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'Strong, Fully Efficient and Modern': Myanmar's new look armed forces

Any perceived challenges to Myanmar's unity, internal stability and sovereignty, or to the Tatmadaw's self-appointed national role, will delay the transition process. They could even halt it.

Author's Note

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Myanmar language. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by almost all countries, the United Nations and other major international organisations. However, a few governments (notably the United States), some political groups, a number of news outlets and certain high profile individuals (such as Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi) still cling to the old forms, apparently as a protest against continuing human rights abuses and the former military regime's failure to consult the Myanmar public about the proposed name change. In this paper the new names have been used. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Army' and 'Myanmar Police Force'. Quotations and references, however, have been given as they originally appeared. Such usage does not carry any political connotations.

The armed forces have effectively ruled Myanmar since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by general elections in 2010 and by-elections in 2012. The national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

After the United Kingdom dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then known) in 1885, Rangoon was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. Now known as 'Yangon', it remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 320 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Yangon regime', or in some cases simply 'Yangon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was formed in 1962, re-invented in 1974 and recreated as a military council in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Myanmar's tri-service armed forces. In recent years, this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. While the term 'Defence Services' usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer to the armed forces, the national police force, the 'people's militia' and sundry other government-endorsed paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category.

'Strong, Fully Efficient and Modern': Myanmar's new look armed forces

1. Introduction

I'd like to urge and impart to you to maintain the noble historic traditions of Tatmadaw at the risk of lives and to go on working for the country in accordance with the Objectives of the 70th Armed Forces Day:

- (a) To build strong, fully efficient and modern Defence Services to protect land, water and air territories of the Nation.
- (b) To cooperate hand in hand with people for peace and stability, national solidarity and development of the Nation.
- (c) To safeguard the Nation and people against internal and external dangers and natural disasters, and
- (d) To safeguard the three main national causes: non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty, making the sacrifice of lives (sic).

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing
Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services
Naypyidaw, 27 March 2015¹

It has been almost five years since Myanmar's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) formally transferred power to a hybrid civilian–military government, and Thein Sein was installed as the country's president.² Elections for a new national parliament were held on 8 November 2015 and it is expected that an electoral college drawn from both Houses will choose the next president in 2016. The role played by the armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) in this process, and their continuing political influence, have been examined closely, from many different angles.³ Also, the Tatmadaw's extended counter-insurgency campaigns against Myanmar's non-state armed groups have prompted numerous reports (usually written from the point of view of the ethnic and activist communities) in the international news media.⁴ However, except for occasional stories in specialist publications, there have been few considered accounts of other military developments. This is surprising, as the Tatmadaw's material strength and combat capabilities not only underpin its domestic position but also help to determine Myanmar's influence on the wider strategic environment.⁵

One reason for this lack of scholarly attention is that, despite its prominence in Myanmar's national affairs, the Tatmadaw's internal workings are in many respects a closed book. For decades, even the most basic data has been beyond the reach of analysts and other observers.⁶ For example, the size of Myanmar's armed forces is a mystery. During the Ne Win era (1962–88), it was generally accepted that there were about 186,000 men and women in its three services.⁷ The actual number, however, was a state secret. After the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, when the Tatmadaw abolished Ne Win's socialist government and took back direct political power, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) launched an ambitious military expansion and modernisation program. By 2000, the Tatmadaw had doubled in size to an estimated 400,000, about 370,000 of whom were in the Myanmar Army (MA).⁸ Some press stories have since claimed that there are currently 500,000 men and women in the Tatmadaw, but estimates by most well-informed observers now range between 300,000 and 350,000.⁹ A few commentators have suggested that the figure may be even lower.¹⁰

Nor can anyone be sure about the size of Myanmar's annual defence expenditure. Ne Win's curbs on military spending were abandoned by the SLORC and SPDC, lending credence to activist claims that, during the 1990s, the armed forces were allocated around 40% of the national budget. A more likely average annual figure was 30%.¹¹ After a dramatic spike in outlays during Thein Sein's first few years in office, annual

2. Improvements and Acquisitions

Since 2011, Myanmar's government has made a concerted effort to create smaller, but more professional, more capable and more respected armed forces – what President Thein Sein called in his inaugural speech a 'world class Tatmadaw'.²¹ The CinC has put this goal in more modest terms, describing it simply as the development of a 'standard army', but he clearly has in mind international norms.²² The plan, which is still being implemented, has encompassed a wide range of measures, at all levels.

Perhaps the most obvious change has been in the Tatmadaw's leadership. In one of his first decisions as CinC, Min Aung Hlaing removed several senior officers and rotated others to new positions in what constituted a major generational shift. He also trimmed the top-heavy command structure and replaced most of the country's Regional Military Commanders.²³ The infusion of new talent and (potentially, at least) new thinking has been maintained through periodic reshuffles of personnel.²⁴ At the same time, officer cadet intakes at both the Defence Services Academy and Officer Training School have been severely reduced and there have been large scale transfers of military personnel to the Myanmar Police Force (MPF).²⁵ In order to increase combat proficiency, new training programs have been introduced and others revised. A joint arms exercise (

acquired a range of Ukrainian, Russian and Chinese armoured personnel carriers (APC). As seen at the last few Armed Forces Day parades held in Naypyidaw, the army now has Chinese SH1 155mm self-propelled howitzers, PTL-02 tank destroyers, and mobile surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems such as the Chinese HQ-12/KS-1A and the Russian Pechora-2M.³⁵ One recent report has claimed that Myanmar plans to buy additional BMP-3F amphibious fighting vehicles from Russia.³⁶ Also, the Tatmadaw has expressed an interest in obtaining more heavy artillery and has even been investigating the use of un-manned ground vehicles.³⁷ A recent deal with the Indian firm Tata to manufacture heavy trucks in Myanmar may herald a supply arrangement with the MA, which to date has relied on a range of transport vehicles imported from China, and to a lesser extent Poland.³⁸ Soldiers on operations have been issued with new light arms and, since 2012, Kevlar helmets and body armour.

Under a 2009 agreement with Russia, the Myanmar Air Force (MAF) is acquiring 50 Mil Mi-35P 'Hind-E' attack and transport helicopters. Also, the MAF's ageing F-7, A-5 and G-4 fighters and ground attack aircraft are being phased out and replaced by more modern platforms. A contract has been signed for 20 MiG-29 'Fulcrum-D' fighters, to add to the 12 Fulcrum-As (including two training variants) purchased in 2001. In 2009, Myanmar reportedly ordered 60 more K-8 'Karakorum' jet trainers, followed in 2015 by 16 CAC/PAC JF-17 'Thunder' multi-role combat aircraft.³⁹ Jointly developed by China and Pakistan, the JF-17s are expected to start arriving in 2017. The MAF has also begun taking delivery of 20 German Grob G 120TP basic training aircraft, plus an unknown number of AS365 Dauphin 2 and Bell 206 Jetranger III helicopters. The MAF's airlift capabilities have been strengthened with several Beechcraft 1900D light transports and ATR turboprops.⁴⁰ In 2015 alone, the air force commissioned 36 new aircraft, including fighters, combat helicopters, trainers and light transport aircraft.⁴¹ Its inventory of air-to-air missiles (AAM), which probably includes the Chinese PL-2, PL-5 and PL-7, has reportedly been strengthened with Russian AA-10 'Alamo' and AA-11 'Archer' AAMs.

A special effort seems to have been made to improve Myanmar's blue-water naval capabilities.⁴² In 2012, China delivered two decommissioned 1,960-ton 'Jianghu II' class frigates, declared surplus to requirements by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In 2011, a locally-built 2,500-ton 'Aung Zeya' frigate was launched in Yangon and another two followed in 2014. Five more in the same class are planned. A third 1,105-ton 'Anawrahta' class corvette was launched in 2014.⁴³ In addition, work has begun on a fleet of missile-armed fast attack craft reportedly based on the Houjian/Huang Type 037/2 currently in service with the PLAN.⁴⁴ Most, if not all, the vessels built in Myanmar's shipyards appear to incorporate Chinese, Russian, Indian and Israeli technology. A recent visit to Israel by the CinC prompted a report that the Myanmar Navy (MN) also planned to purchase a number of Super Dvora 3 patrol boats for 'coastguard' duties.⁴⁵ Claims that Myanmar 'is finally taking steps towards developing a subsurface capability', however, and that it plans to purchase two Russian submarines, remain unconfirmed.⁴⁶

In addition to these reports, there have been rumours that the Tatmadaw is in the market for a range of additional platforms, weapons and sensors. For example, during a visit to India in 2013 the Chief of the Myanmar Navy reportedly handed his hosts a list of equipment that the MN wished to purchase. The list was said to include maritime sensors and components for offshore patrol vessels.⁴⁷ Indonesian sources revealed in 2014 that Myanmar was interested in acquiring a number of medium range twin-engine CN235-220 aircraft.⁴⁸ While suitable for transport and reconnaissance duties, it can also be configured for anti-submarine patrols. Discussions had already been held with the Indonesians over the possible sale to Myanmar of SS-2 assault rifles, and South Korean-designed 'Makassar' class landing platform docks built by PT PAL. However, it appears that no sales have yet eventuated.⁴⁹ There were also unconfirmed reports that the MAF was interested in enhancing its airlift capabilities by purchasing Antonov An-148s from Ukraine and XAC MA60s from China, but these negotiations seem to have stalled, or been abandoned.⁵⁰ Before a demonstration model crashed in Indonesia in

2012, the MAF was named as a possible buyer for the Sukhoi Superjet-100 passenger transport.

At the same time, Myanmar has continued to develop its defence industries, and increase its stockpiles of strategic materiel. Over the past 20 years, Myanmar's capabilities for indigenous production have grown significantly. There are now up to 25 factories and other major sites (such as shipyards and research institutes) operated by the Tatmadaw, producing a wide range of arms, ammunition and equipment.⁵¹ As already noted, Myanmar is building several kinds of naval vessels in its Yangon shipyards, albeit with foreign help. Ukrainian BTR-3U and MT-LB APCs are being built locally. The Tatmadaw is also able to build and provide ammunition for its truck-mounted 122mm multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), which are similar to the Chinese Type 81 MLRS. It is understood that 48 of the 60 K-8 aircraft purchased from China in 2009 will be assembled at the MAF's Aircraft Production and Maintenance Base at Meiktila in Upper Myanmar, probably in cooperation with the China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation.⁵² One news report has claimed that the Tatmadaw is looking to produce most of its new JF-

Thirdly, the proportion of Myanmar's budget allocated to defence is likely to remain high, not only to pay for all these new weapon systems but also to keep them operational. Of the US\$1.15 billion allocated to defence in 2013, for example, more than US\$600 million was earmarked for the procurement of military hardware. About \$200 million was reserved for aircraft, \$93 million for ships, and \$30 million for military vehicles.⁷⁵ In 2015, it was envisaged that 29% of the annual defence budget would be used to purchase new warships, fighter jets, armoured and other vehicles, heavy weapons and ammunition.⁷⁶ There will also be a need to set aside funds for maintenance, operating costs, wages and other recurring expenses. As a proportion of the national accounts, defence's allocation is expected to decline. However, as Myanmar's economy continues to expand)-1(o)8GDxo e3 Tw -4.M(p)8(()-1(o)8a014(d)4-1(e-s)1(e)7[(ww(d

3. The Tatmadaw's Political Role

At the time of writing, it is still too early to make any firm judgements about the outcome of the national elections held in Myanmar on 8 November 2015. However, some preliminary observations about the Tatmadaw's current political role, and the potentially far-reaching implications of an opposition electoral victory, seem appropriate.

One question often asked since 2011 has been: when will the Tatmadaw 'return to the barracks'?⁸¹ This reflects a widespread wish for a genuinely democratic and civilian government in Myanmar, but it misses a vital point. The Tatmadaw has never seen itself as having separate military and political roles, with the first naturally having primacy over the second. Rather, it is deeply imbued with the idea that since 1948 it alone has been responsible for holding the Union together, defeating its enemies – both internal and external – and saving the country from chaos. This has given rise to an abiding belief, strengthened by training and indoctrination programs, of the importance of 'national politics', as opposed to 'party politics'. It has also led to the conviction that the Tatmadaw has both a right and duty to supersede other state institutions if circumstances demand. It was on this basis, for example, that the armed forces took power in 1962, and crushed the 1988 uprising. As Robert Taylor has written, after the latter upheaval the Tatmadaw 'set out on its own to reunify or, as later termed "reconsolidate", the country in order to create the conditions for passing authority to a constitutional government'.⁸²

In the 2008 constitution, the Tatmadaw was recognised as an autonomous institution free from any civilian control or oversight. It was given the right independently to

control, if such a step is deemed necessary by the president. Given certain triggers, the CinC could simply mount another coup. Some observers have put the odds of that happening over the next five years at 20%.⁹⁸ A few have rated the prospect of a coup as high as 50%.⁹⁹ These estimates, however, are highly speculative. A more realistic notion of the Tatmadaw's future behaviour can be gauged by examining factors involved at the national, institutional and personal levels.

At the national level, the Tatmadaw is committed to Myanmar's sovereignty, unity and internal stability, as they judge such matters. These goals were encapsulated in the former government's three 'national causes' and have been enshrined in the 2008 constitution. If they are challenged, military intervention of some kind becomes more likely. Since 2011, perceived external threats have greatly diminished. However, any attempt by the international community to exercise its 'responsibility to protect', for example on behalf of the Muslim Rohingyas, would be strongly resisted.¹⁰⁰ Also, as already noted, there is the potential for civil unrest to erupt over contentious political, economic and social issues, particularly in the context of the Rohingyas, with the potential for a political crisis.

4. International Contacts

While Myanmar continues to attract criticism from foreign governments, organisations and activist groups, one striking aspect of its re-emergence as an international actor has been the readiness of many countries, including the Western democracies, to renew or strengthen ties with the country's armed forces and national police. Before the advent of Thein Sein's reformist government, any relationship with the security forces was politically difficult, if not (in the case of some Western governments) impossible. Yet, since 2011 several governments, international institutions and private foundations have offered Myanmar help in this sector. These approaches have been enthusiastically welcomed by Naypyidaw and, albeit more cautiously, by Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition figures. They have been condemned as premature and ill-advised by most activists and human rights organisations, but the rationale offered in reply has usually been that foreign assistance can ameliorate the very problems about which Myanmar's critics are most concerned.¹¹⁶

Most of these initiatives have been expressed in principled terms, including by Thein Sein, but broadly speaking they make up two separate, if related, sets of proposals.¹¹⁷ One is aimed at increasing the professionalism of the armed forces, reducing its direct political role and encouraging it to observe internationally accepted norms of behaviour (as endorsed by the Western democracies, at least).¹¹⁸ The other relates to the expansion and modernisation of the MPF. While the latter set is usually couched in vague terms, refers to the 'rule of law' in Myanmar, and alludes to the reform of the country's judicial system, most seem to envisage direct aid to the MPF as a way of 'civilianising' Myanmar's coercive apparatus. The thinking seems to be that, the more capable the national police force is, and the more it accepts primary responsibility for the maintenance of law and order, the less the army will need to be involved. Such programs also help develop bilateral relationships and exert a positive influence on the government, by encouraging the reform process.

The US has been interested in restoring defence ties with Myanmar since Barak Obama came to office, something he hinted at during his visit there in 2012. Not long afterwards, a group of MN officers inspected the US Navy amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard in the Andaman Sea.¹¹⁹ In 2013, the Tatmadaw sent two observers to Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand. Later the same year, the State Department announced that the US was looking at ways to support 'nascent military engagement' with Myanmar as a way of encouraging further political reforms.¹²⁰ Pentagon officials have since referred to a 'carefully calibrated' plan of engagement that includes Myanmar's cooperation in the search for the remains of 730 US military personnel missing since 1945.¹²¹ Tatmadaw officers have participated in events sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Hawaii, and the US Defence Institute for International Legal Studies has also become involved. Training places in the US for Tatmadaw personnel and a formal military–military dialogue or 'partnership' with Myanmar have not been ruled out.¹²²

Other Western countries have followed the US lead. During Thein Sein's 2013 visit to Canberra, for example, Australia's government announced that it was restoring the resident Defence Attache's position in Yangon, which was abolished in 1979. Then Prime Minister Gillard said that this would permit engagement with the Tatmadaw in areas like peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as enhancing other forms of dialogue.¹²³ When Thein Sein visited the UK in 2013, the British government announced that it too was posting a Defence Attache to Yangon. Myanmar was also offered training in human rights, the laws of armed conflict and the accountability of democratic armed forces. In 2014, 30 Tatmadaw officers attended a staff course conducted by the British Army in Naypyidaw.¹²⁴ Other courses aimed at

'professionalising' the Tatmadaw have been discussed and consideration given to offering Myanmar military training places in the UK. A European Union (EU) arms

5. Conclusions

As always, Myanmar's future is unclear, but the Tatmadaw seems to have two main goals over the next decade.

The first is the development of a 'world-class Tatmadaw'. Since 2011, a concerted effort has been made to make the armed forces more prof ar2467n..00208 149s1(af)TJ3-5w9(he)7[(al)8(T-7

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