

***Burma and Japan Since 1940: From ‘Co-Prosperity’ to ‘Quiet Dialogue’.* By Donald M. Seekins. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007. Softcover: 181pp.**

This book examines the bilateral relationship between Burma/Myanmar and Japan since 1940, or rather, the onset of World War II. The book itself is divided into three major sections that chronologically fit the three main periods that Seekins thinks marks major policy shifts in the relationship. The first period spans from 1941 to 1945 and takes into account World War II and the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia; the second period from 1954 to 1988 when the bilateral relationship was primarily economic in nature, underpinned by Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA); and finally, from 1988 onwards. Readers familiar with political developments in Myanmar will realize the importance of 1988 in the country’s political calendar. That year marked the collapse of the Burma Socialist Party Programme (BSPP) government that came into power in 1962 following the military coup led by General Ne Win. It should be noted at the outset that Seekins makes it clear that Japan has initiated the changes in the relationship — an unsurprising observation given the disproportionate endowments of power and prosperity between the two countries.

In the first chapter, Seekins begins by outlining what life was like in colonial Burma under British rule. He notes the variegated nature of the cultural life in the urban areas and compares it to Furnivall’s description of “plural societies” where there is public disengagement from civic behaviour and the self-government that the British sought to initiate. There existed a measure of rational tolerance while mutual suspicions and anxieties between the different communities were rife. He then goes on to document how some of the liberal immigration policies introduced by the British for Indians and Chinese led to open conflict, especially between locals and Indians. Another important structural feature of colonization that he draws our attention to was the British division of Burma into the lowland areas or “Burma Proper” and the “Frontier Areas” that were inhabited by hill tribes.

The Japanese invasion and occupation led to a number of important developments. Among these, Seekins highlights the Burmese nascent conception of a post-colonial state, albeit the conception was not necessarily a holistic one involving all the different peoples. Secondly, the importation of a large quantity of weapons into the

country, both by the Allies and the Japanese, led to an early and inseparable linkage between arms and political power (p. 15). The chapter also spells out in detail how the Burmese freedom fighters who sought Chinese training to defeat the British were instead trained by the Japanese and became useful allies to the Japanese during the invasion and subsequent occupation. The group that trained the Burmese “Thirty Comrades”, the *Minami Kikan*, played an extremely active role in maintaining a very positive bilateral relationship between the two countries after 1945. As well, there is discussion of how during and immediately after the war, indiscriminate killings of ethnic minorities became important markers for some of the communities in their perceptions of each other.

The second chapter explores Burmese and Japanese war narratives. In the case of the former, Seekins highlights how the narrative has been captured by the *tatmadaw* (the Burmese armed forces) after 1988 as an episode when the army united in defence of the country from imperialism after defeating the British. The theme is essentially one of unity and patriotic fulfillment of the higher goal of keeping the country safe from foreign domination. As for the Japanese variant of the narrative, the emphasis is on bravado in the face of difficult situations and conflict, living in harmony with the Burmese prior to the British counter-offensive, and the warmth of the Burmese in helping Japanese soldiers who were caught near the Thai-Burmese border area. Seekins observes how the narrative, which bears little correlation to historical reality, is meant to be a story about “self” rather than the “other” (p. 51). Such popular perceptions and the linkage provided by the *Minami Kikan* led in turn to the evolution of a special relationship between the two countries from the 1950s.

Chapter three of the book explores the post-war relationship. The emphasis here is on the overwhelmingly economic nature of the relationship, the Burmese supply of rice to Japan in the 1950s and how war reparations were paid in the form of ODA. Aid projects typically tended to be large infrastructure projects that were concentrated in the lowland areas. Additionally, Seekins notes that there was little concern for the real needs of the country and that the aid and its expenditure in turn were controlled by a small group of bureaucrats, businessmen and lobbyists with little administrative or political oversight (pp. 72–3).

Chapter four examines Japan’s response to the post-1988 situation in Myanmar. The emphasis is on how Japan sought a middle path that was in between the reactionary attitude of Western countries

and the uncritical attitude of the ASEAN countries. The failure of the military government to win or honour the outcome of the 1990 election again made it difficult for Japan to pursue its quiet diplomacy. And the mood among younger Burmese military officers was apparently less friendly towards Japan. Seekins also draws the readers' attention to the cult-like standing of Aung San Suu Kyi and how her release in 1995 led to a resumption of Japanese ODA.

Seekins assesses the Japanese policy towards Myanmar in chapter five. He notes to what he calls the ambiguities of Japan's quiet diplomacy, alerting readers to ODA expenditure after 1990 and the importance of what he calls the boomerang economy for Japan — how ODA benefits specific Japanese companies and individuals. He clearly thinks that Japanese quiet dialogue is not subjected to political or human rights considerations and is therefore morally wanting. The brief concluding chapter draws attention to the power equation in Myanmar with an overwhelming military and an emasculated opposition and civil society, the increased importance of China in sustaining the military junta, the inability of economic inducements to invoke changes in the country and the ability of the military junta to remain united and absorb some changes at the upper echelons of power.

On balance, the book is a competent survey of bilateral relations between Japan and Myanmar. It draws on a number of different narratives to piece a complex picture. Yet, there is little that is not already documented that is brought to bear in the discourse. The author's tendency to sometimes move forwards and backwards in time could also have been smoothed. And parts of chapter five could really have fitted well into chapter four or the two chapters could have been collapsed.

In September 2007 Myanmar witnessed another painful episode of violence. The death of a Japanese photographer in Yangon has made it much more difficult this time around for Japan to continue with quiet diplomacy as usual. Japanese aid was suspended and a travel advisory against travel to Burma was also issued.

NARAYANAN GANESAN is Professor at the Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima City University, Japan.