interaction with Myanmar during the dictatorship. Yet that came at a price because Myanmar was not then included in the moneymaking world. China wanted Myanmar to open up so it could provide normal banking services. Then China has developed the "Belt and Road" project, which includes a transportation corridor through Myanmar down to the Bay of Bengal. The success of that project is probably the primary interest of China in Myanmar. China must navigate in ways that does not undermine its investments. China also wields great influence over the armed groups that were formed along the China border when

the Communist Party of Burma collapsed. The largest of all the ethnic minority armies is the United Wa State Army, UWSA, which controls territories both on the Thai border and on the border with China and has avoided open conflict with the Tatmadaw all the time since 1989. UWSA is believed to provide weapons and training to several other groups. The Kachin Independence Army is also under some Chinese influence. And it has learned, I think, from the UWSA to sometimes stay out of fighting and concentrate instead on training other groups so they can put pressure on the Tatmadaw in their homelands. They did this with the Arakan Army, which was the main insurgent group in 2018 to 2020. They did it with the TNLA, the Palaung army in Northern Shan State, and they now do it with the PDFs. So they train the PDFs and sometimes fight alongside them. But for quite a period it was careful not to provoke the Tatmadaw in Kachin state.

So that's for the neighboring countries.

In ASEAN, you have more engagement for the interests of the Rohingya in Indonesia and Malaysia. And therefore you have seen them keeping greater distance from the military junta in Naypyidaw than other ASEAN countries. The Malaysian Foreign Minister visited Norway recently and I had a conversation with him where he really impressed me with his detailed knowledge of the situation in Myanmar. So, there are forces in ASEAN that try to give ASEAN a more central role in helping the people of Myanmar. Let's see what happens when Indonesia takes over as ASEAN chair in 2023.

The power of the West is often very much exaggerated, particularly by those Westerners who think that the West has interfered too much. There clearly was an inflow of many Western do-good NGOs from 2012 onward. When Thein Sein opened up the country, Western expats took up much space in some parts of Yangon. But the people in Myanmar did not let the Westerners decide over them. They sought Western funding for their own activities and learned from working with the NGOs. The Westerners had little real influence. Aung San Suu Kyi certainly did not listen to them, but sometimes lectured them and made sure she stayed in control. The donor community had less influence in Myanmar than in other countries in the world on the same level of development.

Then comes the United Nations. The United Nations has done far too little, and I think there is an expectation in Myanmar to see a more active UN. I'm not criticizing Tom Andrews, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights. He is extremely active. I'm not criticizing the Special Envoy to Myanmar. Noeleen Heyzer is also doing her best. But I think I want to criticize the General Secretary himself for not having been sufficiently active when it comes to Myanmar.

Tony: I have a question about Bangladesh. A couple of months ago I wrote an op-ed in "The Irrawaddy" about the Rohingya saying that repatriation is not a real solution to the Rohingya crisis even though that is what the UN promotes. Voluntary repatriation to Rakhine is not going to happen soon. It's self-evident to anybody who follows Myanmar. I'm sure that the people in New York and Geneva wish it would happen, but it would be actually kind of stupid to do, given the situation in

Rakhine. And so that was the tone of the editorial.

The Ambassador to Thailand from Bangladesh contacted me after I published that, which surprised me. Usually when you publish something, nobody in official positions contacts you. But the Ambassador contacted me. We had a couple of long conversations about what role Bangladesh might play in this. Bangladesh is a fairly neutral power relative to the other countries, and it's not part of ASEAN. The role that Bangladesh has played with the Rohingya has also been generous—Rohingya are give a place to stay, albeit an austere one.

Historically, too, Bangladesh has had little interest in Burma, because it mainly is concerned with India, and other countries in South Asia. This is in contrast to Thailand which has an interest in Myanmar. China has interests. India has interests in Myanmar too.

Bangladesh is mainly just the recipient of the refugees from Rohingya. They've agreed to host them. They have a million refugees. The Ambassador seemed open to the idea that maybe Bangladesh could play some other kind of role. I'm not sure he had anything in mind, but just one of these long, ongoing conversations. And I was wondering if the other countries that Stein is familiar with, whether they have thought much about Bangladesh being involved in the peace process.

Stein: China has. At one stage, China offered to serve as mediator between Bangladesh and Myanmar. But I didn't hear much about it after the offer was made. When it comes to the Rohingya, they are squeezed. About 400 000 remain in Rakhine. One million are in Bangladesh, mostly in camps, and 3–400,000

in the Middle East and other countries. Of the 400 000 in Rakhine, more than 100,000 are in camps outside Sittwe, while 300,000 still live in villages. They are squeezed between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw, and there are many reports of abuse.

The situation was extra tough for them in the period from 2017–20, when there was heavy fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw. Right before the November 2020 elections, an informal ceasefire was established between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw, although we now see fighting again, which may further hurt the Rohingyas. Rather than calling for any immediate repatriation, I think we should draw attention to the humanitarian situation for the Rohingya who remain in Rakhine. The key to allowing repatriation at some point is to improve the conditions for the Rohingya in Rakhine.

Rodion: So far, I think it's fair to say that all peace efforts have failed since many years. And Stein, you mentioned that the Western influence was much less than they had hoped for. And that is especially what I would like to talk about. There has been a lot of engagement especially between 2012 and 2019, like, experts from all over the world came to Myanmar and shared experiences, like from Colombia, from the Philippines, from Asia, in Indonesia. Even some generals travelled to those areas to see how those places have managed, but in the end, it turned out to not work. And I would like to ask, so what would we have to do differently from a foreign perspective if someday a new window for peace talks would open in Myanmar? So what needs to be done differently if there is a chance to talk about peace again?

Stein: I think for the moment, the priority task for Myanmar's friends abroad is humanitarian. People are suffering enormously. There are those who are killed and brutalized, and there are those who suffer from losing their jobs and from a general economic recession. There is a health crisis. Many people in Myanmar have not been vaccinated. I think only 30% are. So, initiatives to create some kind of humanitarian vaccine or health corridor from Thailand, into Myanmar are called for. ASEAN and the UN, should put pressure on the junta as well as the NUG to guarantee that they will not interfere with the provision of health services and vaccines through a geographically defined corridor. This, I think, should have priority.

And then you ask, what should outsiders do when peace talks become possible again? I think that the people who conduct such talks in Myanmar are going to control any process themselves no matter what foreigners do. So, what we can do is to observe what is happening and see what we find most worthy of support, what is helpful and what is not helpful. But we should never imagine that we can steer or control any peace process in Myanmar.

Rodion: But the question remains: What is helpful and what is not helpful?

Stein: I think contact and talks are in general helpful. So if the parties nominate someone to serve as a negotiator with the others and they need practical support for such talks, I think that is helpful. In a speech to the UN General Assembly, Noeleen Heyzer correctly said that what is missing now in Myanmar is the middle. There is little space for advocating de-escalation or peace initiatives because of the

enormous polarization that has happened. If this middle starts developing and starts daring to speak its mind and comes under attack from both sides, then they are people that should deserve various kinds of support, secretarial services and financial help.

Rodion: And Tony, what is your take on this question? What to do? What to do differently?

Tony: I think that one of the mistakes The Joint Peace Fund and the western embassies made when they arrived, is that they relied a lot on what they thought was best practices coming from other parts of the world like Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Northern Ireland. This is why trips to Colombia, to Sri Lanka and other places were given to ethnic leaders and others. And there's nothing wrong with that. But 'Best Practices' experts from abroad with fancy degrees became the center. They said that "We understand how to make peace, and you obviously don't, so we will fund only what we think is important."

There was a lack of attention to Southeast Asia experts or people who knew the region, who knew the ways of thinking and the history of the area. A lot of people coming in on two year contracts at best, and often much shorter stints. They made big recommendations. They'd come in and have a scripted workshop funded with many hundreds of thousands of dollars. They'd do it, collect data to demonstrate 'change attitudes,' and say, "look, we were successful," and then leave. And that kind of engagement doesn't work in the long run.

What I think would work better is supporting the institutions that are already in Myanmar, starting with the more apolitical ones: Health

ministries that have the best access to remote areas. People want to have vaccinations and health and anti-malaria efforts and other things and something that competing groups can usually agree upon.

The universities need to be staffed with students and faculty from all corners of Myanmar. Not just the University of Yangon which is a Burmese language institution in a multi-lingual country. The University of Mandalay, where I had some contact, is primarily Burmese and a bit of English. Making those types of institutions more inclusive can be something that outsiders can help with. But it's probably not going to be the fly-in workshops, you know, the "curriculum in a box." I remember in Africa UNICEF introduced a "school in a box" so refugee children could quickly be put back in school. They would come and open it up at an emergency place and say, "here's your school". That may work in an acute emergency. But it is not a best practice for saying: "What kind of institutions does a place like Myanmar need in the long run?"

I would hope that the international community could start doing a bit more of that whether it is in a federal arraignment, centralized arrangement, or any other.

I would like to see more people become involved in Myanmar assistance who have a commitment to the region. The UN agencies tend to have highly centralized decision-making, and career trajectories there reflect this. People who work for agencies who defer to New York, Rome, or Geneva have an ambitions to rise in those bureaucracies, not become a Myanmar specialist. "I want to be assistant deputy secretary of FAO or

something in Rome. And Myanmar is just a stepping stone..." International agencies need people out whose career is Southeast Asia. Maybe not Myanmar, but Southeast Asia. They have familiarity with the people and languages involved. They have colleagues whose relationships go back going back five, ten, 20 years. They need to remember people from the Tatmadaw, when they were a lieutenant or a captain, and now they're a general. If they're from the NLD, they need to know them from when they were campaigning in the countryside with Aung San Suu Kyi in the early 2000s and after.

Rodion: Thank you very much. I have learned a lot and I think there have been some important and interesting perspectives. And I think it's fair to say that, first of all, we have to take care of humanitarian aid to tackle the health and the economic crisis, as Stein pointed out. And I think it is also clear that Myanmar people, meaning all people living in the country, have to negotiate and decide how to go about peace and how peace could look like, and that external forces could only be like a kind of facilitator or to give support, like financial support in some cases to find some middle ground which will be needed someday if negotiations would have to start.

Thank you very much once again and thanks to our listeners for listening to Myanmar in a Podshell. Please tune in again next time and have a good day.

The podcast has been edited for clarity and length. The authors revised the transcript.