



## Political ‘New Dawn’ in Myanmar: Implications and Future Prospects for the Myanmar Navy

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### Introduction

Myanmar has always been given scant, almost negligible, mention in the field of study on naval modernisation in Asia. The first reason for this is the paucity of reliable information available. The second reason is that, based on what is being known about the Myanmar Navy’s modernization attempts, quantitatively and qualitatively they were deemed to be insignificant compared to the phenomenal growth in capabilities of Myanmar’s neighbors in the region. The under-researched state of affairs for the Myanmar Navy could have been justifiable a few decades back and possibly up till as recent as the early 2000s, since all along Myanmar has been considered a relatively small player in the region’s geopolitics and naval arena, and its national security focus has been inward-centric premised on consolidation of the regime’s political legitimacy in the face of significant internal dissent and insurgencies.

However, in the light of new political developments in Myanmar which could potentially herald the beginning of a country reborn, certainly in no insignificant manner. In so far the naval arena, for decades a much neglected dimension, is concerned the future of Myanmar’s naval development necessitates a revisit. In this editorial, the ongoing political reform and changes brought to Myanmar’s economic and security dimensions are examined, using a wide variety of carefully considered open sources—a necessary measure in view of the paucity of official publications on the Myanmar Navy. It argues that these new developments will bring about potential room for growth of the country’s naval power which deserves greater attention in the foreseeable future. First, the economic, political and security developments taking place in Myanmar will be discussed.

Thereafter, the editorial looks at the contemporary evolution of the Myanmar Navy to date in order to postulate the future trajectory of Myanmar’s naval power.

### Political Reform in Myanmar

The first crucial development is the current political reform taking place in Myanmar. Having had run the country with an iron-fisted military rule for decades, the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has begun moving the country on a graduated path of democratization since the late 2011. Opportunities are ripe for eventual socioeconomic benefits to be reaped by a newly-

reborn Myanmar assuming the path of political reform carries on unimpeded and irreversibly as its political leaders has assured. The political reform will first allow the country to gain wider diplomatic acceptance beyond the region. An encouraging sign has been the decision by Australia and the European Union to lift sanctions on the country while the United States of America has also made a series of notable moves to enhance its diplomatic relations with Myanmar. Following which, international financial institutions will be allowed to provide much needed funds to assist Myanmar’s socioeconomic development. In fact, to this end, Japan has made a noteworthy move of forgiving Myanmar’s external debts and on top of which, offer funding assistance for the latter’s socioeconomic development projects. The eventual end-result will be an open Myanmar which is integrated within the international community after decades of isolation.

### A New Dawn for Economic Growth

The second crucial development, which is linked to the first, is the essential opening of the economic sphere and this is where Myanmar will benefit the most. With the concrete steps undertaken since the conduct of its first parliamentary elections in decades, Myanmar has attracted a swarm of foreign investors keen on getting their share of the potential economic pie in a country that is blessed with vast natural resources and abundant room for development, as well as a new market in itself. For decades, the crown jewel of Myanmar’s economy has been the oil and gas (O&G) sector that has seen China for instance having owned a significant slice of the pie. With the opening up of Myanmar’s political and economic dimensions, more opportunities will become available to foreign O&G companies. Much interest has been placed in expanding Myanmar’s offshore marine O&G development. Two countries are primarily interested in this prospect: Bangladesh and Thailand. These two countries are in search of new sources of natural gas in particular to make up for anticipated shortfalls in their national power needs. To date, it would appear that Bangkok has been the most successful in pushing for its projects in Myanmar-owned offshore O&G blocks in the Bay of Bengal. However, Dhaka may have been disappointed when Yangon announced that it has no plans to export its new gas finds. Nonetheless, the potential for Myanmar’s offshore O&G development remains significant, even more so than the onshore sector. The other notable area of interest is Myanmar’s drive towards gradual industrialization, with the Dawei deep-sea port and special economic zone (SEZ) project being the centerpiece of this endeavor. The geostrategic position of Myanmar makes it an attractive new destination for international shippers, assuming the Dawei port SEZ project takes off and turns into fruition.

### Moving towards National Reconciliation

The third crucial development is the gradual move by Yangon towards national reconciliation, with its stated goal of achieving a permanent peace pact with major ethnic rebel groups in three to four years time. For decades, the military regime has been engaged in hard fighting with the array of ethnic insurgent groups in the northern and north-eastern part of the country. This overarching focus on internal security for the purpose of maintaining regime survival in the face of resistance from the ethnic rebel armies and potential dissent within

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the broader Myanmar population has for decades entrenched the country's security outlook in an inward orientation. This could have been justifiable back then because the primary national security threat perceived by the military regime is internal in nature. External threats come largely in the form of foreign subversion, especially by Western powers in collusion with dissenting segments in the populace, but not a major foreign armed aggression. In any case, Myanmar has carefully cultivated cordial and warm ties with China – its primary patron and an indirect provider of its security against potential external foes – and with India. Its membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) provides another layer of security under which the regime could feel free to pursue its internal interest of pacifying the restive north and north-eastern parts of the country. In the wake of political reforms, Yangon has begun to negotiate for peace with the ethnic rebels, with greatest inroads made to date with major ethnic rebel group the Karen National Union (KNU). There is huge potential for eventual national reconciliation, assuming both Yangon and the ethnic rebel groups continue to show interest in this process. The end-result will be a change in security outlook from inward to an outward orientation.

### Changing Security Outlook for Myanmar

The fourth crucial development is linked to the second and third developments and it concerns the impetus for a change in Myanmar's security outlook. Potential for growth in Myanmar's economy will essentially increase its reliance on the seas. In fact, Yangon has long been interested in developing its maritime sector even before the recent political reform. Achievements attained to date in the political reform process will catalyze the growth of its maritime sector, be it international shipping with the Dawei port and SEZ project or the expansion of its offshore marine O&G sector. This increased emphasis on the maritime sector necessitates an outward, not inward, security conception. Credible naval power will have to be available to protect these maritime interests. In the case of Myanmar, the need for maritime resource protection is therefore essential given its long coastline and vast maritime zone under its jurisdiction. The resolution of maritime boundary dispute with Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal in April 2012 by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) not only provided the basis for Myanmar's offshore marine resource development but also stressed upon the need for the country to safeguard its maritime interests. The ITLOS ruling is in favor of Dhaka and this development would not have been well received by many within Myanmar's political-military leadership circle. In any case, the long neglect of the maritime boundaries due to decades of overwhelming focus on internal security deep in Myanmar's terrestrial hinterland has somewhat contributed to Yangon's 'defeat' in the ITLOS ruling. In addition, the acute need to focus on safeguarding Myanmar's maritime interests was further sharpened in the wake of the May 2008 Cyclone Nargis when American, British and French warships stood poised near the shores of Myanmar to deliver humanitarian aid to the affected population—a move which was perceived as a threat to Myanmar's national security. The French and the Dutch governments were even prepared during that time to push for United Nations Security Council resolution to compel Yangon 'by all means necessary' to accept international aid in the name of humanitarian rationale. This move could only be interpreted by Yangon as a potential threat of seaward invasion by external naval powers and puts greater emphasis on a maritime-focused, outward-oriented security conception.

### Implications for the Myanmar Navy

The above discussed developments could only logically mean that Myanmar's national security conception will become increasingly outward-looking and essentially predicated on its growing maritime interests and hence room for growth of Myanmar's naval power as a tool to insure these interests. It was not as if Myanmar is oblivious to the need for a credible naval capability. All these while, the Myanmar Navy has been ranked the last in the army-dominated Tatmadaw (Myanmar Defence Services) and had been mainly relegated to supporting the Army and Air Force in the country's fight with the ethnic insurgents, other than policing the coastline against encroachment by foreign fishermen. It was only after the November 2008 standoff with the Bangladesh Navy - during which the Myanmar Navy was said to have made a poor showing - which the regime started to recognize the deficiencies in its naval capabilities. This was complemented also by complaints and resignations by a number of Myanmar Navy officers who lamented the navy's sorry state of affairs. The reported inability of the Myanmar Navy to assert its stance in the Bay of Bengal against the assembled aid-carrying Western warships in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis further amplified the fact that the fleet has been grossly neglected and incapable of performing its basic role of safeguarding national maritime interests within the immediate 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone even if the Myanmar Navy is not expected to be a bluewater force in any measure. Since 2008, some attempts had been made to enhance the Myanmar Navy. However, political isolation and continued troubles in the restive rebel-occupied zones ensured that Yangon found its hands tied in its attempt to bolster its naval capabilities. The recent political reform thus brings forth new opportunities yet at the same time also new imperatives for the expansion of Myanmar's naval capabilities.

### Tracing the Evolution of the Myanmar Navy

The old Myanmar Navy after the Second World War was essentially a hodgepodge of former American, European and Yugoslavian coastal and inshore patrol forces in the main. The navy then was adequate in supporting ground operations against the ethnic rebel armies through the provision of gunfire support and troop transports in the numerous inland waterways of Myanmar. The fleet was barely capable, however, of effectively policing the long coastline of the country, much less to project credible naval force beyond the country's territorial waters. In the 1990s, possibly linked to an agreement to allow the Chinese to establish listening posts in strategic naval stations in Myanmar, the Myanmar Navy received a number of new Chinese-built patrol craft, most notably the *Houxin* class fast patrol craft, whose Chinese-made, 22 nautical mile-range C-801 anti-ship missile for the first time gave the fleet a greatly enhanced long-range striking power since prior to the arrival of such a craft, the fleet was made up of only gun-armed craft that could prove invaluable in providing gunfire support for the Myanmar Army but certainly close to obsolete in modern naval warfare. The arrival of the *Hainan* class large patrol craft gave the Myanmar Navy a revitalized coastal anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability since it is armed with Soviet-origin RBU-1200 5-barrelled ASW mortars and Chinese-made BMB-2 depth charge projectors—all optimized only for shallow-water ASW operations. Nonetheless, compared to the rest of the fleet, the *Hainan* and *Houxin* classes marked a significant addition to the Myanmar Navy.

Chinese assistance continued apace for the Myanmar Navy, not just confined to the supply of warships and crew training, but also in

building up the indigenous naval shipbuilding capacity of the country. With the Western-imposed sanctions in place, Myanmar has limited options but to either procure Chinese equipment or build its own. In a move towards self-reliance, in the 1990s the Myanmar state-owned shipbuilders began to churn out a number of new local makes for the fleet. The first was a simple coastal fast patrol craft known as the *Myanmar* class, which was apparently successful since this class was placed into series production – a general patrol, gun-armed variant as well as a strike variant equipped with Chinese-supplied C-802 missiles that have a 65 nautical mile range, giving the fleet an enhanced surface striking power. The gradual induction of the Myanmar class into service allowed the fleet to retire the ageing force of post-war Western craft. Near the end of the 1990s, the Sinmalaik Shipyard located in Rangoon managed to build a 77m-long and 1105-ton displacement warship—a corvette that gave the Myanmar Navy for the first time a helicopter deck-equipped vessel and an overall ship design that looked poised to take the fleet beyond the territorial waters into the country's EEZ. Initially designated the *Sinmalaik* class, by virtue of its shipbuilder, the corvette was actually a larger hull equipped with a helicopter deck but no hangar facilities but the remaining combat systems did not represent a significant leap beyond what the Myanmar Navy already possessed in its inventory. Later designated the *Anawrahta* class, the ship was armed with a 76 mm dual-purpose gun of Italian OTO Breda design—a huge step beyond the inventory of mainly manually-operated and lower-calibre gun armaments—and OTO Breda 40 mm close-in weapon system (CIWS). For surface strike, the C-802 anti-ship missile found on board the *Myanmar* class is standard fit while for ASW, it is equipped with the standard RBU-1200 found on board the *Hainan* class. The arrival of the class at least allowed the fleet to finally retire the pair of ex-American, Second World War vintage light frigates. The Myanmar Navy has no organic naval aviation, hence the *Anawrahta* class is likely able to embark a small air force helicopter for short periods of time but certainly incapable of locking it down under inclement weather conditions far out from shore. Therefore for the most part, the corvette might have been able to conduct offshore patrols in the EEZ but not for sustained periods of time. This deficiency was possibly exposed during the naval standoff with Bangladesh in November 2008, during the aftermath of which there was reported internal criticisms that the Myanmar Navy was unable to hold its own in asserting national claims to the overlapping zone due to the availability of merely small craft as compared to the larger warships of the Bangladesh Navy. Prior to that, the inability of the Myanmar Navy to mobilize sufficient forces to 'show flag' in the waters close to the high seas, where the Western warships were awaiting permission to deliver cyclone aid in May 2008 highlighted the acute need for platforms capable of sustained presence at sea.

After 2008, it appears that the Myanmar Navy has gained greater traction in demanding more attention from the land-oriented military junta in order to bolster the fleet's capacity to handle offshore operations for longer periods of time, partly but significantly also to exorcise the ghosts of humiliation suffered in May and November 2008 in the face of what was deemed to be more superior foreign naval forces that witnessed the Myanmar Navy being outclassed. Not only naval training was intensified, the Myanmar Navy began to look into capabilities to better allow it to sustain naval presence farther out in the EEZ. The end result was apparently the new *Aung Zeya* class frigate, which appears a larger ship derived from the *Anawrahta* class, built locally with Chinese assistance. It was said to have been laid down in 2006 and commissioned in 2010, with a second ship

still under construction. A total of 3 ships of the class was said to be planned for service. The frigate was shrouded in secrecy compared to the preceding *Anawrahta* class and not much information is available. However, what was known was that the *Aung Zeya* class possesses an enhanced striking power compared to the *Anawrahta* class in the form of Chinese-supplied C-602 anti-ship missile with a 151 nautical mile range—more than double of that of the C-802. The OTO Breda 76 mm gun appears to have become the new standard medium-calibre gun in Myanmar Navy service. However, the frigate is armed with Russian-supplied AK-630 6-barrelled Gatling-type 30 mm CIWS. According to *Jane's Fighting Ships*, the ship is equipped with a helicopter deck but no hangar facilities like the *Anawrahta*. For ASW, again the standard RBU-1200 mortars are observed fitted on board the frigate but no torpedoes seen. On the whole, the *Aung Zeya* probably provides the fleet an enhanced sustained offshore patrol capacity with much improved surface striking power. However, air defence at sea remains confined to short-range non-missile systems while ASW capabilities remain restricted to only shallow-water operations and incapable of dealing with modern submarines armed with long-range torpedo and anti-ship missile armaments. The haste to acquire offshore naval capabilities is witnessed in the recent induction of a pair of former Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy *Jianghu I* class frigates that had seen service since the early 1970s. The ageing vessels probably represent a stopgap prior to the possible induction of two more *Aung Zeya* class frigates because these two old frigates are armed with weapons, for instance the obsolete C-201 (itself a Chinese copy of the old Soviet SS-N-2 Styx) and hand-operated guns, that represented a step backward of what the Myanmar Navy's most modern fleet units are equipped with. Named the *Mahar Bandoola* class, the frigates made their first maiden appearance as the newest additions to the Myanmar Navy when they docked in Vietnam's Tien Sa Port in March 2012 for a visit on their way from China back to Myanmar.

### Serious Deficiencies in Naval Capacity

The Myanmar Navy has certainly made notable strides since the 1990s by progressively enhancing its capabilities, moving from 'brown-water' to 'green-water' naval platforms with the immediate objective of safeguarding the country's maritime interests within the 200-nautical mile EEZ in the Indian Ocean. All these while, the Myanmar Navy has been heavily focused on enhancing its surface strike capabilities, which it has done admirably well so far. Clearly however, serious deficiencies remain. The Myanmar Navy remains weak in anti-air warfare (AAW) and ASW. Until the Myanmar Navy acquires a basic point defence AAW missile system, AAW for the fleet will continue to be restricted to very short-range gun armaments that may only be marginal against modern sea-skimming anti-ship missile threats. Furthermore, the Myanmar Navy will continue to be reliant upon the Myanmar Air Force for land-based air support. It is not clear whether the Myanmar Air Force has over-water maritime support capabilities even though theoretically, its existing inventory of Chinese-built A-5C Fantan and the newer Russian-built MiG-29SE Fulcrum-C fighters can at least muster some basic surface attack capabilities. Shallow-water ASW remains the primary focus of the Myanmar Navy but in the deeper waters of the EEZ, where hostile submarines enjoy greater room for manoeuvre and deeper spots to hide, the existing capabilities are deemed obsolete until the fleet acquires a respectable ASW capability in the form of lightweight ASW torpedoes and possibly, a shipborne ASW helicopter capability. Since the immediate concerns of the Myanmar Navy are likely local,

there may not be a need for at-sea replenishment capabilities. For a country which has an extensive coastline and maritime zone to police, Myanmar possesses weak maritime surveillance capabilities even though India transferred a pair of retired BN-2 Islander maritime patrol aircraft from its naval aviation service to Myanmar in 2006, followed by a second pair in 2007 notwithstanding British protests. These complemented the existing three Fokker F-27 Friendship utility transports acquired in the early 1990s and were employed by the Myanmar Air Force in the secondary role of visual coastal surveillance. Finally, the Myanmar Navy has no mine warfare capability even though it may acquire a basic mine countermeasure capacity in the near term considering the rising importance of its reliance on sea trade routes to facilitate its industrialization process.

### Possible New Naval Developments in the Offing?

In general at present, the Myanmar Navy has a strong surface strike capability, marginal in ASW and weak in AAW. The paucity of information emanating from Myanmar means that the picture of its naval development process is incomplete at best, peppered with discrete information from unofficial sources such as Myanmar dissidents based in Thailand, through *The Irrawaddy* online publication for instance, and also an interesting blog maintained on the Tatmadaw, called *mmilitary.blogspot.com* which posted rather authentic pictures of the Tatmadaw in action and the equipment it possesses. The same blog in May 2012 published some pictures of what seemed to be new warships being in the process of induction into Myanmar Navy. The two new warships-one a frigate or corvette-sized vessel and the other a fast attack or patrol craft-exact specifications unknown and unpublicized, appear to incorporate stealth design features. If they indeed are new warships being incorporated into Myanmar Navy service, again likely with Chinese (or even Indian and Russian) technical assistance, these might represent another significant leap in capabilities for the fleet. The third dimension of naval warfare the sub-

surface is an area that the Myanmar Navy appears to have made some quiet steps. It was reported in Thai press that the Myanmar Navy has already begun to send personnel to China for submarine training and is currently in the process of acquiring at least three ex-PLA Navy submarines. If these developments were verified to have indeed taken place, it will imply significant enhancements of the overall capacity of the Myanmar Navy to sustain its power projection into the EEZ waters.

### Conclusion


Notwithstanding the recent ongoing sectarian violence between the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, the political reform is well underway and has already been termed as an 'irreversible' process by top Myanmar political leadership. Assuming this process continues unabated, the political and economic gains for the new Myanmar Government can be significant. The revival of diplomatic ties with erstwhile foes in the West, buttressed by its membership in ASEAN, will lead to renewed foreign investments and aid from international financial institutions flowing into the country to resuscitate its ailing economy. In this respect, the ASEAN (primarily Singapore), China, India and Japan may spearhead industrialization of Myanmar. The consequent effect of this development will be an outward focus of Yangon's national security interests, facilitated by ongoing national reconciliation with ethnic rebel groups. This outward security orientation will necessarily be maritime-focused in nature-an area which has been much neglected by the Myanmar Government at least until 2008. To safeguard its national maritime interests, such as the offshore marine O&G sector that remains the crown jewel of Myanmar's economy in the foreseeable future and a source of revenue to propel its industrialization process in conjunction with foreign direct investments, the Myanmar Navy looks poised to emerge from the shadows to become a significant force that is worth a close watch in the coming future.

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