

CHAPTER III

POLITICO-MILITARY SECURITY AND CAPITAL RELOCATION TO PYINMANA NAYPYIDAW

After independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Burma was governed under a parliamentary democratic system under U Nu's administration. The new political system was not relevant with the foundation of Burmese society and civil wars with ethnic groups broke out and expanded throughout the country. In March 1962, the military, led by General Ne Win, staged a coup against the civilian government and took control of the country by establishing "the Burmese Way to Socialism" in national politics.

For 26 years, Burma was under authoritarian rule and isolated from the outside world. The people suffered from economic mismanagement by the military government and a democratic uprising finally took place in 1988. Ne Win's regime was destroyed but the military remained in power through the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The new military junta maintained control by massacring demonstrators, suppressing ethnic rebellions and refusing to transfer power to Aung San Suu Kyi after her landslide victory in a general election. In 1997, the military junta changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and has administrated the country until now.

"The military is the most cohesive organization within the country; it occupies that position not only because of its taut command system, but also because since attaining power in 1962, it has consciously prevented the rise of any organization that it could not control or which was deemed a potential rival for any degree of autonomous power."¹ Significantly, political and military security is the main concern of the current regime and the Union of Myanmar. The ruling junta has continuously proclaimed

¹ Quoted in David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, Georgetown University Press, D.C., 2001, p. 69.

publicly that their three main national causes are non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of national sovereignty.² Moreover, the current military regime is very paranoid about internal and external security threats. It has also determined the people's desire in four aspects comprising opposition to those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, and holding negative views, opposition to those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation, opposition to foreign nations interfering in the internal affairs of the State, and crushing all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.³

Even though the military regime is in a strong position, the Union of Myanmar is considered as a weak state because of turbulent ethnic insurgencies and political disintegration and fragmentation inside the state. Thus, "the SLORC/SPDC has attempted to centralize political, administrative and military power in Yangon and used the military chain-of-command to construct a government that took stability and order as its highest priority."⁴ Importantly, the ruling junta strongly believes that a much stronger Tatmadaw (army) and the expansion of military power give the SPDC greater means to consolidate its political power and exercise continued control over the country.

In this respect, if there are significant areas in which the government does not exercise effective control, the establishment of a new centre of command and control to that position is strategically necessary and important. In the same way, if the location of the old capital is not appropriate for political centrality and has heavily been threatened by internal and external dangers, capital relocation to the core area with more geopolitical importance is strategically makes sense from the point of view of the government. In terms of political and military security, there are three main strategic threats about the current capital relocation from Yangon to Pyinmana.

² Ministry of Information, Myanmar Today, May 2001, Volume 4, No. 2, p. 2.

³ Ibid, p. 8.

⁴ Mary P. Callahan, *Cracks in the Edifice? Military-Society Relations in Burma since 1988*, Burma/Myanmar: Strong Regime Weak State? Crawford House Publishing Adelaide, Australia, 2001, p. 22.

3.1 The Threats from Political Turmoil and Popular-Uprisings

Like ancient monarchs, Myanmar's military leaders maintain traditional concepts and believe that power is finite and limited. "If power is considered finite and yet its origins are related to religious concepts and residual traditional attitudes, then the sharing of power, its delegation or devolution on an individual or institutional basis or from central to local governments, becomes far more problematic than in societies with a view of power as infinite, no matter how unconscious these concepts may be in either society. Under such conditions, and related to earlier religious beliefs, power thus becomes highly personalized. Although such power was originally centered on the monarch, it has an important influence on contemporary leaders."⁵

The sharing and distribution of power to other political organs, particularly democratic parties and ethnic groups will bring the decline of the military regime and thus the concept of power as infinite from globalization and democratization may bring the collapse to the Union of Myanmar. Moreover, the junta also believes that power is concentric and maintaining absolute power in the center is essential for a strong regime and political stability. As a result, the concept of centrality is perceived as the core of military and political power. If the centre is dramatically threatened and fragmented, the ruling government will feel insecure in its finite power and will try its best to regain its absolute power.

"The military believes that it is the only present and future institution capable of keeping Myanmar united and that pluralism is destructive of national unity. This assumption is true at present because the military has effectively destroyed every other institution that might have played a unifying role. It will be true in the future insofar as the military prevents the rise of pluralism and the growth of civil society."⁶ In SPDC's conception, the security of the state, regime, and the military are conflated. A threat to any one institution is seen as a threat to all. ... In summary, the values included under

⁵ Quoted in David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, p. 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.291.

the label of security are the unity of the military and its domestic political role; domestic order and stability; national unity; and the territorial integrity of the state.”⁷

The military junta wants to stay in power for eternity. It is not only for Myanmar’s security, but also for strong regime and the military’s political interests. “The Tatmadaw has effectively crushed all internal articulate opposition to its political and economic power, arrested many opposition leaders, destroyed much of the political structure of the NLD (National League for Democracy), and prevented the development of any autonomous institutions.”⁸ SPDC has constantly viewed Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic uprising as a threat to internal politics and its finite power. The junta has never trusted the NLD and wants to exclude democratic movements and civil society from national politics. The current junta strongly believes that a military regime is the most suitable political system for Myanmar, and that democratization and the NLD will make power fragmented and infinite and will totally destroy the Union of Myanmar.

In these circumstances, a capital which is considered as the centre of power plays an important role in forming and structuring SPDC’s political direction. Yangon, situated on the coast for an outward-looking economic orientation, can not function as the symbol of centralization in the 21st century. It has continuously been influenced by waves of westernization and democratization via overseas trade and foreign influence which led to the decline of its traditional centrality and dominance. The influences of pluralism, civil society and democratic movements have constantly developed in Yangon even though the ruling government has tried to control the situation by deploying its forces in strategic locations throughout the city.

In terms of political history, Yangon has been a symbol of political struggle and power competition between state and civil society for more than five decades. In the past, Yangon was the site of independence movements during the British colonial period that vested it with a tradition of “revolutionary nationalism”, a durable legacy that the post-1988 military regime has found difficult to neutralize. The massive popular

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

demonstrations of 1988, which caused the collapse of the military regime of General Ne Win, came exactly half a century after the demonstrations of 1938-39 against the British led by students, the nationalist Thakin Party, and politicized workers.⁹

During both periods, the Shwedagon pagoda functioned not only as a Buddhist holy site, but also as a public space for political activism. University students established “strike centers” around the Shwedagon during the colonial period. Aung San Suu Kyi made an important speech on the west slope of the pagoda hill on 26 August 1988, in which she described the upheavals of that year as “the second struggle for national independence”.¹⁰

In fact, there were antecedents to the popular uprising of 1988: most notably, in 1974 when mid-year labor strikes, caused by shortages of rice and other necessities, spread from Mandalay and Magwe Divisions to Yangon. In the capital, strikers closed down the railway works at Insein and 42 other factories, and in some cases took government officials as hostages. Some of the strikers demanded an end to the Ne Win regime and its socialist party-state, which provoked a harsh response: the army killed 22 workers, and imprisoned many more. According to one eyewitness, the strikes represented the first genuine mass movement against a state that claimed to embody and represent the interests of the people. In the words of the eyewitness, “Myanmar, especially the centre, the seat of power, between 1974 and 1976 was explicitly ungovernable.”¹¹

“Another example is the U Thant incident of December 1974. The uprising began as a student-centered action, with their capture of the coffin containing the remains of United Nations Secretary General U Thant and its installation at the Rangoon University Convocation Hall. Not only students but also Buddhist monks and the general public came in large numbers to the campus to express their respect for a renowned national figure. But after student activists built a mausoleum for U Thant

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Speech to a Mass Rally at the Shwedagon Pagoda*, in Michael Aris, ed., *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 193.

¹¹ Donald M. Seekins, *The State and the City: Rangoon under Military Rule, 1958-2002*, p. 15.

inside Rangoon University, the riot police stormed the main campus on 11 December. The authorities seized U Thant's coffin and buried him at a secure site near the Shwedagon. The number of fatalities is unknown. The official figure was 18, but the actual figure from the campus takeover and subsequent unrest in the city may have been over a thousand."¹²

The 1988 upheaval is the most important political confrontation between the military government and the Burmese population inside Yangon. "Because the military-political elite has been largely external to the city since 1962, a central theme in Yangon's modern social and political history has been the conflict generated by the vertically imposed power of the militarized state, and attempts by the urban population to avoid or mitigate its consequences by exercising power horizontally."¹³

The eighteenth of September 1988--the bloody inauguration of the State Law and Order Restoration Council--witnessed the triumph of vertical over horizontal power. But in the general election of 27 May 1990, candidates backed by the opposition National League for Democracy won in most Yangon constituencies reflecting the victory of horizontal over vertical power. Thus Yangon has emerged as a place of struggle between the state and the people it rules.¹⁴

A democratic uprising occurred again in 1996 by number of university students at Rangoon Institute of Technology and Rangoon University. Although the student's activities were limited, they tried to work in parallel with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD by raising people's awareness and encouraging them to participate in simple acts of political defiance.¹⁵ Thus, the legacy of 1988 still remains in Yangon and provokes the political paranoia of the government. After the collapse of the Cold War, mass movements and civil society organizations have rapidly expanded with local events throughout the cosmopolitan cities in Southeast Asia. The SLORC/SPDC views Yangon as the centre of political turmoil and popular uprisings which has been heavily

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Christina Fink, *Living Silence Burma under Military Rule*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2001, p. 91.

influenced by the wave of globalization and democratization. The emergence of civil society movements and horizontal power has constantly threatened the vertical power exercised by the military regime and extended the network of public spaces which support political activities conducted by NLD and democratic movements throughout Yangon. Even though the ruling junta can still control democratic movements, the spirit of political struggle and silent power is still concentrated in Yangon. In this respect, The legacy of the 1988 uprising and the paranoia about an urban uprising by the extremely poor and ethnically diverse residents of Yangon against the junta have continuously influenced the military mentality. This has led the military junta to realize that the status of its absolute power in Yangon has changed from finite and compact to infinite and fragmented.

Additionally, from the late Cold War (1981-1991) to the present, the military regime has constantly faced non-traditional security issues, which are a new threat in the context of globalization and the current junta is very confused at transformation of the security environment because its traditional security perspective focuses on visible enemies and conventional warfare. Moreover, invisible enemies and non-state actors have gradually established complicated networks inside Yangon and the new security threats, especially bombings and terrorism have dramatically increased throughout the city.

On July, 10, 1989, a time bomb exploded at Yangon City Hall killing 3 persons and leaving 4 others wounded. Terrorist Ko Ko Naing was arrested in Kawkareik Township.¹⁶ It was believed by the government that the incident was caused by the dissatisfaction of demonstrators in 1988. On December, 25, 1996, the military government claimed that NLD and other terrorist groups jointly launched the cruelest atrocities. The Buddha Tooth Relic had been conveyed from the People's Republic of China and was being kept at Maha Pasana Cave of Kaba Aye hillock in Yangon for public homage. Taking advantage of public peace in a religious activity, unscrupulous persons planted a time bomb. As a result, 5 members of the security forces and pilgrims were killed and 17 wounded.¹⁷

¹⁶ Quoted in <http://mission.itu.int/MISSIONS/Myanmar/pressrelease/press%202006.htm>

¹⁷Ibid.

Security personnel found four time bombs in Yangon Railway Station during 26-27 June 2004. Fortunately, the explosions were caused by sound mines and there were no destruction or injuries.¹⁸ On 9 May, 2005, three bomb explosions hit busy shopping areas in Yangon. At least 11 people were killed and more than 150 people were injured in the blasts. The junta believes that ethnic insurgencies, democratic activists and former members of military intelligence, which had been destroyed by the government the previous year, are behind the bomb explosions.

From the examples above, Yangon is considered by the ruling government as a hub of terrorism and the current junta might feel insecure to have the centre of power at Yangon. Globalization has made power more disordered and fragmented and faced the current regime with a wave of non-traditional security threats both directly and indirectly. The junta perceives the threats occurring in Yangon as threats to the security of the state, regime and military and it is conceivable that the current leaders view military management of a new security situation inside Yangon is very difficult and complicated.

Under strategic pressure, the concept of traditional security has deeply affected the military mentality in managing and confronting complicated politico-security problems inside Yangon. If the leaders cannot control the fragmented power, they should totally destroy the old political network or in other terms, they should establish a new seat of power elsewhere to escape from the serious problems and to create a new stronghold which can provide effective control of finite power and political security.

Moving the capital from Yangon to Pyinmana reflects the use of traditional concepts to manage political turmoil, popular uprising and non-traditional security challenges. It is conceivable that the current regime believes that the establishment of a new command and control centre in a new geographical location will bring finite power

¹⁸ Press Conference on Bomb Blast, Unlicensed Vehicles and Damages Caused by Strong Earthquake, Myanmar Ministry of Information, 28 December 2004, Available from: http://www.mofa.gov.mm/declarations/press_29_dec_04.html

to a strong regime and Pinyinana is better than Yangon which has been deeply threatened by internal political fluctuation and complicated security problems.

3.2 The Threat from Ethnic Insurgencies

Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, with over 135 different ethnic groups, speaking over 100 different languages and dialects. The major ethnic groups include the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni (or Kayah), Mon, Rakhine (or Arakan), and Shan and are predominately located in border areas. "The impressive and unique diversity found in Burma has been a source of conflict throughout Burma's history."¹⁹

Before Burma achieved independence in 1948, there had been no political integration of the minority territories with the Burman areas. The indigenous peoples in Burma were politically autonomous before and during the time of British colonial rule. Under British colonization, ethnic differences became further amplified through the system of government in which Myanmar was administered as two separate territories: 'Ministerial Burma' areas predominantly Burman, and the 'Frontier Areas', where ethnic minorities lived. Ethnic minorities, principally the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, were preferred for recruitment into the colonial army.²⁰ The divide and rule policy has created divisions and fragmentations which carry on until this day.

The ruling military regime regards the ethnic minority groups with intense suspicion because of their lack of unity throughout the history of Burma. Ethnic groups are economically marginalized while their social, cultural, and religious rights are suppressed. Ethnic minorities consider themselves discriminated against and have openly accused the SPDC of a deliberate policy of "Burmanization". Many ethnic

¹⁹ Quoted in *Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics*, ICG, 7 May 2003.

²⁰ Smith, Martin, *Burma (Myanmar): Time for Change*, Minority Rights Group International, May 2002.

groups originally fought for independence and non-Burman armed ethnic groups have been fighting the military government for more than 50 years.²¹

“The ceasefire policy initiated by State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) Secretary One, Lt-General Khin Nyunt, has had profound effects on the armed opposition’s resistance struggle. Ceasefires have included agreements to end fighting, but with no political details.”²² In non-ceasefire areas, especially in the Karen, Karenni and Shan borderlands, there are still clashes and intensive government operations. In 2002, the only groups continuing armed struggle that have significant military strength are the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Shan State Army South (SSA South). These three groups have formed a new military alliance, including also some smaller groups, but their aims are largely defensive.²³

The SPDC military has engaged in counter-insurgency operations in areas controlled by the ethnic nationalist armies since the mid-1960s. The general population in ethnic areas has suffered gravely from government’s military operations. Millions of people have lost their homes and livelihood as numerous villages were forcibly relocated and scores of other civilians have been killed. “Since 1996 alone, more than one million people have reportedly been displaced by the forced relocation program launched by the SPDC in Karen, Karenni (Kayah) and Shan states.”²⁴

“The military junta believes that the minorities are inherently inferior (culturally/socially) and would split from Burman authority if given the chance. It also believes the minorities are distrustful of the Burman majority (including the military) and fear Burman domination (Burmanization). It equates Burman Buddhist culture with

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics*, ICG, 7 May 2003.

²⁴ Ibid.

the state and wants some form of central (Burman) control.”²⁵ Ethnic political struggle has been perceived by military leaders as a symbol of rebellion and disunity which must be suppressed by using only military force.

In these circumstances, moving the capital to Pyinmana is an attempt to control and stabilize chronically turbulent regions, especially in Karen, Kayah and Shan states. These three ethnic groups have strongly insisted on national independence and maintained military strongholds in their sphere of influence. The military government does not exercise strong control in those areas and moving the capital to a new location situated in a strategic position vis-à-vis frontier regions dominated by ethnic forces can support the government in a critical position to determine political and military strategy.

Pyinmana is situated near Shan, Karen and Karenni states and can function as a strategic springboard to attack and subjugate ethnic rebellions effectively, especially in both conventional and guerilla warfare. Although there are arguments that Pyinmana is located in a choke point and can be contained or attacked by ethnic armies, the military capability of the SPDC right now is far superior to those of ethnic forces and Pyinmana can play a major role as the forward defensive capital like ancient Toungoo in the Burmese context and Islamabad in present-day Pakistan. If the ruling government can establish a stronger military regime over these states, Tatmadaw’s sphere of influence will be very secure and spread over the whole country.

Most military leaders in SPDC retain a traditional security perspective of using force and power to subjugate ethnic rebellions directly. They are military hardliners and have never cared about human rights or democratization but in contrast, they care only about a strong regime and absolute power.²⁶

Interestingly, the ruling junta also believes in the traditional concept of power. “In the absence of the modern concept of rigid, demarcated borders, authority emanated in concentric circles radiating from the center - the capital, the palace, and ultimately the throne and its occupant. Power became weaker as the distance from its core grew and

²⁵ See in David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, p. 292.

²⁶ Author’s interview with ethnic military sources along the Thai-Myanmar border, August 2006.

could, and did, overlap in the peripheral areas with other waves of concentric power emanating from other, similar capitals of greater or lesser strength.”²⁷ If the minorities are considered to be on the geographic, social, and power periphery of Myanmar, then the Burman population becomes the center. At that center is a core, which is the military; it is also Burman, but an elite.²⁸ (Burmans who support the military regime).

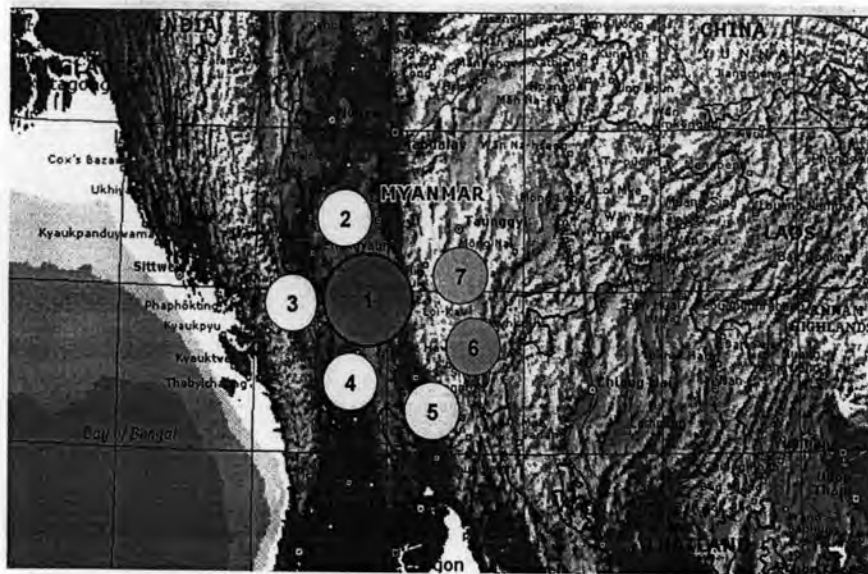
In this respect, Yangon is peripherally located from the Shan, Karen and Karenni power centers and its political control over those ethnic areas becomes weaker by distance. Transferring the capital to Pyinmana situated in the core area and very close to the ethnic political domains will bring more concentric power to the ruling junta. The strong regime and absolute power will pull other fragmented powers into the SPDC’s sphere of influence.

Moreover, diplomats and military experts have speculated that Pyinmana's central location will enable the government to better monitor the rebellious border regions.²⁹ General Sarki of the Karen National Union (KNU) also explained that “The Burma's army is quite decentralized anyway, and it is spread throughout Myanmar. Now they want to concentrate in Middle Burma and radiate from this new military operation centre toward every direction and furthermore, the new capital is a place suitable for guerilla warfare against ethnic minority groups”.

²⁷ Quoted in David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, p. 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

²⁹ Maung Chan, *Burma Capital Moves to Pyinmana, WHY?*, 11 November 2005, Available from: <http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/english/2005/11/200511110401.shtml>



Map 11: Geopolitics of Pinyinana and Ethnic Insurgencies

Symbol 1 = Pinyinana 2 = Mandalay Division 3 = Magway Division 4 = Bago Division
5 = Karen State 6 = Kayah State 7 = Shan State

Adapted from Microsoft Encarta Premium 2006 (DVD)

After relocating its strategic capital to Pinyinana Naypyidaw, SPDC troops have been constructing garrisons and planting landmines within Taungoo District, east of the new capital in central Burma, allegedly for the security of the capital. Thandaung and Htantapin regions within Taungoo District, mainly populated by Karen nationals, are said to be only 8 kilometers away from the new capital. According to KNU Information and organizing official David Takabaw, the army planted landmines deliberately so that villagers could not go to their farms and internally displaced people (IDP) could not move around or flee from their hiding places. Takabaw also admitted that the junta is trying to stop the movement of the KNU fighters by clearing the grassroot support.³⁰ In these circumstances, the new capital will function as a strategic springboard to suppress and subjugate ethnic rebellions, particularly the KNU, the strongest ethnic force from the SPDC's perspectives.

³⁰ Burma Junta Plants More Landmines to 'Protect' New Capital, 1 February 2006, Available from: www.irrawaddy.org.



Picture 3 Karen local people in Toungoo District
Not far from Pyinmana



Picture 4 Karen guerrillas in Kayin state

Source: www.prayforburma.org/.../toungoo%20IDPs.jpg

Source: Microsoft Encarta Premium 2006

After the establishment of a new capital, many Karen people have been violently suppressed by government's troops and forcibly relocated from their original communities near the eastern border to military camps for more effective command and control.³¹ Not only the Karen, but also the Shan and Karenni have been strongly attacked by government's troops.³² Interestingly, many members of these three ethnic groups have been relocated to military camps near the periphery of Pyinmana such as Toungoo District in Kayin state and many garrisons in the Shan plateau.³³ They are forced to learn Burmese history, language and culture instead of their ethnic identity. The policy of Burmanization focusing on mono-ethnicity has been adopted to establish Burmese domination over ethnic minority groups.

Pyinmana is also located on the southern boundary of Mandalay division, not far from Magway and Bago divisions where there are populations of ethnic Burmese. Establishing a new capital in the dry zone close to turbulent ethnic areas allows the geopolitical extension of Burman influence over other political organs in the Irrawaddy Plain, Sittang Basin and Salween Valley (Shan, Kayin and Kayah states, respectively). The SPDC will establish concentric power in that location which is a point of overlapping between Burman and ethnic areas of political power. Moreover, it is also

³¹ Author's interview with Karen people along Thai-Myanmar border, August 2006.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

conceivable that the ruling junta wants to establish a new command centre to control political, military and economic movements of the Wa and Kokang ethnic groups which have continuously expanded their sphere of influence over the Shan Plateau and Salween Valley through the illegal narcotic trade.³⁴ Thus, Pyinmana will function as a military strategic capital to attack, subjugate and control ethnic rebellions effectively. The new capital is a garrison city and will function as a great magnet to pull various ethnic groups into the process of Burmanization.

3.3 The Threat from U.S. Maritime Invasion

“Burma’s leaders have always been conscious and appreciative of external sensitivities to defense and security issues and have constantly taken great pains to avoid situations which would give the slightest excuse for foreign aggression or intervention in domestic affairs.”³⁵ The ruling junta has perceived the ‘foreign threat’ as neo-colonialist tendencies in the actions of major Western powers. It may have been half a century since the British left Burma, but events such as the crossing of CIA-backed Kuomintang forces into Northeast Burma during China’s civil war have kept the distrust alive.³⁶

The U.S. is seen as the most powerful external military threat to Myanmar’s security system. “The military regards the United States as highly significant because of its international influence but distrusts the U.S., believing that if sufficiently provoked, it might intervene militarily in Burma. The military also believes that the United States wants a different regime in Myanmar.”³⁷ Fear of a U.S. maritime invasion firstly arose from the democratic uprising in 1988. “It was during this period that reports of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Bay of Bengal for evacuations gave rise to military fears of a U.S.

³⁴ Author’s interview with Pornpimol Trichote, Asian Institution, Chulalongkorn University, April 2007.

³⁵ Quoted in Mohan Malik, *Burma’s Role in Regional Security*, Burma/Myanmar, Strong Regime Weak State?, Crawford House Publishing Adelaide, Australia, 2001, p.263.

³⁶ Quoted in Morten B. Pedersen, *International Policy on Burma: Coercion, Persuasion, or Cooperation? Assessing The Claims*, p.223.

³⁷ Quoted in David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, P. 293.

intervention into the political process-fears that have constantly resurfaced and have been given greater credence after Haiti and Kosovo.”³⁸ Improved maritime surveillance capabilities seem to have been a high priority for the Rangoon regime since it was surprised by a U.S. fleet in Burmese waters in 1988.³⁹

Military paranoia grew serious when George W. Bush took a position as the new American president and condemned Myanmar as an ‘Absurd of Tyranny’ like Iran and North Korea. He has promoted human rights and democratization in Myanmar by the Burmese Freedom and Democratic Act approved by the Congress in 2003.⁴⁰ The new law aims to provide political authority to President Bush to build democracy and civil society in Myanmar and approves a budget for a Myanmar reconstruction program after the collapse of current military regime.⁴¹ This new act clearly defines the American government’s target of sanctioning the Myanmar economy and establishing a new democratic system to replace the military regime. More interestingly, the pattern of language is very similar to the operation in Iraq for demolishing Saddam’s regime and it openly recognizes Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD as the representatives of the Burmese people.⁴²

Because of the aggressive American policy towards Myanmar and military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan by deploying aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf during 2001 to 2004, Senior General Than Shwe may feel insecure to have a centre of power in coastal Yangon which is easily attacked by U.S. powerful naval forces. Most military leaders believe that external threats are deeply connected with internal threats and the current regime may be destroyed by a U.S. sea-borne invasion. The US remains

³⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁹ Andrew Selth, *Burma's Maritime Strategy*, Maritime Strategies in Asia, Jurgen Schwarz, Wilfreind A. Herrmann and Hans-Frank Seller, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2002, p. 308.

⁴⁰ Boontiem Playchompoo, *Myanmar: History, Civilization and International Relations*, Odienstore, Bangkok, 2006, p. 257.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.258.

⁴² Ibid.

a strong critic of the junta, and it is believed a large number of Burmese under the repressive regime would welcome Iraq-style “liberation” by US forces.⁴³ Under strategic pressure, moving the capital to continental Pinyinmana is very important to protect the regime from foreign invasion.

Andrew Selth, a specialist in Myanmar security, reasons that relocating inland does not put the military out of reach of advanced missiles and aircraft of its perceived primary threat - the United States. President George W Bush's administration has recently referred to Myanmar as an “outpost of tyranny”, though few security experts reckon the US would ever attack, because of China's heavy influence in Myanmar. But “if the external threat was seen as real and imminent, the regime may well choose to consolidate its military strength in central (Myanmar), with a view to a conventional defense of the (Myanmar) heartland.”⁴⁴ In this regard relocating the capital to Pinyinmana in central Myanmar strategically makes sense.

In terms of military geography, moving the capital to the interior surrounded by mountainous areas and far from the sea is sometimes employed by the military during times of strategic crisis. For example, one of the reasons of Turkish capital relocation led by Atatürk from coastal Istanbul to continental Ankara is to protect the country from maritime invasion from the Black Sea after World War I and Field Marshal Phibulsongkram established the inland military capital at Lopburi (north of Bangkok) to protect Thailand from maritime threats during World War II. Significantly, this strategy can increase defensive space to resist and counterattack the enemy by guerilla warfare.⁴⁵

Although Pinyinmana can be attacked by the American air force, more or less, it is better than having the capital in Yangon which can be easily seized by the enemy.⁴⁶ In a real operation, if the U.S. wanted to overthrow the SPDC leaders, it would have to send

⁴³ *Pinyinmana on Hold, the Irrawaddy*, October 2005, Vol. 13 No. 10, p. 4.

⁴⁴ See Andrew Selth's perspective in, *Inside Myanmar's secret capital (wrote by Clive Parker)*, 30 October, 2006, Available from: http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HJ28Ae01.html

⁴⁵ Author's interview with military officers from Royal Thai Army and Navy. January 2007.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

infantry or special troops to invade Myanmar in continental landscape. Thus, moving the capital to Pyinmana can increase the military difficulties in subjugating the ruling government in a secure defensive stronghold.⁴⁷

Shifting the capital to Pyinmana is a grand strategy of the army which represents the backbone of the armed forces, and comprises the largest number of personnel among the three services. Its growth over the course of more than a decade has been effected by the introduction of new units such as light infantry divisions, and expanded armored divisions and artillery forces.⁴⁸ The expansion in size of the navy and the air force in Myanmar were not significant compared to that of the army because of their relatively small size. In this respect, military leaders in SPDC are confident in the capability of their army and distrust the effectiveness of their navy when the state is under attack by the enemy from the sea. Moving the capital to Pyinmana in deeper mountainous regions can be interpreted as the ruling junta's choice to consolidate army strength in a continental landscape to fight with a powerful maritime enemy.

Even though some experts argue that Myanmar is low on the list of American foreign policy concerns and the United States is expanding its hegemony over the Middle East and Central Asia and has paid little attention to Myanmar, a recent top-secret document obtained by The Irrawaddy reveals just how deeply the regime fears external interference, particularly from the US. "The document records the heightened concerns of top military leaders in Burma over the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. In it the generals show a marked preoccupation with the US military's state-of-the-art weaponry, and they assert that the country's operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have more to do with demonstrating US military might and impressing the world than pacifying rogue nations and combating terrorism."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Author's interview with Thai infantry. February 2007.

⁴⁸ Aung Saw, *A Growing Tatmadaw*, Irrawaddy, March 2006, Vol. 14 No.3, p. 23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

“Army commanders are repeatedly admonished to prepare their troops to be vigilant and to create alternative command posts in the event of invasion. A portion of the document also exhorts regional commanders to bolster their local defenses by stepping up training for fire brigades and organizing local war veteran associations. Some sources say the generals have already constructed anti-aircraft missile sites and underground tunnels in Pyinmana. Outside the country the move has been widely viewed as the paranoid action of a regime fearful of foreign invasion.”⁵⁰ Yangon is considered vulnerable to a sea-borne attack. Therefore, Pyinmana is safer and more secure capital than Yangon.

After the collapse of the Cold War, China’s strategic power in Southeast Asia has grown. Although the United States has little geopolitical interest in Myanmar, China has extensive economic, political and strategic influence on Myanmar. “China believes that a stable, friendly, pliant regime in Yangon is in its national interests, and it would support the present government in the face of induced change.”⁵¹ From geographical proximity, China views Myanmar as a strategic state in international politics and has continuously conducted a “Look South” Policy to dominate the Bay of Bengal for maritime hegemony by having Myanmar as the centre of its logistics and security system.

In these circumstances, it is conceivable that Chinese containment policy has been deployed again by the US and a strategic policy to intervene in Myanmar domestic affairs began to be important in order to reduce Chinese domination. As a result, the military leaders have come to realize Myanmar’s strategic significance in Southeast Asian politics and feel insecure to have the capital in Yangon. Moving the capital to Pyinmana is a slide into China’s embrace. China has a strong naval base in Myanmar’s Coco islands commanding some areas of the Bay of Bengal but it is far away from Yangon while other Chinese naval bases in Lower Burma are not strong enough to protect Yangon from a powerful American invasion. Relocating the capital to Pyinmana

⁵⁰ Quoted in Aung Lwin Oo, *Rangoon Moves Ministries to Pyinmana*, 7 November 2005, Available from: www.irrawaddy.org

⁵¹ Quoted in David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, p. 295.

puts the ruling government in a prominent position to receive military assistance from Chinese influence in Mandalay and the Shan plateau. There are connecting routes along Chinese border which can transport weapons from the frontier to Mandalay and the new capital.⁵² In addition, some sources say that Senior General Than Shwe proclaimed at Pinyinmana that “our army must be strong and can resist an undesirable invasion until our friend (China) comes to help and repress the enemy”.⁵³

At present, an American sea-borne invasion is possible from the government’s perspective even though the ruling junta has already relocated its capital to the interior. The United States officially put Burma’s issues to the UN Security Council and successfully got permission by the Council to intervene Myanmar military regime although China and Russia opposed in the first stage (it is believed that Russia has joined with China to oppose American hegemony in world politics and has supported Myanmar in military technology⁵⁴). US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Eric John explained on September 21, 2005 that Burma remains exceptionally repressive and is becoming even harsher in its treatment of its people.⁵⁵

The UN likewise expressed its concern that the transfer of government ministries to Pinyinmana would hinder their capacity to function effectively. The exasperation felt by diplomats, UN agencies, and aid organizations as a consequence of the Pinyinmana move will surely contribute to the growing international consensus about the instability of Burma’s military regime and the need for a considered response.⁵⁶

Even though Myanmar’s military power cannot compete or compare with that of the US, moving the capital to the interior is a reflection of traditional Burmese strategy

⁵² Author’s interview with ethnic people along Thai-Myanmar border. August 2006.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Author’s interview with senior military officer from Royal Thai Navy, January 2007.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Nanda Kyaw Thu, *Tyranny of the Absurd, Assessing the Implication of the Pinyinmana Move*, Available from: <http://www.burmaissues.org/En/Newsletter/BINews2006-01-01.html>

when confronted directly with western threats in the delta. Moreover, it is considered an important military strategy in the international context, especially moving the capital from coastal areas to the hinterland during a time of military crisis, for example, Pakistan (Karachi to Islamabad) and Thailand (relocation program from Bangkok to Phetchabun during the Phibulsongkram period). Therefore, capital relocation to Pyinmana is more or less better than having the capital in Yangon which can be easily accessed by American maritime invasion.

3.4 Conclusion

Politico-military security is significantly considered as the core of current regime which by nature pays special attention to absolute power, strong government and state sovereignty. Although internal threats such as democratic movements and ethnic insurgencies are the main driving force which has heavily influenced on government's strategy and military mentality, external threats, particularly the American sea-borne invasion and the influence of globalization have also played a crucial role. The concept of power as finite, traditional concepts of security, the root of internal conflicts with ethnic minorities and the influence of xenophobia have greatly impacted on the government's perception of threats and as a result, a capital which is a source of political power and a centre of military strategy should be moved to more central and controlled location.

Significantly, relocating the centre of command and control to Pyinmana Naypyidaw is a reflection of geostrategic and geopolitical thinking which is the main concept of military organization.⁵⁷ Military leaders pay much attention to space, location and landscape. If power in the capital is fragmented and disordered by internal and external threats, the leaders should leave the old capital and establish a new one in a high potential geographical position. In addition, because location is perceived as a symbol of power and security, the ruling government decided to relocate the seat of power from Yangon to a new geopolitical space which can provide a more concentric

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Thai military officers, February 2007.

power to the junta and can protect the regime from all the dangers. In this conception, Pyinmana is believed to be such a place.