

Myanmar Is on 'Regime Change' List, Charges U.S. Specialist

by Michael Billington

In September 2003, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) released a study investigating the ongoing crisis in Myanmar (referred to as "Burma" in the report, as a political statement against the current regime in Yangon, which changed the name to Myanmar in 1989). The title of the CFR report is "Burma: Time for Change"; a concept which, on one level, everyone could agree with. However, in an era of U.S. political domination by a faction centered around Vice President Dick Cheney, committed to pre-emptive war and "regime-change" against governments not to its liking, the word "change" takes on a far more ominous meaning.

The following interview with Dr. David Steinberg, the Director of Asian Studies at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, and one of the nation's foremost specialists on Myanmar, identifies the severely flawed character of the CFR report. Dr. Steinberg was one of the very few members of the CFR Task Force who had any in-depth knowledge of the country—its political intricacy, historical nuance, and strategic importance in Asia and the world. The Task Force included 27 members, but the character of the final report was, to a great extent, defined by the presence of financial speculator George Soros, who has spent a significant portion of his ill-gained fortune in attempting to subvert the sovereign state of Myanmar. The greatest irony of his fixation on Myanmar is that, while Soros talks of his concern for "democracy," he is, in fact, the world's leading promoter of the legalization of psychotropic drugs. The multiple Soros-financed non-governmental organizations aimed at keeping Myanmar divided and unstable, like the British colonial regimes which governed Burma until 1947, facilitate the production of drugs in the border regions. Soros and his ilk are extremely unhappy with the considerable progress made by the Yangon regime in bringing the border regions under centralized government control, and dramatically curtailing the opium production left over from British colonial times.

Joining Soros on the Task Force were four Members of Congress—Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.), Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), and Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.)—all of whom have shown their prejudice against the sovereignty of Myanmar, in keeping with the policies of the National Endowment for Democracy

(known as "Project Democracy" since the days of Oliver North's 1980s arms- and drug-running escapades in the name of "democracy"). Leading the witchhunt against Myanmar in the Congress, and on the CFR Task Force, is Senator McConnell, who often appears to be unwilling to admit that the Vietnam War is over. (McConnell applies the same colonial vitriol toward the other poorest nations of Southeast Asia, Cambodia and Laos.) Republican Senator Lugar, who has otherwise been a voice of moderation against the Administration's Iraq policies, not only endorsed the McConnell view in the CFR report, but also published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* on Sept. 28, denouncing Myanmar as a "pariah state" with no "legitimacy." Lugar's op-ed, however, exposing the broader purpose of the targeting of Myanmar—namely, the destabilization of China, India, and the Southeast Asian neighbors of Myanmar. Lugar warns these nations that they must follow U.S. policy regarding Myanmar, or face consequences of their own from the U.S. government.

Steinberg, in his published dissent in the CFR report, acknowledges the serious problems within Myanmar, but writes that sanctions, such as those imposed in July by the U.S. Congress, have proven over and over again to have failed to achieve any positive objective. "U.S. policy has been patently ineffective," Steinberg writes. "This Task Force was a missed, rare opportunity to re-examine analytically policy options," pointing especially to the fact that the report ignores Myanmar's "cooperation in terrorism and narcotics. . . . A thorough review of U.S. policy toward Burma in all its aspects is needed. This study is not a substitute for it."

There are those in the Administration who are aware of the failure of the sanctions policy—and the danger of their continuation. Matthew Daley, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, testified before a subcommittee of the House Internal Relations Committee on Oct. 2, on the impact of the sanctions. He reported that the sanctions imposed in July "immediately disrupted the economy in Burma. Unfortunately, the sanctions also affect ordinary Burmese. . . . We estimate that more than 40,000 garment sector jobs were lost. In the long term, the garment sector will likely lose 100,000 jobs, most of which are filled by young women."

Daley said that credible reports indicate that large numbers of these women “have entered the flourishing illegal sex and entertainment industries,” or have become economic migrants seeking illegal work inside Myanmar, or in Thailand or China. Sources told *EIR* that the draft of Daley’s testimony was carefully vetted, right to the top of the State Department, adding another piece to the open battle within the Administration against the imperial policies of the neo-conservatives in both parties.

Interview: Dr. David Steinberg

Dr. Steinberg, Director of Asian Studies at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, was interviewed by Michael and Gail Billington.



EIR: Dr. Steinberg, you are known as a specialist in regard to both Korea and Myanmar, but you once told me that while there are many Korea experts, there are very few for Myanmar.

Steinberg: I never use the word expert for myself. Student, yes.

EIR: Specialist, perhaps?

Steinberg: A Myanmar-wallah, or a Burma-wallah, to mix Indian and Burmese terms.

EIR: What do you see as the importance of Myanmar in Asia and in the world—the mission, or the role Myanmar plays historically, and can play in the future?

Steinberg: Burma is quite a large country, in terms of population and size (I’ll use “Burma” rather than “Myanmar” for convenience, but not to make a political statement). It is strategically located at the flank of India, and India/China relationships are likely to be one of the most important power relationships in Asia in the future—of course, with China/Japan the other side of the picture. Burma, seen from Delhi’s point of view, becomes extremely strategic because, if you are in Delhi, and view Pakistan as an ally of China to the west, and China to the north, and Burma is under significant Chinese influence, then you feel surrounded. So if you’re sitting in Delhi, you get worried. Thailand is an ally of the United States. Anything that goes on inside Burma is important, because the spillover effects frequently—in terms of a million undocumented laborers in Thailand from Burma, 120,000 Karen and Mon refugees, the problem of trafficking in women, the HIV-AIDS problem, malaria, drugs—all of those things are no longer internal problems of Burma. The role of

China in Burma, and Burma to China, is important, as the Chinese attaché in Burma said to me: Burma is in our [Chinese] strategic interest. The former Chinese Ambassador to Burma is a member of the Central Committee, and, normally, ambassadors to countries like Burma are not members of the Central Committee—indicating the importance of the relationship.

China is the major supplier of arms to Burma. We can document about \$1.6 billion, but it’s probably closer to \$2 billion. The amount of infrastructure China has assisted in providing is extensive. Gen. Than Shwe was in Beijing in January, where he got \$200 million in loans and \$5 million in technical assistance. Gen. Maung Aye went to Beijing at the end of August, and signed off on the details on those things.

So, China becomes very important. China wants access to the Bay of Bengal. Chinese access to south Burmese ports puts them very close to the Malacca Straits, which is the most important natural waterway in the world, and of exceedingly important strategic interest—not only to us, but also to Japan and Korea, which get their basic oil supplies from the Middle East.

The Chinese role is of concern to the Japanese, whose aid program is in part intended to limit Chinese influence in so far as it can. As one retired Japanese general said to me: If China can import oil through Burma to southwest China, and not go through the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea, that is not in Japan’s national interest. Strengthening China is not in Japan’s national interest, even though it is a subdued issue.

So there are lots of reasons. We can also learn from the Burmese experience. You have a state that went through an intense socialist period (under Gen. Ne Win from 1962) that failed, and which Burma admits was a failure—it’s not *our* judgment (although it is also our judgment)—but it is the Burmese judgment that it failed. What can we learn from that experience?

How do we deal with multi-ethnic states, of which Burma is one of the prime examples? Are there lessons there? What to do, or not to do? How do we deal with development in a potentially very rich agricultural state that has destroyed a lot of its natural resources, and has basically pauperized its people over about 30 years? An educational system that was one of the best in the British Empire, has now deteriorated to, basically, almost a joke. They have expanded education, but lowered it. When I met with the Minister of Education, he told me all the wonderful things they are doing, and I said, “Yes, you are doing an heroic job but with no money.” That’s what it is. The amount of money spent on education, on health, is infinitesimal, and has decreased in real terms and per capita.

EIR: Could that be changed, or is that part of the situation with foreign isolation?

Steinberg: It could be changed. They could be allocating

Legacy of British Rule

In the 19th Century, the Southeast Asian nation of Burma, though then a colony of the British Empire, was well known for a high level of education and culture. As World War II came to an end, the British continued to try to manipulate Burma, by playing off its multiple minority ethnic groups against the majority Burman population. The British singled out the Karin leader Gen. Dunn Smith to play off against the head of the Burman military, Gen. Aung San. Aung San was assassinated, along with several of his “30 comrades” (the leaders of the Burmese independence movement) in 1947, in circumstances that remain unsolved to the present day, although the investigations point to British sponsorship through the organization “The Friends of the Hilltribes’ People,” which had fostered separatism in the interest of Britain’s continuing colonialist role.

When Burma regained its independence, it was confronted by no fewer than 16 ethnic rebellions against the central power. Between 1988 and 1996, cease-fire accords were signed with nearly all the separate ethnic military commands, bringing centralized sovereign control to the

country for the first time in modern history.

In 1962, Gen. Ne Win, now deceased, staged a coup d’état, overthrowing the parliamentary government, and launching his “Burmese road to Socialism,” which ultimately devastated what had been, in the pre-World War II period, one of the most productive agricultural sectors in Southeast Asia.

In 1988, the political dam broke in Burma, following the collapse of the value of the currency, with the outbreak of a mass strike, in particular among university students. In the carnage that followed, as many as 3,000 people died or were injured. A military junta assumed power over the “retired” Gen. Ne Win, and retains power today, under the title State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The three top leaders of the junta, referenced in Dr. Steinberg’s interview, are Generals Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Khin Nyunt.

Today’s fracas around the person of Gen. Aung San’s daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, derives from the parliamentary election in 1990, which was won by Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy, but whose results were rejected by the junta. The “recent incident” mentioned by Dr. Steinberg refers to the arrest of Suu Kyi on May 30, after her entourage was attacked by a pro-government gang.

less money to the military; also, by building less infrastructure. Here’s something that’s very important. The military feels very much under-appreciated in the international community for all the infrastructure they have built. They have built more than any set of governments ever has in that country. No doubt about that. However, were those wise investments at that time? In a sense, it’s kind of “legitimacy through infrastructure building.” But by building all that infrastructure, are they 1) printing more money? If there were figures for the money supply—there certainly are no such figures now; 2) are they using corvée labor to build some of that infrastructure? and 3) could the money be better spent, on health and education, and building up the society?

Basically, they have lost 1% of their total population—an educated 1%—to overseas flight, both for economic and political reasons.

So, you have this hiatus in society. You have the military running all the ministries; if not right at the top, then all through them. They are running all the local governments, it is a very centralized system—but you don’t have technocrats anymore. How do you get people who are trained in basic human needs, in managing foreign aid, in having foreign experiences?

One of the important things about Gen Khin Nyunt in his new role as Prime Minister, is that he is the only member of

the SPDC [State Peace and Development Council] who has been in touch with foreigners, who has access to foreign information, who gets relatively unfiltered reports, reports that are filtered more and more as they go up the ladder, so that important pieces may have been eliminated by the time it reaches Gen. Than Shwe.

The other side of this problem is that the military is a state within the state of Burma. It has its own educational system, its own health system, its own monasteries, which are known for being close to the military. It has its own PXs and commissaries, its own housing. So, one wonders if the average senior officer is aware of the dire poverty in many parts of that country.

EIR: How would you compare the facilities available to the military to the rest of the population?

Steinberg: Vastly better. The military takes care of itself quite well. It trains people; doctors go into the military, where they are quite well trained—actually, the Burmese Ambassador in London is a former medical doctor. Some of these people are quite good, but at the same time, you can earn a living working for the military, while if you are a private physician, a civilian, you can’t really earn a living unless you moonlight, unless you buy pharmaceuticals on the local market—you need a supplemental income, essentially; al-

most no one can live on their salary. I'm told a policeman must double his income to support a small family at the most modest level. So you will resort to minor extracurricular activities to get those funds.

EIR: You have been an outspoken critic of the sanctions policy, which you don't think is going to help at all. What is your sense of those, like Sen. Mitch McConnell, who are pursuing the sanctions?

Steinberg: The purpose is very clear. The purpose is regime change. They said: "Honor the May 1990 elections, then we'll lift sanctions." And honoring the May 1990 elections says to the military: "Get out of power, and then we'll talk to you," in essence. And that is just something that will not happen. The military has been important since independence. Even under civilian governments, they've had, basically, veto power over critical things—not everything, but critical things, like the unity of the state. They don't trust civilian politicians anymore. There is potential for factionalism and dispute.

The military is just concerned about where the country is going. They really believe this—this is important. We must distinguish between propaganda and deeply held beliefs, whether these beliefs are right or wrong. The military is saying, we don't trust politicians, they've been corrupt and venal and ineffectual in the past. The military says, without us, the country will split apart; national unity is our first priority. They've said it since 1948, since independence.

That is questionable. I've argued that "your goal of national unity is undermined by what you are doing, so by your own actions you are undercutting your own objectives. You still don't trust the minorities, you may give local autonomy to a few groups, and reach cease-fires like the one with the Wa and Kokang. But basically, you are doing what the Chinese did, which is to give the minorities some local but no national power."

They can say, to foreigners who criticize this, "These local groups will have more autonomy than they have ever had in Burmese history." And that may be true, but they will not give them any *national* power. The minorities have been excluded, in whatever modest dialogue may have taken place between the military and Aung San Suu Kyi, before the recent incident [see box].

Some of the minorities hurt themselves. They want their own military, but then who is going to police the borders? The military has acted brutally in those areas, but they are in a dilemma. The military has essentially eliminated minority positions in the most senior ranks, where they once were.

EIR: They were removed from such positions? This was the British policy, to use minorities in the military, to keep divisions. Was this a reaction against the colonial model?



Steinberg: No, part of it was a reaction against the Karen, Gen. Smith Dunn, but they eliminated the Kachin, the Chin, and some Shan. They say, that if you want to be rise above a major, you'd better be a Buddhist.

EIR: What is your road map? What is your idea for what has to be done?

Steinberg: Well, we are now limited. Before the final sanctions business went in, I said that the U.S. did have a potential role to play. Now, with the sanctions and everything being frozen, the U.S. is out of the picture essentially. There is nothing more that we can do. The Congress will not, say, "do a Cuba," and prevent the travel of private Americans in that country. They will not do that. Some people in the Congress had thought about it, but I don't know that it was ever voted on, probably not; but they got the impression it would not work. Basically, there is nothing more the U.S. can do. So, we are out of the picture, in a way.

Now life has become more complex, because "face" has to be saved, but face has to be saved for three parties: the National League for Democracy and Aung San Suu Kyi, the military, and the U.S.—and, basically, the White House.

So, some compromise has to be found, but I don't see anything happening. The military are involved in their own road map, the seven-point plan that Khin Nyunt has set forth, which, in fact, had no time-frame, so, therefore, is not

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credible. It does not mention the opposition, doesn't mention Suu Kyi in that part of the speech. The first part of the speech is basically all of the good things the military has done, which he tells foreigners every time he gets a chance to see them.

The second part, on the politics, where he has this road map, those are logical things: Finish the constitution, have a referendum, have an election, go to a multi-party system. Yes, I think those things will eventually happen, but it may be five years. We don't know how long it will take. Everybody I know—and myself, every time I have a chance—say that it is important to have a road map, with a time-frame for it. The answer comes back, if there is a time-frame, the opposition may try to scuttle that time-frame.

Well, that's the chance you take, but it's worse to have no time-frame, because you are not credible without it, because you have been saying this all along.

Now in 1988-89, they said they were going to have a national election, and everybody said, no they won't. I said, "I believe they are going to have a national election. Don't ask me what the election will be worth, but they will have it. They are publicly committed to it." And they did. They were fooled by what happened as a result of the election; but the fact of the election was there.

I think that they will move to a multi-party system. A multi-party system is a system that, I think, would be like Suharto had in Indonesia: a multi-party system, but where Suharto could dismiss Megawati, as the head of the party, if he thought she was being obstreperous; and I don't think that the situation in Burma is going to be much different.

Democracy—they say they want disciplined democracy, which, basically, is a *non sequitor*. Suharto had his "guided democracy." I don't talk about democracy. Power in the country is highly personalized. It's not based on institutions, it's based on personal leadership. So, that makes for many problems in terms of democracy. That's not only true in that country, it's true in many countries. In Asia there is still a personal aspect of power, which is very old, a Confucian tradition, and particularly Indic tradition in Southeast Asia. It's true in Indonesia as well.

We have a problem. That is, besides Suu Kyi and a few others who are not in government, they don't know anything about democracy—its dynamics, the compromises required. So, what I talk about is the development of pluralism, which

is maybe a way-station on a road to democracy, if you will. Pluralism is important, but the military has refused to allow the development of pluralism, or civil society, or significant autonomy for local minorities, or any other institutional structures.

So far as you can work toward civil society and pluralism, in a manner that does not threaten the integrity of the state, I think that is something that ought to be done. I think that is one of the issues coming from the international NGOs, that are not only providing assistance, but these foreign NGOs need local institutions with which to work. They can't do everything themselves. You need local organizations that have some kind of local concern about issues, where people gather together for some sort of discussions—this kind of social capital at a local level. It's a very long, un-sexy kind of way to do things, but it is something that is required if you think over the longer term. Not very satisfying for activists.

EIR: Over the past year, the Council on Foreign Relations, like the *New York Times*, has somewhat served as a counter-pole to the most extreme, neo-conservative policies in Washington, on many major issues. But I understand that the report they have just released on Myanmar, for which you were a member of the Task Force, seems to be not at all taking a position against the Administration's hostility to Myanmar.

Steinberg: Well, basically, as far as policy, it talks more about humanitarian aid; getting the Thais to improve their treatment of refugees; and that's all fine.

But basically, what you have is a paper that does not look in-depth at any of the major U.S. potential interests in that society—beyond human rights. And even in the human rights field, it is reportorial rather than analytical. The result is a document that I think is seriously flawed. The composition of the Task Force was essentially designed for people who supported a strong position on human rights alone. There were a few others in it, as you'll see in the list, but our meetings were very, very infrequent, and we met for short periods, half of the time of which was taken up with visitors who gave outside views. But if the Task Force had been composed of specialists in the field, you wouldn't need these people, because you would know the situation. You'd know what the U.S. thought, what the opposition thought, what the State Department thought—you'd have all of this at your fingertips. Then you could immediately go into the discussion of issues.

The question is: Is a government illegitimate that doesn't adhere to our particular set of values? Who determines that legitimacy? It's a very interesting problem, it's very murky, but the ethnocentrism with which we pursue the policy worries me.

There were bound to be differences, which is fine, but what you want are a set of conclusions and recommendations that are based on analysis, and the document would flow from that.

I think there are some severe problems with that report. When you compare that to, for instance, the Korea Report done by the Council on Foreign Relations, there's a vast difference. I have great respect for the work they are doing on Korea. It's sophisticated, thoughtful, practical, reasonable—but with regard to Myanmar, this seems as if it reached its conclusions before the meeting ever started.

EIR: On the Cambodian elections, the International Republican Institute [IRI] election observer teams had reached their conclusions before the elections had even taken place.

Steinberg: Both the IRI and the National Democratic Institute [NDI], of the National Endowment for Democracy were mad at me, because I did an evaluation of their programs in Cambodia in 1994, while I was with AID. I was very critical. Essentially, those organizations were operating on the principle, which I think derived from their work in Eastern Europe, where you had a very sophisticated political system, and a long period of exposure to these programs of modern political science thought. But in many parts of the world, what you have is not political parties, but entourages.

In Korea, for example, still, the parties have little platform, they don't train any new people. They change their names constantly according to the political *feng shui* of the moment. Basically, they are at the beck and call of the leader. The IRI and the NDI do not support anything in Korea; but it is an example of a system that is not a party system in our sense; it is the weakest democratic institutional link in Korea. So we have to be very careful when we talk about using government funds to perfect political processes.

I said, in Cambodia, "Okay, when you are educating people to vote, that's fine, but when you are talking about supporting a radio station for one political party, or a cadre school for another, then you're in real trouble, and I don't think the U.S. ought to be involved in that."

There is an issue of just how ethnocentric is the American policy, in terms of pushing our particular values. This is a question that comes up in class all the time. I teach a class in political legitimacy in East Asia. The question is: Is a government illegitimate that doesn't adhere to our particular set of values? Who determines that legitimacy? It's a very interest-

ing problem, it's very murky, but the ethnocentrism with which we pursue the policy worries me.

In December 1999, on the eve of the so-called Millennium, one of the Japanese papers sent a reporter to interview me. I remember the last question, which was: "What is the most important thing to prevent the U.S. from maintaining its superpower status in the 21st Century?" I said, immediately, "arrogance." And then they left.

I'll stick with that answer. What we've seen is the spread of this arrogance, in military terms, in economic terms, in diplomatic terms, in a manner that I think is very dangerous. The idea that you can say to countries, well, you may not like what we're doing, but you're going to have to agree with us, because we've got the goods—we've got the money, we've got the guns, you have to come along.

And you think you are building permanent relationships that way? Come off it; it never happens.

The White House takes the high moral tone of saying "This is what I believe, so I'll say it." In diplomacy, one of the first things you learn is that when you sit down with someone, you do not want to insult them to begin with, because you have other objectives, and you are undercutting the chance of achieving that objective by your very tactics. I think that's what's happening.

EIR: The advantage here in the United States is that the American System still has some semblance of a presence in people's minds, even though it's been largely crushed. But there's still a sense that this nation has a mission with a good purpose.

Steinberg: Yes, It was Joseph Nye, or perhaps Lee Kuan Yew, who talked about the "soft power" idea, that the moral, cultural lodestone was the path that everything went. We had that, in one period. In the old East Asia, China had it. The Central Kingdom really was the central Kingdom, culturally speaking. If you weren't with us, you were a barbarian, as the Chinese said, but, in fact, it was a society that culturally was looked up to, by Japan, by Korea, even by Vietnam. They copied all the institutions, changing them to suit their own society, but still copied them. Are we giving up that "soft power"? I think we are, and I think that's dangerous. I was impressed when Vaclav Havel spoke to the U.S. Congress, when he spoke of the U.S. as a kind of beacon, and, this is important.