



HAL
open science

[compte-rendu] Renaud Egreteau. Wooing the Generals:
India's New Burma Policy

Jacques Leider

► To cite this version:

Jacques Leider. [compte-rendu] Renaud Egreteau. Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy. 2005, Aséanie 15. pp. 177-181. hal-03629427

HAL Id: hal-03629427

<https://hal.science/hal-03629427>

Submitted on 4 Apr 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Renaud Egreteau. *Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy*

Jacques P. Leider

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Leider Jacques P. Renaud Egreteau. *Wooing the Generals: India's New Burma Policy*. In: *Aséanie* 15, 2005. pp. 177-181;

https://www.persee.fr/doc/asean_0859-9009_2005_num_15_1_1856

Fichier pdf généré le 05/04/2018

le coup de 1962 marquait le triomphe d'une institution centralisée, bureaucratisée et fonctionnelle sur une structure gouvernementale faible, inefficace et divisée. L'auteur l'illustre en rappelant que "many of the tools of army building were the administrative tools of state building": enseignement du birman, livraisons de provisions à la population, ou encore paiement de salaires aux fonctionnaires (p. 179). Contrairement à d'autres pays en Asie du Sud-Est, la résolution des tensions sociales et politiques nées avec l'accès à l'indépendance n'aboutit pas à un compromis, mais à la création de "vainqueurs et perdants, de gouvernants et gouvernés, de citoyens et ennemis" (p. 202).

L'ouvrage se termine avec un épilogue qui, après avoir très brièvement évoqué la période de 1962 à 1988, offre une analyse magistrale du rôle joué par l'armée depuis 1988. Ces quelques pages qu'on s'abstiendra de résumer ici, offrent des vues perspicaces et éclairantes et on se doit d'en recommander ardemment la lecture à tous ceux qui se lassent des commentaires manichéens de la presse

internationale sur la situation actuelle en Birmanie.

Making Enemies dispose de bonnes cartes, d'un index bien ventilé et d'un excellent appareil de notes qui sont toutefois compilées à la fin de l'ouvrage. Pour le grand bonheur des spécialistes, toutes les références à des ouvrages en birman sont données en écriture birmane. C'est rarissime et cela mérite d'être signalé; il y a donc une chance de clairement identifier les documents si on veut les consulter. On s'étonne en revanche que l'ouvrage ne comporte pas de bibliographie.

Making Enemies est un *must* pour les spécialistes de l'histoire contemporaine qui s'intéressent au développement de régimes autoritaires. Bien plus que le simple "tentative attempt to understand the internal dynamics of a military" que l'auteur nous annonce avec modestie en préface (p. xv), cet ouvrage est le bilan d'une recherche qui approfondit notablement notre connaissance de l'histoire contemporaine birmane.

Jacques P. Leider

*Making
Enemies
War...*

Renaud Egreteau

*Wooing the Generals :
India's New Burma Policy*

2003, Delhi, AuthorsPress / Centre de
Sciences Humaines, 234 p.

During the last fifteen years, the United States and the European Union have pursued a policy of economic and political isolation of Myanmar trying to undermine the military regime and cripple its socio-economic basis.

Renaud Egreteau's book that deals with India's recent change of policy towards Myanmar, shows that from a regional point of view, this policy of diplomatic isolation has been unsuccessful (p. 106). Myanmar's leaders can firmly count on China's support, the country entered the ASEAN club in 1997, and the regime currently enjoys rather cordial relations with both India and Bangladesh, two of its direct neighbours.

In the geo-strategic context of the Indian Ocean, it is India's pro-active involvement with Myanmar's leadership over the last ten years that has attracted particular attention. It emerged with the

Wooing
the
generals

BJP-led government in the early 1990s and is now continued by the Congress-led administration¹. There are two competing though complementary interpretations of India's recent policy towards Myanmar. One emphasises India's domestic policy issues in the North-East, the other focuses on India's rivalry with China. According to the first view, India wants to solve economic and political problems in some of its north-eastern territories by opening up the borders with Myanmar so as to stimulate trade and economic growth². The second view holds that, as China has gained a critical access to the Indian Ocean through its Myanmar ally (radar stations on the Coco islands, deep-sea port of Kyauk Phyu/Rakhine), India needs to counter this Chinese strategic advance.

Egreteau's timely publication outlines current wisdom on a number of geopolitical issues of the area and provides many informative data. It pays great attention to the trans-border interactions between Myanmar and India's north-eastern territories, but in its wider analysis, it is mostly concerned with the impact of China's Asian foreign policy on India's diplomacy. Generally speaking, Egreteau is strong on contemporary international relations and the major political and economic issues it purports to discuss, but often weak in portraying the cultural and historical background and the connections with the inner political issues of Burma. Interestingly, it highlights a big difference between the foreign policy towards Myanmar by one and the other: China's policy has been of remarkable clearness while there remain many ambiguities in India's diplomacy.

The book is divided into four parts. The first one presents a historical and geo-strategic background; the second

part is concerned with the "stakes involved", detailing India's problems in the North-East, the Chinese military and economic presence in Myanmar and India's "Look East Policy"; the third part explains India's policy, strategy and political options towards Myanmar; the final part, presented as a kind of outlook ("Problems and Prospects") asks the question if it is China rather than India that should feel cordoned in an international context and if the Burmese military will be able to master the diplomatic game.

The work is based on extensive readings of the press, interviews by the author and field work done in India, China and Southeast Asia. The second and third parts where the author gives a descriptive account of complex issues and recent developments make great reading. Much information from Indian sources that the reader will glean here could not be easily assembled, say, by anybody based in Southeast Asia. Readers interested mainly in Myanmar affairs will be impressed by the array of articles written in India that pertain to hot issues concerning Myanmar's domestic and international affairs. On the other hand, this reviewer became particularly aware that India's press also seems to produce a lot of distorted information on Myanmar.

1. A continuity correctly foreseen by *The Hindu* in November 2000, as quoted by Egreteau p. 142.

2. The "domestic policy interpretation" was recently presented to an audience of international Burma scholars by Marie Lall (London) at the *Golden Jubilee Conference of the Myanmar Historical Commission* (Yangon, 12-14 January 2005). See also Egreteau p. 108 on the Kunming Initiative.

After a severe repression of opposition groups after September 1988, the military government of Myanmar (SLORC) organised national elections in 1990 but did not respect the victory of the opposition. After 26 years of wilful isolation between 1962 and 1988, Burma then converted, unwillingly, into an international pariah state. China after the Tian-an-men massacre was temporarily in a similar situation, and it is not surprising that the international front of rejection brought the two countries further together. The chapter on China's presence in Myanmar in the first part shows how China became ever more involved in Myanmar's trade, monopolizing for example, the import trade in small and household goods, in major infrastructure works of national interest, and in a vast, often commented, programme of rearmament of Burma's military forces. These ever tighter relations were vital for Burma's men in power and they were above all advantageous for China notwithstanding growing problems of drug consumption, HIV and prostitution due to the links between Myanmar's drug producing Shan State and China's frontier province of Yunnan (p. 81-87). Here we are: the massive human and economic Chinese presence raises critical questions regarding its political, economic and cultural impact on Myanmar. In his conclusion, the author says that China's policy has paid off, but he seems confident about Myanmar's ability to balance its relations with both China and India, saying that "it is hardly likely that in the future Myanmar would become a veritable pawn in the hands of China" (p. 203). Nonetheless, he thinks – and in his appreciation this reviewer would agree with Egreteau – that the military regime is "not yet capable of [...] making the most of its crucial geostrategic position in the manner it wishes" (p. 212).

Should the Indians then be afraid of China's advance towards the Indian Ocean? Not really, we are led to believe. There is no serious conflict potential as "political disputes are too small" (p. 180). Egreteau puts indeed "the theory of encirclement of India by China" into the chapter of "Indian fantasies" arguing that it is rather China that "has every reason to consider itself encircled by foreign powers" (p. 205).

*Wooing
the
generals*

While the well publicised advance of China into Burma appeared as the obvious, but, as we learn, insufficient motive of the tremendous change in India's foreign policy after 1993, the complex issues involved in trans-border relations between North-East India and Myanmar have gained relatively less prominence. Ethnic conflicts, decades of fighting in Manipur, Assam and Nagaland for political autonomy, drug smuggling, kinship relations between ethnic groups living in India and Myanmar (for example the Mizo/Chin ethno-linguistic family) and arms dealings have made up for an explosive mix and a constant challenge for central governments. It is obvious that India can only win by getting into agreements with the government of Myanmar and by opening up perspectives of development for this area. So does Myanmar. But, as our author illustrates several times, India's policy has been ambiguous. It is important to recall that at the beginning of the 1990s India was a staunch supporter of Burma's political opposition and it never completely dropped its erstwhile stance (p. 135). Beyond some limited co-operation after 1995, notably in the field of anti-drug trafficking, projects of upgrading the trans-border roads and a basic awareness of common interests in the area, there is still little concrete results to show for India's new Burmese policy in this sensitive area of the North-East. Egreteau defines economic co-

Wooing
the
generals

operation between India and Myanmar as a “tool of choice” to further India’s “Look East Policy” towards Myanmar. While India, unlike China, does not have the capacity to invest massively in Myanmar, says Egreteau (p. 214), MOUs have nevertheless been signed in the fields of agriculture, science and technology. Infrastructure projects (railways, roads) have moreover been announced and India can take advantage of Myanmar’s desire to diversify its military procurement (uniforms, logistical equipment, training of officers in anti-guerrilla warfare) (p. 162-166).

While asking if “a democratic Burma would be a better option for India to deal with democracy issues in the North-East”, Egreteau concludes that right now, “the ambiguousness of its Burmese policy suits India to perfection” (p. 215).

Certainly Egreteau’s work succeeds in raising our awareness of regional hot spots and contributes to our understanding of “India’s New Burma Policy”. On the other hand, his book suffers from a not inconsiderable number of errors of appreciation and factual imprecision. These may not *all* be put on the account of the author alone, who ventured into some badly charted waters, but they should not be left unnoticed either.

It is obvious that Egreteau’s view of Burma/Myanmar is heavily tilted towards a colonial-period perception of Southeast Asia held by Indian intellectuals, a perception that may still be popular in India, but that does not suit an academic discourse that wants to reach out to Southeast Asians. It is a long time ago that Southeast Asians have stopped to look at India as the single motherland of their civilisation (p. 110). Noting that “Burma parted [after WW II] with the Indian sub-continent and turned toward a South-East Asia, etc.” the author omits that

Burma had always been a part of SEA rather than an extension of India (p. 26). It is paradoxical to recall, on the one hand, a cliché of Western tourist brochures that Burma was “closed-in and inward-looking for many centuries” (p. 47) and insist, on the other hand, on the “mobility” and “a real intersection of peoples and cultures” (p. 49 et 57).

Talking about Burma’s political development during the U Nu and Ne Win period, Egreteau’s summary accounts are of little use when they end in exaggerated or merely wrong statements. U Nu did not try to impose Buddhism on the “Muslim Arakanese” as he cunningly used the Muslims in Arakan to further his electoral chances (p. 29). It is occasionally difficult to follow the author’s thought, for example, when he writes that U Nu’s “pragmatic diplomacy” was “far removed from the ideological considerations of the Cold War (at least, at first)” (p. 30) or when Ne Win is credited with an “autarchic diplomacy” and his policy defined as “exacerbated Jacobinism, based on Burmese ethnicity and a mystic Buddhism”. Was there (or not) a difference between what is called U Nu’s “policy of systematic cultural assimilation” (p. 29) and Ne Win’s “new regime” that “truly intended to ‘Burmanise’ the country’s society”?

The representation of the situation of the Muslims in Arakan has, as far as this reviewer can judge, suffered from distorted information found in Indian or other press media. There is no evidence to state that “the enmity between Muslims and Buddhists/Hindus in Burma is ancient” (p. 114). True, there are extremist Rakhine Buddhists, but there are for sure no “Buddhist national movements” in Arakan that would be “largely supported and armed by the junta”. There were also no “large-scale massacres” perpetrated by Arakanese Buddhists. Only a tiny minority of

the so called Rohingya may be called "islamised Arakanese", most of them are originally Chittagonian Bengalis that have immigrated and settled in Arakan during the colonial period. To state that the majority of the Arakanese would have been "Buddhists for over two millennia" is what Arakanese Buddhists would make us believe (p. 58), but it is not an historical truth as the so called Arakanese did probably not migrate to Arakan before the 9th century AD. A surprising lack of historical awareness is also found in the characterization of Bodhgaya as "the *new* Mecca of Burmese Buddhists" or when the hair-raising defeats of the Chinese armies in Burma in the 18th century are brushed away as "a few short clashes" (p. 78). These may be minor points of criticism, to a certain degree, but they make the reading of this book less enjoyable than it could be and they could be easily

amended. They do not distract from the fact that this is a valuable book that every reader interested in current political developments in the region will read with profit.

*Wooing
the
generals*

Any work on contemporary issues takes the risk of being fast challenged by new political realities. This book is no exception as Khin Nyunt, one of the main figures of the Myanmar military junta amply discussed in the last part of the book, was out of power less than a year after the publication of the book. As qualified writers on the area are relatively few, hopefully this will stimulate Egreteau to keep track of ongoing political affairs of the region that may result in further publications.

Jacques P. Leider

Mary S. Zurbuchen (ed.)
*Begining to remember
The Past
in Indonesian Present*

2005, Singapore - Washington,
Singapore University Press -
University of Washington Press,
xviii + 376 p.

L'ouvrage que nous propose Mary Zurbuchen est le fruit d'un colloque intitulé "History and Memory in Contemporary Indonesia" qui s'est tenu en avril 2001 à l'University of California. La publication est ainsi plus de trois années postérieure à l'événement, mais elle est d'une très bonne tenue technique et tous les textes qui la composent ont été soigneusement corrigés et mis en langue. L'ensemble est plaisant et agréable à lire.

L'entreprise était d'autant plus ambitieuse que les contributions sont nombreuses (quinze au total), mais surtout qu'elles traitent la mémoire sous des angles très différents. Le livre s'ouvre par l'exégèse de textes littéraires ou de démarches artistiques. On retrouve là un article sur l'itinéraire politique du *dalang* (marionnettiste) Ki Tristuti, un autre sur la vision de l'histoire portée par les nouvelles et les romans en malais: deux autres encore sur la pièce *Kali* du célèbre journaliste et essayiste Goenawan Mohamad (dont sa présentation par son auteur).

Ici, comme dans l'ensemble de l'ouvrage, les époques et les angles s'entrecroisent. Certains textes constituent des témoignages vécus, d'autres des analyses savantes. Il est question de l'Ordre ancien de Soekarno (assez peu), de l'Ordre nouveau de Suharto (bien davantage), mais aussi, à la marge, de