

Myanmar & Japan: Building on Their Historic “Special Relationship”



Author Jillian Yorke

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Introduction

With its complex history, multiple ethnic groups, and current military junta-based government, Myanmar (Burma) is in a state of continued high tension marked by widespread censorship and imprisonment, and massive internal displacement. There has been a huge exodus from the country in recent years, with reported numbers of young people having left ranging from 300,000 to 500,000. In February, I participated in the Month of Action for Myanmar organized by worldwide Quakers, which aimed to increase awareness and understanding of the issues the country faces, and explore ways to alleviate them. This experience inspired me to delve deeper and look at ways to stabilize the political situation so as to achieve beneficial, broad-ranging exchanges between Japan and Myanmar, which already have strong ties.

Historical Relationship

Japan and Myanmar have long had a close relationship. Their connections date back to at least the 16th century, with evidence of samurai playing active roles in Burmese armies in the early 17th century. Kyaw Din, a Burmese engineer and athlete, travelled around Japan teaching football after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 and wrote football manuals. His student Shigemaru Takenokoshi played for the Japan national football team at the 1930 Far Eastern Championship Games. Kyaw Din was elected to the Japan Football Hall of Fame in 2007.

In 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, Japan's victory in the Battle of Tsushima showed that an Asian power could overcome a Western one, inspiring the Burmese anti-colonial movement. U Ottama, a central figure in the struggle for Burmese independence, taught Pali and Sanskrit at the Academy of Buddhist Science in Tokyo in 1907. Galon U Saw, a future prime minister of British Burma, and Nyi Pu, the first film actor in Burmese cinema, also visited Japan, in 1935. They studied the factories, military, film industry and education systems, and came to believe that Myanmar

could gain independence only with Japan's help.

Japan occupied Burma during World War II, from 1942 to 1945. The infamous Burma Railway (Tai-Men Rensetsu Tetsudo 泰緬連接鐵道 in Japanese), completed the rail link between Bangkok and Rangoon. An estimated 12,000-16,000 Allied POWs and 75,000-100,000 Asian forced laborers working on the railway died. The well-known 1957 film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, while largely fictional, used the construction of this railway as its historical background. *The Burmese Harp* (ビルマの豎琴, Biruma no Tategoto), a 1948 children's novel by Michio Takeyama, was the basis of two highly popular films by Kon Ichikawa. Although the original book had an anti-war focus, the films have been criticized for downplaying Japan's wartime responsibility. Approximately 150,000-190,000 Japanese soldiers died in Myanmar in World War II, including in campaigns, during retreat, and from disease and starvation. The Nippon Izokukai, a group for war-bereaved families, has just ended its 30 years of memorial services. On their final overseas trip in March, about 60 people visited Myanmar for memorial ceremonies and interaction with local children.

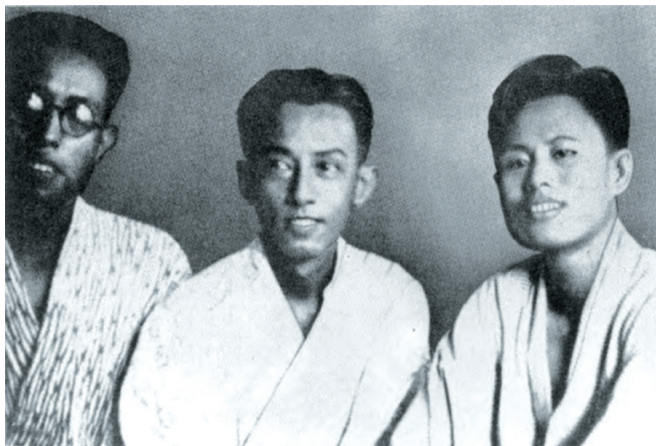
Aung San, known in Myanmar as the “Father of the Nation”, was minister of war in the Japanese-backed State of Burma led by Dr. Ba Maw, though he later switched sides. He was one of the “Thirty Comrades” trained and supported by Japan's Fumimaro Konoe government who led the struggle against British rule. Aung San's daughter, the popular and respected Nobel Peace laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, now 80, continues this activist tradition. She has a strong connection with Japan, including conducting research at



Photo: Author

Panorama shot of Bagan, site of about 2,200 ancient Buddhist structures

Photo: Public domain



Aung San (right) and his friends during military training in Japan

Kyoto University in 1986. She was the State Counsellor of Myanmar and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (and de facto leader of the country) from 2016 to 2021. When she met the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during her return visit to Japan in 2013, Abe said he supported reforms in Myanmar and would help the country to “build its future” (*BBC News*, April 18, 2013). She has been detained by the Myanmar junta for many years for her efforts to achieve greater democracy. *Letters from Burma*, a book of her essays published in English and Japanese in 1997, was featured serially in the *Mainichi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Daily News* newspapers for over a year.

Another famous Burmese politician was U Thant (1909-1974), who served as the third secretary-general of the United Nations from 1961 to 1971, the first non-Scandinavian to hold the post. During his tenure, he helped to defuse the Cuban missile crisis, ended an insurgency in Congo, and openly criticized US involvement in Vietnam. During World War II, U Thant took a moderate stance as neither passionate nationalist nor British loyalist.

The Postwar “Special Relationship”

According to *The Irrawaddy* (Oct. 5, 2018), one of Myanmar’s few independent news media, “Japan is one of the countries that has assisted Myanmar most consistently in nearly every sector from development to health to education since it achieved independence in 1948, and the countries continue to maintain warm relations.” In 1954, the Union of Burma and Japan signed a peace treaty, reached agreement on war reparations of US\$250 million, and established diplomatic relations. This was followed by substantial trade and technical cooperation, and Japan’s assistance with building urban infrastructure. In 1974, Burma joined the Asia Development Bank, in which Japan is a major shareholder. However, official Japanese ties with the government were weakened after the 8888 Uprising, a series of protests and riots throughout Myanmar in 1988, ending in a military coup. In 2007, Japanese photojournalist Kenji Nagai was shot dead in Yangon as soldiers opened fire on demonstrators in the

Saffron Revolution, led by monks. Civilian rule returned in 2011, but Japan condemned the violations of the human rights of the Rohingya people in 2017.

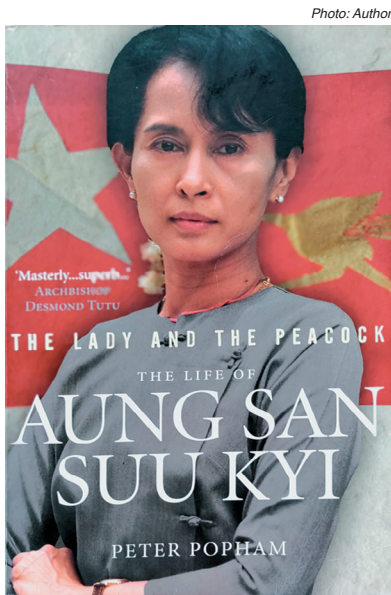
Before the 2021 coup, Japan played a unique role in Myanmar’s peace process, using economic influence and diplomacy to mediate among all stakeholders. On the website of *The Irrawaddy*, the “Timeline: Eight Decades of Myanmar-Japan Relations at a Glance” lays out in comprehensive detail the numerous political, diplomatic, and economic exchanges, cooperation, and high-level visits in the bilateral relationship during the 1940-2018 period. (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/timeline-eight-decades-myanmar-japan-relations-glance.html>). Another *Irrawaddy* article on the relationship between Japan and Myanmar (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/japans-special-relationship-with-myanmar-has-abetted-decades-of-military-rule.html>) ends rather scathingly, “That ‘special relationship’ – when it comes to aid, investment and involvement in the so-called peace process – has so far resulted in little more than making sure that the Myanmar military remains firmly entrenched in power.”

Nevertheless, the longstanding efforts for greater peace and democracy in Myanmar by Japan (one of the few international actors still engaged in Myanmar’s peace process) have earned widespread respect. However, it is under pressure to take a firmer stance. Japanese-financed railway projects remain contentious in case they help military logistics, create revenue that benefits the junta, or sustain its credibility. This is reflected in the thorny question of ODA. A statement by Mekong Watch (https://www.mekongwatch.org/PDF/rq_20231201_Eng.pdf) calls on the Japanese government to stop ODA and publicly financed projects benefitting the Myanmar military. It urges Japan to confront the Myanmar military’s “escalating atrocities” instead of prioritizing the profits of Japanese companies, saying, “This is a particularly poor look for a country that currently sits as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, which adopted Resolution 2669 calling for an end to violence in Myanmar.” Many Japanese companies have already withdrawn from projects in Myanmar, or are selling off, in response to pressure and because of human rights concerns and growing financial risks. However, Japan has a strong incentive to be more active in East and Southeast Asia, including by recovering a strong relationship with Myanmar, to curb any further drift to China and Russia.

To celebrate 60 years of bilateral diplomatic relations, in 2014 the Ministry of Culture in Myanmar designed a commemorative coin featuring the Bagan Archaeological Zone, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where Japan has assisted with preservation and restoration activities.

Political Shenanigans: Sham Elections & the 2021 Coup

The first multi-party general elections in Myanmar since the military dictatorship began in 1960 were held in 1990. Daw Aung



Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi by Peter Popham

San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the election in a landslide, but the military junta refused to recognize the results. Another general election was held in 2020, to elect members to both houses of parliament, amid covid-related travel restrictions and other measures including a partial lockdown. Voting was not held in several constituencies, on the grounds that they could not meet the conditions for a free and fair election. The NLD again secured an overwhelming victory, winning a total of 396 seats across both houses, well above the 322 required for a parliamentary majority, but the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) once more rejected the results. On Feb. 1, 2021, the day the new parliament was scheduled to convene to confirm the new government, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) seized power. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other senior political leaders were detained by the military and a year-long state of emergency was declared, to widespread international condemnation. Dozens of ethnic parties were also dissolved; according to election monitoring group Anfrele, 57% of the parties that ran in the 2020 general election no longer exist, even though they received more than 70% of votes and 90% of seats. Japan condemned the coup and killing of peaceful protesters, and urged the ending of airstrikes. It strongly upholds the ASEAN mediation efforts, including the implementation of the "Five-Point Consensus", which calls for an end to violence, inclusive political dialogue, and humanitarian assistance. A 2024 BBC investigation found that the military government controlled only about 21% of territory, while ethnic and rebel forces held about 42%, four years after the coup.

The most recent general election, in 2025-2026, though touted by the Myanmar government as a step towards greater democracy, is widely seen as a sham. Japan was one of only nine countries willing to send observers to oversee the election process. (The others were

India, Cambodia, Vietnam, Russia, China, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Nicaragua.) A [recent Australian parliamentary committee report](#) on human rights and democracy in Myanmar includes a thoroughgoing study of the legitimacy of this election, and finds multiple issues of serious concern. The persecution of Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar began in 2016 under the leadership of the current president, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, whom the International Criminal Court in The Hague sought to arrest for crimes against humanity, in 2024.

An Example of Innovative Cross-Cultural Entrepreneurship

NHK World (Feb. 17, 2025), in its "Shining Light on Myanmar Talents" feature, introduced Plus Impact, a Singapore-based recruiting company headed by Japanese entrepreneur Kenta Takada, who had previously worked for Marubeni in Myanmar. Plus Impact, which opened a Yangon office in 2024, matches talented Myanmar people, especially those with advanced IT skills, with Japanese firms in need of such expertise. Of Myanmar's population of approximately 55 million, about 45.5% are in the 20-49 age group. Because of current conditions, regardless of their talent, many students are unable to graduate from universities in Myanmar, making it an optimal market for Japanese companies seeking human resources. In an article on Bridge (<https://thebridge.jp/en/2024/05/plus-talent-official-launch>), Takada explains, "We hope to rectify this disparity in opportunities and ... support developing countries. Myanmar engineers are extremely talented. From the company's side, it is cost-effective, and from the engineer's side, the treatment is attractive. It is important to provide opportunities for talented people in Myanmar. To this end, we are looking to match not only IT engineers but also designers, office workers, and all other types of human resources. More people in Myanmar learn Japanese today, so there is not much of a language barrier. Rather, the diligent and mild-mannered nature of the people makes them a good match for Japanese companies." Peter Popham, in his first biography of Aung San Suu Kyi, also cites the commonalities between Japanese and Burmese people: "instinctive courtesy, self-effacement, diligence, and graceful attention to everyday tasks."

The Quaker Connection

The Month of Action for Myanmar in February, organized by the Society of Friends (Quakers), which has a long history of working for peace and justice, had over 125 participants from multiple countries, including several within Myanmar. Some chose not to share their name to avoid possible repercussions. The event aimed to facilitate learning and increase awareness of Myanmar's ongoing crisis, and suggested practical ways in which we could help, because "Myanmar's ongoing crisis touches global concerns: violent conflict, refugee rights, environmental degradation, and the erosion of democratic freedoms. We are called to respond and to support each

other and our neighbors.” Organizers explained: “The members of the small Yangon worship group meet every week online. Most of us lived inside the country at one time, but few of us remain there. Our Meetings for Worship serve as a link to each other. Another motivation for joining Meeting is the link it provides to the place, which has suffered military rule for decades. In solidarity with those who remain in Myanmar, and to mark five years since a military coup overturned the landslide election victory of a party led by a Nobel peace prize winner, we organized a Quaker Month of Action during February 2026.” (<https://www.myanmar-matters.info/>). Below is a list of actions done by Osaka Friends. Their walk was along a riverside path, “to call attention to the plight of the 3.6 million people who are currently internally displaced in Myanmar, according to UNHCR. For them, water is life.”

Friends of Osaka Monthly Meeting in Japan organized &/or participated in the following events during the Month of Action for Myanmar called for by AWPS, the Asia West Pacific Section of World Friends (Quakers).	
2/1	Joined the online meeting with Yangon Worship Group.
2/18	Saw the documentary film, Myanmar in Japan, directed by Toshikuni Doi.
2/19	Attended the Amnesty International webinar about the “ghost ships” that carry jet fuel to Myanmar for use in airstrikes.
2/21	Organized a 5K peace walk.
2/26	Attended a World BEYOND War webinar with a speaker from ALTSEAN Burma.
2/26	Led a discussion on Myanmar at the Amnesty Osaka office.
2/27	Visited a local Myanmar establishment, Mandalay House.
3/1	Joined the online meeting with Yangon Worship Group.
3/3	Wrote letters of support to advocates in Timor-Leste, the UNHCR and others.
3/3	Sent a group photo expressing solidarity.

At the month’s end, John Henderson, clerk of the Yangon Friends Meeting, Myanmar/Burma, told us: “The Month of Action on Myanmar ended just as the world’s attention shifted toward Iran, yet your efforts on behalf of Myanmar people continue to echo. They told us they felt heard, and decision-makers responded to the dozens of email messages you sent. We’re deeply grateful for the many ways you were led to act. Sadly, the junta continues its reign of terror. The need continues for international legal systems to hold the Myanmar military accountable. The Myanmar people continue to inspire the world with their creative calls for the military’s removal.”

- Suggested actions include:
- Join [English-conversation sessions with Myanmar students](#)
 - Donate money to [Friends Peace Teams](#) and [Partners Asia](#)
 - Support Burmese businesses in your area
 - Learn about and share stories of life in Myanmar

- Amplify local voices through social media campaigns
- Engage with the media and decision-makers to advocate for stronger action
- Call for divestment from banks and companies complicit with Myanmar military
- Give a talk about Myanmar
- Sponsor Myanmar students to attend universities elsewhere
- Join local Myanmar solidarity events
- Donate to organizations doing good work in Myanmar, or based in your country
- Host vigils or days of fasting for Myanmar

The Way Forward: How Can Japan Help?

When asked recently what Japan can do to improve the situation, Henderson said, “The first thing is support for independent media inside the country. News organizations such as *Frontier Myanmar* <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/> and *Irawaddy* <https://www.irrawaddy.com/> have lost funding recently. They provide a crucial balance to the increasingly skewed coverage of events by the international press. In addition, the Japanese government and its businesses could begin aligning more with like-minded countries in order to step up pressure on the Myanmar military. Historically, Japan has acted quite independently in diplomatic and economic areas.”

In December 2024, there were an estimated 134,574 Burmese in Japan, showing a big increase since the 2021 coup, and also since the conscription laws were introduced in 2024. “Myanmar People in Japan: Our Freedom” (*Zainichi Myanmajin: Watakushitachi no Jiyuu*) is a film recently produced by Toshikuni Doi, an award-winning



Poster of documentary “Myanmar People in Japan: Our Freedom”

creator of numerous documentaries and books on controversial issues. He is producing an English version of the film, which will be completed shortly. Doi made an earlier film on the same subject, “Burmese People Inside Japan: Living in a Foreign Country” (*Ikoku ni Ikiru, Nihon no Naka no Birumajin*). See <http://doi-toshikuni.net/j/myanmar/>. In an online message, Doi explained his motives in producing the new film (my translation from the Japanese), “Young Myanmar people living in Japan who had already experienced ‘freedom’ stood up in resistance to the February 2021 crushing of the democratization that had just begun in their country. Their courageous efforts to topple the military government makes us Japanese wonder about the true meanings of ‘one’s country’, ‘freedom’, and ‘how we human beings can live in a human being-like way.’ Moreover, they also make us question if we can simply turn our backs, when Japan has such strong links with the military junta.” Another film about Myanmar, focusing on Rohingya refugees, “Hara Watan” (Lost Land), was directed by Akio Fujimoto, who worked in Myanmar for 12 years, (see trailer at: <https://share.google/pH835go8eG7SZ9EVC>), and released in France in March this year.

Further potential strategies to support Myanmar: protect Myanmar people living in Japan by offering legal aid, visa assistance, and help for refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced youth, and establishing hotlines in Burmese and ethnic languages for those abused or threatened. Fund-raise and support Myanmar-led civil society, humanitarian organizations, and NGOs. Pressure Japanese companies to avoid supporting the junta and encourage ethical investment. Strengthen collaboration and cooperation between the two peoples. Advocate for stronger action by the Japanese government. Express solidarity with the numerous groups in Asia working on Myanmar issues. Support documentation, long-term justice efforts, training, and research.

ALTSEAN-Burma (Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, <http://www.altsean.org>) is a network of human rights and social justice



Myanmar children supported by Atutu

NGOs, political parties, think tanks, academics, journalists and student activists based in member states of ASEAN (which currently bans Myanmar leaders from its high-level summits) that support human rights and democracy in Myanmar. It was established at the Alternative ASEAN Meeting on Burma held at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok in 1996.

Atutu (<https://atutumyanmar.org/#english-home>) was formed soon after the Feb. 1, 2021 coup as a grassroots exchange between people from Myanmar living in Japan, and people in Myanmar. It holds weekly online prayer meetings, provides face-to-face support, conducts fund-raising, accompanies Myanmar people to hospitals and public offices, and assists in emergencies. From their website: “Japan has invested in numerous development projects in Myanmar, which has been called the ‘Last Frontier of Asia’. Japan and Myanmar are connected by a ‘strong pipeline’, and ... the Japanese government has taken a lax attitude towards the repression of its citizens, as it has been negotiating with the Myanmar Military Council since after the *coup d’état*.”

Apart from those already mentioned, there are many other groups supporting human rights and democracy in Myanmar, such as Justice for Myanmar, Political Prisoners Network, Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, Bridge Asia Japan, Burmese Relief Center-Japan, Myanmar News, World Beyond War, and Amnesty International.

I have not yet visited Myanmar myself. I asked two friends who have for their impressions. One (who visited several decades ago) told me that, despite the tight control over her itinerary, she found the country beautiful. The other (who went there about 20 years ago) noted “how very thin most people were and how fat the generals were. They had their own TV channel and were shown going round to communities and schools ‘doing the benevolent’. It was disgusting. I felt the intelligence and the courage of people in all kinds of places and had some deeply wonderful encounters and conversations.”

Japan is in a unique position to combine political and economic pressure with people-to-people interaction – the kind of “omnidirectional balanced diplomacy” mentioned in the Cover Story on the Global South in the previous issue of *Japan SPOTLIGHT* – to achieve both greater freedom, justice, and stability in Myanmar, and a bilateral relationship that is truly “special”.

My heartfelt thanks to Adrian Glamorgan, executive secretary of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Asia West Pacific Section; to Naomi Backes Kamimura and Gerry Yokota of Osaka Friends; to John Henderson; and to Atutu, Toshikuni Doi, and Peter Popham.

JS

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