The history of Burma, like that of many Southeast Asian countries, can be viewed in terms of the interaction between coastal regions and kingdoms and the more densely populated inland agrarian states. In Burma this division also largely coincides with ethnic differences between the coastal Mon and the Arakanese and the inland Burmans and the Shans.

External influences have typically been transmitted through overseas contact, including in earlier periods with India, Ceylon and Portugal and in later times with Britain and Japan. The economic policy of independent Burma, during both the civilian and subsequent military regimes, has largely been shaped by the fraught legacy of overseas contact in Burmese history.

The recent change of the capital from the commercial port of Rangoon to the new inland city of Naypyidaw is thus of more than merely symbolic significance since it may reflect a desire to return to the apparently safe isolation of the interior heartland over the vicissitudes of international trade and overseas contacts. But is that a wise choice in the increasingly globalised world of the twenty-first century?

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