

# BURMA'S FOREIGN POLICY

*A Study in Neutralism*

*by*

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## PREFACE

THIS study is an analysis of Burma's foreign policy since independence. It examines, first of all, the basic concepts accepted by the Burman leadership in their initial formulation of a foreign policy for their new country. It attempts to identify those factors or circumstances which influenced the adoption of certain ideas as underlying principles of Burma's foreign policy and caused the rejection of others. In the second place, an attempt is made to trace the evolution of these underlying ideas and their translation into action in a changing domestic and international environment over the fourteen years since independence. This study is not a comprehensive review of the totality of Burma's foreign relations since 1948. Rather it is focused upon that complex of concepts, attitudes and actions described generally as a policy of "neutralism." By trying to find out the ideological content of this policy as defined by the Burman leaders themselves, and then by analyzing how these concepts of neutralism have been applied to important international issues and situations of concern to Burma, a basis is laid for some evaluation of Burma's neutralism from both the point of view of the Burmans and of the outside observer.

This volume is based on studies comprising an extensive group research project on the subject of Burma's foreign relations since independence. The project was initiated at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D. C., in the spring of 1956. It was carried on through field research in Burma between June, 1956, and April, 1959. The original research project called for a multipronged investigation of Burma's foreign relations designed to be as comprehensive as possible within the time allowed. The end product was a series of papers, each a separate study in itself and of varying lengths. These were completed in April, 1959. (See Appendix I for list of papers and authors.) After April, 1959, the author continued the collection of material from Rangoon and in January, 1962, was able to return to Rangoon, Burma, for a final evaluation of material and collection of additional data.

The group research project and this present study were made possible by the existence of the Rangoon-Hopkins Center for Southeast Asian Studies, a joint undertaking of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and Rangoon University. The Center was opened in June, 1954, to serve the teaching and research needs of Rangoon University and of universities in southeast Asia. As part of its area training program, the School of Advanced International Studies provided a number of fellowships each year for selected graduates for advanced study and research at the Center in Rangoon. All the recipients of these fellowships between June, 1956, and April, 1959, worked on various papers connected with this research project on Burma's foreign policy. From February, 1957, until April, 1959, the author directed this field research while serving as Co-Director of the Rangoon-Hopkins Center and Visiting Professor of International Relations at the Rangoon University.

The initial group research project, as well as the continuing research necessary in the preparation of this present volume was substantially aided by a grant to the School of Advanced International Studies from The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California. The RAND Corporation regularly sponsors, with its own funds, research projects of importance to national security and public welfare. Such research is fundamentally the responsibility of the individuals involved in the project and any interpretations or conclusions offered are not necessarily endorsed by The RAND Corporation.

The author is grateful to The RAND Corporation and the staff of its Social Science Department for helpful suggestions and a variety of assistance in this project. The author is deeply indebted to those graduates of the SAIS associated with him in this research project in Burma, particularly for their conscientious and painstaking work under difficult and often frustrating conditions in Rangoon. The author is highly appreciative of the opportunity for engaging in a special kind of intellectual experience as a part of "area training" and is only hopeful that it proved of equal value to all those who participated in it.

Although the author has drawn heavily on the material provided by the individual studies comprising the original research project and on the mass of source material collected in Burma and in the United States, this present study is an attempt at coherent presenta-

tion in a single volume of the development of Burma's foreign policy of neutralism, and for any interpretations, conclusions, errors of fact, or sins of omission, the author willingly accepts responsibility.

W.C.J.  
Washington, D. C.  
August, 1962.

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# — I —

## *INTRODUCTION*

ON January 4, 1962, Burma celebrated the fourteenth anniversary of its independence. For all of these fourteen years the government of Burma has pursued an unwavering policy of non-alignment or neutralism in world affairs. It could be said that the Burma government pioneered the policy of neutralism. Whereas in 1948, Burma stood alone with India in adopting a foreign policy of nonalignment, today Burma is one of a large majority of neutralist members of the United Nations. As the number of such nations increased there have been continuing references to the Afro-Asia bloc, to the possibility that the neutralists might some day constitute a "third force" in world politics, interposed between the major contestants in the cold war. To date no such developments have taken place. There is no effective "Afro-Asian bloc" in the United Nations, and at the large Belgrade conference of "unaligned" nations in September, 1961, it was apparent that neutralist unity extended no farther than agreement on vaguely worded resolutions and a unanimous condemnation of colonialism.

The real concern of the United States and its allies, however, is what appears to be the development of a "cult" of neutralism — a set of beliefs which found concrete expression in the reaction of the neutralist nations at Belgrade to resumption of nuclear tests by the Soviet Union. The neutral nations refused to condemn vigorously this Soviet breaking of the moratorium on nuclear testing, but instead generally condemned all nuclear tests, equating the United States with the Soviet Union in this regard. It appeared that a policy of neutralism involved belief in a double standard of international morality, that neutral nations were unwilling to judge the actions of



the Communist bloc and those of the United States and its allies by the same standards. Quite apart from the understandable concern of the United States over the actions of the neutralist nations on specific issues, it is clear that neutralism is now a phenomenon in world affairs to be reckoned with.

American attitudes toward the neutralist nations have vacillated. During the early years of the Eisenhower administration, neutralism was regarded as immoral. We held that in the contest with world Communism, those who were not for us must necessarily be against us. Yet the American government continued to give economic aid to neutralist nations, from India to Yugoslavia, and American policy gradually softened to the point where the new President, John Kennedy, could call for a "neutral and independent" Laos as the American objective at the Geneva conference in 1961. Failure to obtain agreement at Geneva, the growing crisis over Berlin, and increasing Communist infiltration of the Republic of Vietnam, however, caused President Kennedy to indicate to Congress that the United States would carefully consider its future aid program with respect to "nations which share our view of world affairs." This shift caused concern among the neutrals, particularly India, and since it was obvious that the American government would not change its economic commitments to India in the immediate future, President Kennedy modified his position. At his news conference on October 11, 1961, he stated that the United States would help nations maintain their "national independence."

While there has been increasing attention given to the general problems of neutralism and to action of neutralist countries on specific international issues, there have been few attempts to subject the foreign policy of a neutralist nation to an analysis in depth, to examine the evolution of neutralism in one country and its application over a period of years to changing international issues and events.

In a great many respects Burma can be considered the prototype of a small, neutralist country. Burma's government early determined to follow a course of nonalignment in world affairs and has consistently maintained this policy over a fourteen-year period. During this period the Burma government has confronted many of the same kinds of problems which now concern the newer neutralist nations.

Armed insurrection, infiltration of foreign forces in its territory, economic growing pains, internal political upheaval, these and other difficulties have been dealt with by the Burma government since independence. As a member of the United Nations, too, the Burma government has been bound to take a foreign policy decision on a wide variety of international issues, from those involved in the Korean war, to the problems of Suez and Hungary, the recent Soviet resumption of nuclear tests, to the upheavals in the United Nations structure itself. The Burma government has had to determine the kind of foreign economic assistance it needed and decide how much to take from nations in both the power blocs in accordance with its nonalignment policy.

While it is true that each of the neutral nations occupies a particular geographic location, possesses a distinct cultural and historical heritage and that in each nation its leaders view their country's role in the world from their own particular ideological and personal preconceptions, there is much that is comparable. Burma's posture of neutralism in the cold war, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine both the evolution and the application of a neutralist policy by a small nation. Such an examination can provide some useful clues for a more careful assessment of this phenomenon of neutralism and perhaps some insights into the problems faced by the United States in its relations with the large number of neutral nations in this world of the cold war.

This study is focused on the particular concepts or principles of Burma's foreign policy since independence which, taken together, have been described as neutralism. An attempt has been made to find the answers to a series of questions which can be posed concerning the foreign policy of any nation. Was the decision of Burma's leaders in 1948 to follow a course of nonalignment the result of circumstances at the time of independence or does this policy have roots in the past? Did the Burma government have other, logical options it might have selected? What has been the ideological content of Burma's neutralist policy? How has it been changed or modified over the period since independence and what factors caused any such changes or modifications? How has Burma fared with its neutralist policy in specific situations or issues confronting it? Has the application of a neutralist policy in practice been easy or diffi-

cult? Answers to these and other relevant questions can provide a basis for rational evaluation of this policy in action.

In all of the research which forms the basis for this study an attempt was made to review the evolution and application of a neutralist policy as the leaders of the Burma government saw it, to keep in mind how these men viewed the role of their nation in world affairs. The approach to this study, therefore, has been that of empiricism, attempting to avoid prejudgment until the facts were assembled. This study is not a comprehensive review of Burma's foreign relations since 1948, nor does it attempt to include all the details of Burma's relations with its neighbors and the major nations in the two power blocs. Issues and situations which the leaders of Burma considered to be of major importance were selected for examination in terms of the application of basic concepts of their foreign policy.

In order to provide a basis for final evaluation and some judgment as to the consequences for Burma of its neutralist policy, the remaining sections of this chapter trace briefly the historical factors which influenced the leaders' choice in 1948. The chapters that follow attempt to present both the evolution and the application of neutralist policy chronologically over the fourteen years of independence. Because Burma shares a long frontier with Communist China, a major partner of the Soviet Union, such physical proximity has had a significant effect on Burma's foreign relations and this problem is dealt with in a separate chapter. The final chapters provide both a summary and an evaluation of neutralism for one country which it is believed has relevance for consideration of this relatively new phenomenon in cold war politics.

### *The Roots of Burma's Neutralism*

The men who took control of the new government of the Union of Burma, in 1948, were not wholly free to chart the course of their independent nation in the turbulent sea of postwar international politics. The nation for whose destiny they were now responsible was not of their making. They had not determined the composition of its people. They had little to do with the extent of its territory. In their brief political careers prior to independence, they had neither shaped its history nor influenced its culture. They had been respon-

sible only for the constitution of their new state and for the manner in which freedom had been obtained from Britain.

The leaders of the new nation, Burma, were a diverse group with varying ideas and capabilities. They had joined together to work for a single goal, independence. Although many of them shared a common orientation toward Marxism, their individual interpretations of Marxist doctrine differed widely and many of them had little attachment to Marxism either as a doctrine or as a guide to action. But no matter what their views, individually or collectively, they were soon to find that they could not divorce themselves from the historical factors that had shaped their country and its people. The leaders of the new Burma government still had to develop their domestic and foreign policies within the framework of the historical circumstances, old culture patterns, and habits of thought and conduct that were their legacies from preceding generations.

A consciousness of this legacy of the past was not immediately apparent in the actions and expressed ideas of Burma's leaders. As in most colonial territories, there was the feeling that attainment of independence would mean a sharp break, a radical change, from all that was past history. To most of the political leaders and to most politically literate Burmans, freedom from British rule meant that a wholly new, and fresh start, could be made.<sup>1</sup> There was little disposition to consider the operation of the new government or the formulation of domestic and foreign policies in the context of their history. They considered that by eliminating alien rule over their country they had broken with the past and in particular had finally dissociated themselves and their people from the unpalatable rule of the British.

These attitudes, of course, were delusions. No nation can wholly break with its history, its culture, or the habits of thought and patterns of conduct that have survived through generations. In the case of a colonial territory, not even the most rigorous alien rule can wholly eliminate or destroy its precolonial culture. Nor can an ex-colonial country, merely by the attainment of independence, eliminate at a stroke the effects of an imposition of alien culture or the forms and methods of colonial administration. In fact, attainment of independence is a change in only one aspect of a nation's political

and social fabric — the transfer of political power from alien to indigenous rulers.

To the observer studying a new, excolonial nation's political development in the first years after independence, there is always the temptation to try to determine accurately what historical circumstances, what habits of thought and conduct, are most influential in affecting the attitudes and actions of those who control the government. There is always the temptation to try to find the answers to such natural questions as: what are the significant roots of political behavior of such a country's leaders? In what ways are they influenced by their religion? — by their own social patterns or by those acquired under colonial rule? What elements of alien culture and thought have they absorbed? In the case of a new country like Burma, such a task is full of frustration and can easily end in futility. At present too little is known about the social or economic or political history of Burma. Detailed studies by competent scholars remain to be written. Specialized studies on the nature of Burmese society, the social and political influence of Buddhism, or the sources and sanctions of conduct among Burma's diverse population are only just being undertaken.

There is also the danger that an observer, in attempting to evaluate the reasons for a particular statement of policy or a specific action of an individual official or political group, will read into this too much of his own knowledge of the country's history or his own estimates of the influence of past history and culture patterns. What must be done, so far as possible, is to estimate the degree to which persons holding political power think and act in terms of their own society or are conscious of their nation's historical development as a factor that limits their freedom of action.

In the case of Burma, the persons wielding political power since 1948 have been, for the most part, the same persons who led the prewar independence movement, who shared a variety of experiences under the Japanese from 1942 to 1945, and who were directly concerned in the successful struggle for independence after 1945. To these political leaders, the memories of their youthful prewar political activity, their experiences during the war and their more recent struggles after the war and during the period of insurrection, are all very clear. It is their own personal experiences of the imme-

diate past that affect their attitudes and upon which they most often draw for guidance in solving their present dilemmas.

With very few exceptions, these political leaders of independent Burma have not been students of their country's history. They have had neither the time nor the inclination to analyze carefully the period of British rule or of Japanese occupation in order to determine their effects on the economic and political development of the country. In attempting to manage the affairs of a sovereign state, they are often hindered or limited by the legacies of their history and culture without being fully conscious of precisely what aspects of Burma's past affect the present.

Acutely conscious of the events within their own lives in the past twenty years, Burma's leaders have naturally drawn upon this personal experience as a guide to their actions or reactions to contemporary events. For these reasons, some understanding of the period of the independence movement in Burma, and the events between 1942 and 1948 is necessary to an evaluation of Burma's foreign policy since independence. This was the period during which the present leaders of Burma cut their political teeth. Experience in the art of politics and the operation of government was gained during this period, mainly under the Japanese.

Right at the start it is necessary to characterize Burma's independence movement. Was it a truly "nationalist" movement or not? Did the efforts of Burmans to gain independence from Britain include a conscious effort to create a feeling of national unity among the diverse population of the country? Or, did the struggle to gain freedom from British rule itself serve to unite the diverse people of Burma, bringing them together in a common effort to achieve a common aim which transcended their local differences? The answers to these questions are important for if a new government, of a new "nation," must struggle with divided loyalties among its people, and with the failure of people generally to accept their new role as citizens of a nation as one transcending their local or particular group loyalties, then that government faces grave handicaps in the execution of its domestic and foreign policies.

The area known as "Burma" today has been said to lie "within the most distinctive physical environment in the Orient, because it has but one core area placed within a framework of mountains." <sup>2</sup>

Throughout the early history of Burma, the bulk of the migration has come from the north, while the major cultural penetration has come from and through India from the west. The extent of these migrations from the north, the racial and linguistic characteristics of the migrants are imperfectly known, particularly for the earlier periods. It is fair to conclude with Spencer, however, that<sup>3</sup> "in a general way the lowlands have been the final goal of all the varied culture groups that have entered Burma, and the modern Burmese people and Burmese culture have been the final product. The Burmese of today are a lowland people, and their culture is a lowland culture, though the upland frame is home to a wide variety of culture groups with different patterns of culture." The flow of migrants from the north took place over a period of centuries. The easiest access to Burma is by the Bay of Bengal. Consequently, there have been few attempts by foreign conquerors to control Burma. Control or even political influence by outside nations was brief and transitory in the pre-British period. Unlike other territories in Asia, Burma never became a real bone of contention between rival imperialisms.

The population of Burma has been a mixture of ethnic-linguistic and geographically separate groups throughout its history. The continuing underpopulation of the country has permitted the Burmese majority and the substantial numbers of the minorities to maintain their separate identities and culture. There has been space and land enough for all. This underpopulation, when coupled with the fact that internal communication between the Burmese-populated lowlands and the surrounding non-Burmese highlands and even the coastal areas has never been adequate, produced an environment in which diversity and separatism could flourish unchecked. Today, the Burmese majority of approximately 15,000,000 lives predominantly in the lowlands, surrounded by some 4,000,000 hill people — the Shans, Kachins, Nagas, Chins, Karreni and many smaller ethnic-linguistic groups. One large minority, the Karens, are filtered throughout the Burmese population of the lower Irrawaddy delta and the Tenasserim coast.

As colonial rulers, it was only natural that the British gave no serious thought to the development of anything like a "national" culture, or a "national" society or economy that would transcend in any way



the group loyalties of the Burmese and of the minority groups in the country. Such a policy would have been contrary to British economic and political interests. The Government of India, responsible for the new province of Burma, had recognized communal, ethnic and linguistic differences in India. They could not have been expected to pursue a different policy in Burma. The new British rulers took Burma as they found it — a country of diverse population.

During the first thirty years of British rule in the twentieth century, the non-Burmese groups were encouraged to retain their group characteristics and their group identity. The highland areas were separately administered from Burma proper, where the Burmese majority lived, and the Burmese were not permitted to extend their cultural domination over the non-Burmese inhabitants in any way that might have resulted in developing common ties and interests among all the people of the country. Such a development would have raised the horrid specter of "nationalism" in its modern meaning and permitted "national" aspirations to be expressed. Instead, the people of Burma became simply British subjects with the same status as the people in provinces of British India. They were governed in ways that served to perpetuate their differences rather than diminish them.<sup>4</sup>

Under the British, another element was added to the diverse population groups of Burma — the Indian immigrants and seasonal laborers. This influx began after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 when the prospect of developing Burma's raw materials for export via the shorter route to Europe caused a new interest on the part of British investors in exploitation of Burma's resources. Not only did Indians come to Burma as workers, laborers, and merchants, but they were also brought in to take positions in the British administration. For the British this was a natural step, since Burma was administered by the Government of India. For the Burmese and many non-Burmese, it meant closing the doors to employment opportunities and loss of control over much of the rich delta rice lands.

The result of British policy and of the Indian influx was to create barriers, social, political, and economic, between the British rulers and their subjects, the Burmese majority and the indigenous minorities. As Furnivall points out,<sup>5</sup> "Thus, merely by the working of economic forces, there came into existence a plural society, comprising



many different racial elements, differing in culture and performing different economic functions and with nothing in common but the desire for gain. What had formerly been a national society was converted into a business concern." By "national" society, Furnivall, like most writers, is referring to the Burmese majority, not the people of the country as a whole. Both in administrative structure and in political policy and practice, the British administration accentuated, rather than softened, the differences among racial, linguistic, and geographic groups within Burma. Representatives of the minority races were often given preferred positions in certain fields and in the local armed forces, on grounds that the Burmese were incapable of learning discipline or were lazy. Even members of the minority groups, however, were hardly able to compete in business, in commerce, in government clerkships, or in many other occupations against the Indians and a small, but active Chinese immigrant population.

Although some attempts were made to redress this imbalance before World War II, the Burmese majority and many of the members of minority groups had developed no feeling of loyalty toward their British overlords nor any significant belief that they had a chance to eventually possess and govern a country of their own. British concessions toward self-government were grudging and gradual, lagging behind the aspirations and even demands of the small, politically conscious group of Burmans who sought independence for their country.

Compared to some other colonial territories in Asia, the independence movement in Burma came rather late in the period between the two world wars. At this point, it is necessary to emphasize that as in most Asian countries the Burma independence movement is *not* to be equated with the development of nationalism in the true sense. The movement for freedom from British rule did *not* serve to unite the people of Burma as a whole nor infuse into them any ideas of national unity — loyalty to their country, Burma, transcending any local loyalties as Shans, Karens, Arkanese and so on. Freedom from British rule was not a means toward a united Burma, a new nation in the strict sense. As in other colonial areas, independence became an end in itself and the problems of national unity were not considered important. Thus, in a realistic sense, the leaders of the Burman