

Western engagement: Misreading the Myanmar military's mind

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Western engagement with Myanmar's incorrigible Tatmadaw was always an exercise in willful if not corrupt self-delusion.

Days before Myanmar's military coup, I was messaging with a prominent Myanmar intellectual who reminded me of a recent evocation of the Edward Luttwak classic study from the 1960s Coup d'État: A Practical Handbook in the context of the growing political crisis.

Many Myanmar friends mentioned the same book. Just as many foreigners were dismissing the probability of an impending putsch, Myanmar analysts saw it as imminent. They knew better.

Monday's seizure of power has abruptly ended the turbulent, tawdry relationship the West has had with Myanmar's military, or Tatmadaw, for nearly 10 years. Nothing says it's over like a coup.

It's worth reflecting on a pathology of ingratiation that defined the West's total misread of the Tatmadaw as an institution, and its homegrown Napoleon, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. This doesn't include repressive states such as China, Russia, Israel, Pakistan and Vietnam who have been long-term partners and arms suppliers, or Japan who has long had a special relationship with the Tatmadaw and generations of its leaders.

The basic methodology of understanding the Tatmadaw should have been a combination of words and deeds, and certainly the army's history of coups, brutal violence, repression, clumsy propaganda and incompetence at all things governance, should have guided perceptions.

But the West's at first tentative, then gushing, embrace of the military was less about Tatmadaw deception and more about self-delusion. It was combination of hope and greed that infused narratives the Tatmadaw was as invested in the "democratic transition" led by former president General Thein Sein. This developed into what should be termed "Naypyidaw Syndrome."

The Western scramble for Myanmar had as one of its primary premises the downplay of reports of military atrocities. Engaging required understanding the Tatmadaw. Understanding didn't include a full recognition of past and ongoing crimes. Diplomats, usually European and Scandinavian, would scoff at reports of serious human rights violations and mock the ethnic rights groups who relayed information.

The peace industrial complex vultures who began descending in 2012 sneered at ethnic civil society organizations (CSOs) traumatized by decades of war and derided them as "spoilers." The same foreigners would recoil in umbrage when it was suggested they had adopted a pro-government slant.

They rejected any suggestion their engagement was looking a lot like accommodation. Rekindled wars in Kachin state, with over 100,000 civilians displaced, were downplayed and the Kachin demonized as the aggressor. Ethnic armed organizations with decades of genuine grievances and

abuses against their people were dismissed as greedy bandits.

This early stage of the affair with the Tatmadaw involved increased calls for diverse military engagement, what some call “mil-mil.” The British, United States and Australia all jostled to ingratiate themselves with the Tatmadaw, offering courses, exchanges and study tours, everything short of weapons.

It was Aung San Suu Kyi, remember, who pushed the UK to engage the Tatmadaw. The US, with more comprehensive oversight and scrutiny, established the parameters of engagement more carefully.

Oddly enough, military officials in the West seemed more circumspect on greater engagement than did civilian officials. Many of the earlier calls for engagement came from academics and analysts. A prominent think-tank in Washington in 2014 ruminated over US military assistance to the Tatmadaw to jointly provide public health care to people living in remote ethnic communities.

The transformative promise of imposing Western value systems on the Tatmadaw was always misguided. The conversation was discordant, resting on the promotion of “professionalization” of the armed forces. When it became clear the West offered only lectures in international humanitarian law, and little hardware or advanced killing techniques, the Tatmadaw’s interest waned.

The relationship soured after October 2016, after the Tatmadaw responded brutally to attacks by Rohingya Muslim militants and drove more than 800,000 civilians into Bangladesh. Soon afterward at a dinner with EU officials, a Greek general and head of the EU military commission announced he was helping Min Aung Hlaing, “who was going through a difficult time right now.”

The second stage of the relationship was shock at the Tatmadaw’s bestial approach to pacification. It was as if all the stories of a military with sadism in its DNA had finally registered. Military commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing, now national leader after the coup, was finally recognized as the war criminal he always was, around the time Suu Kyi’s luster was tarnished forever.

Four years of multiple rights group reporting, UN investigations and international accountability measures should have necessitated a serious rethink of Tatmadaw engagement. The West shifted focus instead to the moribund peace process, seeking salvation for its blind incompetence over Rakhine state in solving the world’s longest-running civil war.

Nowhere is the collective collusion more evident than the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) established to mediate breaches of the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Time and again, this flawed body was used by the Tatmadaw to launch complaints against ethnic armed groups, and obscure their own flagrant violations.

During the five years of the JMC, scores, if not hundreds, of civilians were killed and wounded in ongoing fighting. But squandering US\$10 million on “supporting ceasefire structures” was more important than civilian protection.

The peace process has been a protection racket for the Tatmadaw, funded by complicit Western donors. By persisting with blind faith in the Tatmadaw’s sincerity, nowhere in evidence by actions or words, its credibility as an institution still in simpatico with democratic reforms was artificially sustained.

The third stage the West is entering right now is grim realization that they have been tacitly aiding and abetting an unreconstructed and unrepentant military institution.

The Naypyidaw Syndrome was undoubtedly subscribed to by multiple donors, diplomats and hordes of VIP visitors between 2011 and 2016 who wanted to believe that the military was as genuine deep down as the civilians they interacted with.

But there are three typologies of the syndrome that did more than most to convince the Tatmadaw they could get away with anything and inhabit the darkest depths of self-deception that nurtures authoritarianism.

The first are the “great men,” those statesmen who believe the very act of meeting with Min Aung Hlaing will result in a “breakthrough.” Pompous former politicians, UN envoys, peace specialists alike conveyed legitimacy on military leaders by the very act of meeting, not realizing they were being deftly manipulated, even just for a photo op.

These martinets should be purged from any future peace process. Such close proximity to senior military leaders, such little insight into their character.

The second is the peace industrial complex. The motto for this sordid milieu could well be “I’d kill for a Nobel Peace Prize.” The purveyors of multiple discrete meetings, workshops, study tours, bedazzled by access to men in uniforms, convinced their proposed architecture was perfectly suited to Myanmar, self-deluded by an almost supernatural propensity for insight into the Myanmar military mind.

Cheap grifters gorging on misguided donor support, with a blank sheet of progress on peace, even before the coup.

The last category is the contentedly boiling frog, the unoriginal technocrat who convinces themselves their “non-confrontational” issues or sectors are somehow not political and are firewalled from military dynamics – or abuses – and could not possibly be complicit by their routine fealty to government and military officials.

That within the safe confines of the Green Zone in Yangon’s Golden Valley there wasn’t a malevolent military outside their limited perception undermining almost all their endeavors.

What has cost a decade and millions of dollars for the chicanery of liberal Western engagement to comprehend that the Tatmadaw is incapable of change, could have been arrived at with even a short conversation with most any ordinary Myanmar person.

And as the decade-long caravan of international exploitation starts to decamp after the coup, it will be the ordinary Myanmar people who knew all along the limits of change who will be left to the mercy of the military.

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P.S.

• Asia Times. February 3, 2021:
<https://asiatimes.com/2021/02/misreading-the-myanmar-militarys-mind/>

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