

CHAPTER 4

Myanmar Security Outlook: A Taxing Year for the Tatmadaw

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Introduction

2015 was a landmark year in Myanmar politics. The general election was held on 8 November and the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (daughter of Myanmar armed forces founder and independence hero General Aung San) won a landslide victory over the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP; a military-backed party led by ex-military officers and President Thein Sein). This was an unexpected development that could challenge the constitutionally-guaranteed political role of the military. The Tatmadaw (literally “royal force”) or Myanmar Defence Services (MDS) also faced a serious challenge to its primary security role when the defunct Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), a renegade ethnic armed organization (EAO), unleashed a furious assault to take over the Kokang Self-Administered Zone (KSZ; bordering China) leading to a drawn out war of attrition lasting several months and threatening Myanmar-China relations.

Tatmadaw: fighting multiple adversaries

Despite actively participating in the peace process, launched by President Thein Sein’s elected government since 2011, The MDS found itself engaged in fierce fighting with powerful EAOs in the northern, eastern and south-eastern border regions of Myanmar. In fact, except for the MNDAA, most of these armed groups that engaged in armed conflict with the MDS throughout 2015 were associated with EAOs which had been officially negotiating with the government’s peace-making team toward a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) since March 2014. Moreover, almost all of them had some form of bilateral ceasefire arrangements with the government in the past.

In general, the Tatmadaw followed a containment strategy towards EAOs which had not made bilateral ceasefires, while taking an active defensive posture in conformity

with the President's directive (in December 2011) to take defensive actions only.¹ Inevitably, there ensued many clashes with the EAOs when the MDS reacted to perceived threats and provocations by non-ceasefire groups. In the absence of a comprehensive ceasefire agreement with all EAOs there was always a potential for violent conflict with EAOs even with those who had made bilateral ceasefire agreements with the government of President Thein Sein.

The fighting between the MDS and the Kachin, Kayin (Karen), Rakhine (Arakan) Shan, and Ta'ang (Palaung) EAOs consisted of not only small skirmishes but also major battles in which the MDS used artillery and air support. The Tatmadaw claimed that those clashes were caused by accidental encounters, imperatives of securing lines of communications and robust responses to EAOs' provocations. On the other hand, the EAOs had alleged that the MDS was aggressively encroaching upon their territories and launching offensive operations to force them into signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) on the government's terms. The fighting in Kokang against the MNDAA was on a larger scale and intensity involving large numbers of troops on both sides.

MNDAA assault and MDS response²

There were few visible signs of the gathering storm in KSAZ as the MNDAA stealthily built up its forces, preparing for an all-out assault to retake the region once controlled by its octogenarian leader Peng Jiasheng (Phone Kyar Shin). He resurfaced after vanishing in 2009 when the government cracked down on the MNDAA's illegal drug-dealing and weapons production under his leadership. Neither the North-East Regional Command (NERC; responsible for the larger region) nor the local Regional Control Command (RCC) anticipated the ferocious assault that broke out on 9 February 2015 and consequently the MDS suffered heavy casualties.

There was intense fighting in and around Laukkai (the provincial capital of KSAZ) with well-armed MNDAA troops who were supported by Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Arakan Army (AA) units. On 10 February, the MDS used heavy weapons, attack helicopters and jet fighters to turn the tide. In fact close air support (CAS) by rotary and fixed-wing aircraft were called upon time and again during many months of incessant fighting in which the MDS deployed dozens of battalions from its elite light infantry divisions (LIDs) as well as regional troops under the

NERC. When the MNDA lost its momentum under the overwhelming firepower of the MDS its units retreated to heavily fortified hills near the Myanmar-China border as the MDS undertook offensive operations.³ During April and May, it took many weeks of fighting with heavy casualties for the MDS to dislodge the tenacious MNDA fighters from their well dug-in positions.

As the civil administration collapsed at Laukkai and its surrounding townships, President Thein Sein, on 17 February, issued an ordinance to declare a “State of Emergency” in KSAZ lasting 90 days. This was immediately followed by a second presidential ordinance empowering the military Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) to impose military administration in KSAZ. The C-in-C then conferred the “Military Administrative Authority” to the commander of the RCC (Laukkai) who, acting on his behalf, would exercise executive and judicial authority to restore peace, stability and tranquillity in the area concerned.⁴ Three months passed but as the situation had yet to return to normalcy the President further extended the ordinance for 90 more days thereby allowing military administration to continue until 17 August.⁵ Finally, after one more extension the military administrative order was lifted on 17 November.⁶ However, barely 10 days after the lifting of military administration, military columns patrolling Laukkai came under attack by MNDA elements using heavy weapons that also damaged some buildings in the city indicating that the rebels were not easily giving up.⁷

As a result of the extensive fighting that not only affected the countryside but also the city of Laukkai itself where street-fighting took place for many days, thousands of inhabitants (mostly civil servants, migrant farm workers and indigenous ethnic nationals) fled the city to safer areas outside of KSAZ while some 60,000 (mostly ethnic Chinese) reportedly crossed over to the Chinese side of the border. By May, thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) had slowly returned home to find their houses and farms destroyed while many thousands still remained in refugee camps in China.⁸

Kokang conflict and China

The MNDA was originally part of the Burma Communist Party (BCP) military formation. When the BCP imploded in 1989 due to rebellion by territorially designated ethnic-based factions, the MNDA emerged as one faction that struck a ceasefire deal with Myanmar military intelligence. Most of Kokang’s inhabitants are

of Chinese origin and MNDAAs ethnicity was also identified as Chinese by both Myanmar authorities and the general public.

This led to nationalistic expressions of solidarity with and support for the MDS.⁹ Rumours about Chinese support for the MNDAAs have abounded right from the beginning of the Kokang conflict and were further aggravated when Myanmar's chief of military intelligence reportedly alleged in a press briefing that "Chinese mercenaries" were involved.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Beijing called for an "early solution to the Kokang conflict" and a Xinhua news editorial commented: "Proximity and ethnicity have bred misleading speculation about Chinese involvement ... it would both violate China's basic foreign policy principle and harm China's national interests." It added: "Even if there were indeed Chinese nationals participating in the fighting, it would be only an individual act, to which the Chinese government is strongly opposed."¹¹ On 2 March Xinhuanet reported that the director general of the Department of Asian Affairs in China's Foreign Ministry had "denied any Chinese local authorities' involvement in the conflict" stressing that "China respects Myanmar's sovereignty [and] territorial integrity." He also admitted that the fighting "has had an impact on China's border control and social security."¹² This came after President Thein Sein, in his monthly radio/TV speech, on 1 March, reportedly said: "I stress here that I will not tolerate any country or group infringing on the sovereignty of Myanmar."¹³ However, in his 3 April monthly address, the President acknowledged that "The stability of our border is of utmost importance and we will not allow this [Kokang] conflict in one part of [the] country [a]ffect our broader strategic interest – which is to have the best possible relations with all our neighbors and all the great powers of the world."¹⁴ The contentious speculation over Chinese involvement was virtually put to rest when MDS C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing told the Asia General Bureau Chief of the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun* on 9 June 2015, at Nay Pyi Taw, that "I think, one can say that this [MNDAAs rebellion] has nothing related to the Chinese government." He also mentioned earlier in the interview that "although one would think that" there might be some "connection" with Chinese authorities "just by looking at the food, arms and ammunition, and the administrative assistance that they [MNDAAs] get or their difficulties being solved and the injured being treated, there is no clear evidence to prove that."¹⁵

The accidental bombing of Chinese territory by Myanmar warplanes on 13 March resulted in a robust response from China. Four persons were killed and several were

injured when bombs fell on a sugar cane field in Lincang in Yunnan Province. China's Vice Foreign Minister summoned the Myanmar Ambassador on the same day to deliver a "solemn representation" on the incident while the Chinese Ambassador in Myanmar also lodged a similar protest to the Myanmar government and the military on the following day. China's air force also responded by sending several flights of jet fighters to patrol the border and to "track, monitor, warn and chase away" straying Myanmar aircraft. Moreover, Xinhua reported that Vice Chairman Fan Changlong of the Central Military Commission telephoned Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, asking for a serious investigation, apology and compensation as well as severe punishment of the guilty persons. He also mentioned that previously, on several occasions, Myanmar aircraft had crossed over into Chinese airspace and stray shells and explosive ordinance had landed on Chinese territory damaging property and wounding people. He also warned that future deadly incidents would entail "firm and decisive action" by Chinese military to "protect the safety of its people."¹⁶ Finally, the contentious issue was settled when a special delegation consisting of Myanmar's foreign minister (designated as President Thein Sein's special envoy) and the relevant military theatre commander visited Beijing on 2 April to deliver Myanmar government's and military's apologies.¹⁷ There were further incidents in April and May of shells hitting Chinese territory which led to Chinese authorities lodging protests and demanding assurance to prevent further recurrence. However, in the case of artillery shells landing on 14 and 15 May, injuring people from the Wen Min Xin neighbourhood in Nansan area of Lincang district, Myanmar denied that the MDS was responsible. The MDS C-in-C received the Chinese Ambassador on 18 May and explained with maps that given the deployed positions of Myanmar forces it was impossible for Tatmadaw shells to hit the affected Chinese territory. Based on the trajectories of the bombardment he suggested that it came from MNDAA positions on the hills. Nevertheless he gave assurance that further investigation would be done.¹⁸ Previously, on 15 May, in replying to a reporter's query on the shelling incident, which led to Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying expressing "strong dissatisfaction," Myanmar's information minister said "to prevent this sort of thing happening is to prevent fighting in the border area." He then asked a rhetorical question: "How did this insurgent group [get] supplied? From where?"¹⁹ All in all, one could say that the "Kokang Affair" exposed the vulnerability of Myanmar-China relations to border insecurity and instability brought about by domestic conflict.

Conflict with other EAOs

Despite ongoing ceasefire negotiations (see next section) with EAOs the Tatmadaw had no respite in fighting with many EAOs throughout the year, which was oftentimes intense enough to employ artillery and fighter aircraft. Most of the conflict occurred in Kachin and Shan states but there were also a few skirmishes in Kayin and Rakhine states as well.

Most of the adversaries were groups that refused to sign bilateral ceasefires while others with standing ceasefire agreements still fought. Such is the complexity of ethnic politics and the fluidity of varied ground situations that clashes occurred repeatedly despite affirmation by top leaders of both sides of the desire to strive for peace.

Perhaps the heaviest clashes were with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA, the military wing of the Kachin Independence Organizations or KIO) with over 10,000 troops under arms. The MDS also interdicted logging trucks in KIA/KIO territory sometimes using air strikes. There were reportedly 57 clashes in the first six months of 2015 in which a dozen KIA outposts fell in Kachin State where most of the clashes occurred. Several encounters were also reported in Shan State where the KIA had a presence, though it denied that it was supporting the MNDA's campaign. In fact, in mid-February MDS units were fighting around approaches to the KIA headquarters (HQ) in Laiza town but apparently refrained from advancing to Laiza.²⁰ Air strikes were used by the MDS during clashes in March and May. In the second half of the year the clashes continued every month except for October when both sides showed restraint, probably in order not to jeopardize the signing of the NCA (nationwide ceasefire agreement) on 15 October and the forthcoming general election on 8 November. The fighting that resumed in November, barely a week after the elections, was described by a KIA leader as the "fiercest in the history of fighting."²¹

The TNLA is the military arm of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) and did not have a ceasefire agreement with the government. Its reported strength of several thousand fighters and extensive knowledge of the terrain made the TNLA a formidable foe. After operating in Shan State clashing with the MDS in January and early February (targeted for an air strike) it joined the MNDA's fight with the Tatmadaw in Kokang during the three weeks in February. Thereafter, it engaged the MDS on its home ground in Shan State with an occasional foray into Mandalay Region. It was supposed to be in alliance with the KIA and it seemed there could

be some coordination between the two in tactical operations. It was involved in a large number of clashes (103 in the first half of the year) with the MDS from March through May, in July, August and December. In fact, the TNLA clashed with the Shan State Army (South) or SSA-S in early December over territorial disputes amidst allegations that the latter, an NCA signatory EAO, was colluding with the MDS to put pressure on the TNLA.²²

The AA was another EAO that fought alongside the MNDA in February. Like the TNLA it left the fight when the MDS got into the act and melted back into Kachin State while elements of it surfaced in its ethnically affiliated Rakhine State. It is a relatively new outfit founded only in April 2009 and believed to be under KIA tutelage and has a strength of some 2,000 soldiers. It did not have a ceasefire agreement with the government and usually operated in KIA territory. It reportedly had 24 clashes with the MDS in the first half of 2015.²³ Rakhine State, which had been virtually free from military conflict in recent years, saw the AA clashing with government forces in March, April, September and December. In April there was also fighting between the AA and the MDS in Chin State adjacent to Rakhine. As a result, the security forces went to some lengths to root out suspected AA supporters among the ethnic Rakhine residents.²⁴

Some of the most intense fighting in Shan State broke out in early October and lasted throughout late November between the Shan State Army (North) or SSA-N and government forces. SSA-N, the armed wing of the Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP) has undergone many incarnations since its progenitor, the Shan State Army (SSA), was formed in 1964. Its strength is believed to be in the high thousands and it had signed a ceasefire agreement with President Thein Sein's government in January 2012 and had been taking part in peace talks but did not sign the NCA. Previously, the SSA-N had only two skirmishes with the MDS in the first half of 2015. However, beginning on 6 October nearly two weeks of heavy fighting erupted near the SSA-N HQ at Wan Hai involving multiple MDS battalions and artillery. The apparent MDS assaults continued after the 8 November election involving air attacks by the Myanmar Air Force. The intense fighting spawned some 10,000 IDPs by mid-November. Altogether over 80 clashes were estimated to have happened within six weeks since 6 October. Civil society organizations (CSOs), ethnic Shan political parties and the SSPP/SSA-N leadership sought to bring about a halt to what they saw as an army offensive against SSA-N and appealed to the President to stop

the fighting. There were also a few demonstrations for peace. A truce was worked out in late November though sporadic clashes continued into December when they finally died down as SSA-N leadership decided to withdraw its troops from sensitive positions near a strategic motorway cutting through its claimed territory.²⁵

On the other hand, the SSA-S, which is the military arm of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), did sign the NCA, having signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement in December 2011. With a troop size comparable to SSA-N it was a breakaway faction of narco-warlord Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army (MTA). It too took part in the peace talks but had a few clashes with the MDS in March, August and September. It had apparently succeeded in shedding its earlier unsavoury image of a former narco-army faction and managed to maintain a working relationship with the MDS in a post NCA environment.²⁶

Kayin EAOs had signed bilateral ceasefire agreements as well as the NCA and rarely clashed with government forces. However, some factions and units belonging to mainstream EAOs such as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) which is the military wing of the Karen National Union (KNU) and Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) were loosely controlled and often isolated giving rise to a tendency to act independently; often driven by business and rent-seeking motives. As such, they had the potential to clash with local MDS units or Border Guard Force troops. The two clashes with KNLA units in northern Kayin State at the end of February and April were due to territorial disputes with no follow-up actions.²⁷ Clashes with DKBA elements in March and several times in July appeared to be caused by territorial disputes, toll gate rights and closing of sections of the Asian Highway traversing Kayin State. This led to the sacking of two DKBA tactical commanders whose troops were involved in the incidents.²⁸

Tatmadaw and NCA negotiations

The Tatmadaw had consistently welcomed the negotiations in the peace process since its inception in 2011. Nevertheless, when senior military officers (led by a Lt. general) joined the Union Peace-making Work Committee (UPWC) team in face-to-face negotiations with the representatives of the EAOs it was made clear that it would not deviate from the six principles put forward as the Tatmadaw's position

on the NCA. Lt. Gen. Myint Soe, representing the military in the UPWC team, told a press conference on 31 March 2015: “Our Tatmadaw ha[s] already declared that genuine peace will happen if [EAOs] adhere to our six principles,” adding “These six principles we hold firmly forever.”

These principles are:^{29;30}

1. to have a keen desire to reach eternal peace;
2. to keep promises agreed to in peace deals;
3. to avoid capitalising on the peace agreement;
4. to avoid placing a heavy burden on local people;
5. to strictly abide by the existing laws; and
6. to march towards a democratic country in accord with the 2008 Constitution.

The EAOs were concerned about the implications of the 5th and 6th principles which could inhibit their quest to establish a federal system of government and a federal army incorporating their troops into ethnically designated formations. Moreover the military also insisted on instituting disarmament, demobilization, and re-integration (DDR) right at the beginning of the sequencing of the post-NCA road map.³¹ This was also unacceptable to the EAOs which feared that they would have to practically “surrender” and risk losing their armed formations. In fact, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing reiterated the importance of these aforementioned requirements in his interview with the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shimbun* on 9 June even after the draft NCA document was inked on 31 March 2015. After stating that “Due to my yielding to the wishes of the armed groups as much as I can, we are now at a stage where we could already sign a draft ceasefire agreement,” he went on to stress that the “most important issue would be security reconciliation. Roughly, we call it DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration). This is a must.” He then added: “The military has laid down six peace principles... We did not tell them to follow word by word these principles. We just told them to be serious about them.”³²

Meanwhile the UPWC team led by President Office Minister Aung Min and the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) representing the EAOs managed to put together a draft document for the NCA as a “single text” document in its 7th official meeting and five representatives from each side signed the finalized draft

document in front of President Thein Sein on 31 March 2015.³³ However, all was not well on the EAO front. When the NCCT went back to seek endorsement of the draft NCA from the EAO leaders, they balked at endorsing the document in its entirety. Instead an EAO summit was convened at the KNU headquarters at Lawkheela in Kayin State from 2 to 6 June. There it was decided to replace NCCT with a new negotiating team called the Senior Delegation (SD) to demand 15 amendments to the draft.³⁴ The negotiations between the SD and UPWC for the conclusion of the official NCA were rather contentious. There were major differences regarding the new demands and the insistence by the EAOs to include the MNDA, TNLA and AA in the NCA was unacceptable to both the Tatmadaw and the government. The latter, known as the “all-inclusiveness” issue, the wording on security issues, the choice of signatories (from both sides) and international witnesses became significant stumbling blocks in the bumpy road to the NCA. The target date was repeatedly moved back and as the general election drew closer the window of opportunity was rapidly closing, thereby giving rise to speculation that it might not be possible to have the NCA under the incumbent regime. The UPWC however managed to pull it off at the last hour with the EAOs agreeing to an “open book” arrangement whereby those EAOs that were not yet ready could come in later. Altogether fifteen political representatives (military in some cases) of EAOs were invited by the government to sign the NCA at Nay Pyi Taw on 15 October 2015 in a grand ceremony with hundreds of attendees. Those invited could be classified into three categories: EAOs that had bilateral ceasefire agreements and were NCCT members (nine); EAOs with bilateral ceasefire agreements but not NCCT members (five); and KIO which was an NCCT member but had no bilateral ceasefire agreement. The final tally for the signing was eight out of fifteen; six from the first category and two from the second category, with KIO abstaining. See Table 1 below for the list of signatories and non-signatories of NCA.³⁵

Given all the odds due to nearly seven decades of mistrust, grievances and missed opportunities on both sides the NCA was a remarkable achievement. Nonetheless it was far from the all-inclusive outcome expected in the beginning of the peace process. Among the non-signatories were three (Kachin, Karreni or Kayah and Mon) from among the seven major ethnic groups while Rakhine and Shan were but partial successes. Only Kayah and Chin (the smallest) could be deemed to be fully represented. In important Shan State, which had more EAOs than other states,

powerful forces such as those of the NDAA, SSPP /SSA-S, TNLA and UWSA remained out in the cold; either by choice or by circumstance. As such, the guns are unlikely to be silent soon in the contested areas.

Table 1: NCA signatories and non-signatories

Signatories	ABSDF*	ALP	CNF	DKBA	KPC	KNU	PNLO	RCSS*
Non-signatories	KIO^	KNPP	NDAA*	NMSP	NSCN-K*	SSPP	UWSA*	

Notes: ABSDF= All Burma Student Democratic Front; ALP=Arakan Liberation Party; CNF= Chin National Front; DKBA= Democratic Karen Benevolent Army; KPC= Karen Peace Council; KNU= Karen National Union; PNLO= Pa-O National Liberation Organization; RCSS=Restoration Council of Shan State; KIO= Kachin Independence Organization; KNPP=Karenni National Progressive Party; NDAA=National Democratic Alliance Army; NMSP=New Mon State Party; NSCN-K=National Socialist Council of Nagland-Khaplan; SSPP=Shan State Progressive Party; UWSA=United Wa State Army.

* denotes non-member of NCCT

^ denotes that bilateral ceasefire agreement lapsed

On the other hand, the following EAOs (all of which had not signed bilateral ceasefire agreements) did not receive invitations to sign the NCA. Among them, the AA and TNLA together with their ally MNDAA were apparently punished for their aborted insurrection in Kokang.

1. Arakan Army (AA)
2. Arakan National Council (ANC)
3. Lahu Democratic union (LDU)
4. Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)
5. Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)
6. Wa National Organization (WNO)

Tatmadaw: politics and general election

The 2008 Constitution gives the Tatmadaw a mandate to participate in “national politics,” presumably as a check and balance against “party politics.” The 25 per cent nominated quota for military personal in all legislatures (both national level and provincial level) could exercise bloc voting to determine the outcome of important bills and motions, in particular those attempting to amend the Constitution.

Such a blocking exercise was seen during 2015 when the military faction in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Assembly consisting of a combined Lower and Upper House) apparently played a crucial role in defeating elected parliamentarians' attempts to change article 59 (f) that effectively barred Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming President as well as article 436 that made such amendments extremely difficult by setting a voting threshold of 75 per cent plus one for affirmative votes.³⁶

Moreover, the military also play a significant part in the electoral process through a quasi-symbiotic relationship with the USDP whose founders had strong military roots. The soldiers' extended families numbering millions could become captive voters for military-backed candidates.³⁷ Furthermore, around 140 senior officers resigned to apply for nomination as candidates of the USDP (the ruling party) and among those accepted were the Tri-service Chief of Staff (a full general and number three in the Tatmadaw command hierarchy), the incumbent defence minister as well as his predecessor, several theatre-level commanding generals, some defence agency heads, regional commanders and senior command and staff officers (colonels and brigadier generals).³⁸ Finally, there was also speculation that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing might be nominated as a presidential candidate by the Tatmadaw faction in the new parliament).³⁹

However, when the Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD swept the polls on 8 November most of the ex- military candidates did not survive the opposition's tidal wave. Only ex-General Hla Htay Win (former tri-service Chief of Staff), retired naval C-in-C and one theatre commander won and the most notable casualties from the military were the two former defence ministers of the current regime and the military appointments general.⁴⁰

Tatmadaw's non-combat security related activities

Apart from combat duties the MDS also performed tasks related to broader security issues. Its leaders led the way in several, dealing with areas such as external relations, humanitarian and disaster relief operations and human rights issues such as child soldiers.

External relations and defence diplomacy

Apart from regular attendance and hosting of formal Association of Southeast Asian Nations- (ASEAN) related military conventions and meetings or bilateral meetings

with neighbouring countries' military establishments (mainly Thailand and China) much of the military diplomacy aspect was carried out by the MDS C-in-C and his deputy. Their foreign travels were sometimes associated with facilitating military procurement and training or enhancing border security.

On this score the most notable visits during the year were Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's visits to Pakistan and Serbia in May on a round trip marking the first visit by a Myanmar defence chief to these two countries. In the last week of August the Senior General went to Thailand to attend the 3rd Thailand-Myanmar High Level Committee meeting. More intriguing was his four-day visit to Israel in September which again was touted by the Israeli press as the first such visit in 55 years. The *Haaretz* news report also indicated that Myanmar had purchased Israeli Super Dvora class fast patrol boats.⁴¹ Later, in the November session of the Union Assembly the deputy defence minister reported to the legislature about the MoU between Myanmar and Israel on military cooperation covering a wide range of areas, including policy-making, training in non-military subjects, military medicine, information sharing, and relief operations.⁴²

Vice Senior General Soe Win, Deputy C-in-C of the MDS and C-in-C of the Army also paid a rare visit to Japan in August and then visited Thailand on the return trip home. He also visited China in September.

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR)

In 2015 Tatmadaw faced a major challenge to its HADR capability as Myanmar suffered a prolonged bout of massive flooding due to torrential rains during the monsoon season. In July and August the flooding affected 11 out of 14 states and regions (provinces). The MDS was quick to respond by providing logistic support and on-ground relief work. Some of the tasks performed were:

- Provided over 700 million kyat worth of donations in cash and material supplies.
- Nearly 800 sorties by 6 fixed wing aircraft and 11 helicopters
- Nine naval vessels made 32 sorties carrying over 1,500 tons of supplies
- Over 7,200 tons of supplies transported by 1,812 motor vehicles
- The medical corps treated nearly 7,500 persons in flooded areas through its mobile teams travelling on naval hospital vessel.

Child soldiers and land mines

The Tatmadaw had been cooperating with the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) on preventing the recruitment of child soldiers and discharging those underage boys who had been inducted into the army. Up to 30 November, when 53 recruits were discharged, the military had released 146 child soldiers under 18 years old. On the latest release, Renata Lok-Dessallien, the U.N. Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Myanmar commended the action in a statement: “Today’s release is the result of continued efforts of the Government of Myanmar and the Tatmadaw to put an end to the harmful practice of recruiting and using children.”⁴³

As for land mines, they continued to be a scourge for non-combatants as both the Tatmadaw and the EAOs allegedly were using them indiscriminately as conflict continued in many parts of the country. On 25 November 2015 the International Campaign to Ban Landmines released their 17th report on Myanmar which again highlighted the “lack of trust between groups in solving an issue that harms civilians mostly after the conflict is over.” The biggest problem appeared to be the lack of statistics on mine victims and Myanmar’s health ministry did not have reliable data on the number of persons treated by its hospitals and clinics for mine injuries. Moreover, the Myanmar Peace Centre was supposed to set up a Myanmar Mine Action Centre but it appeared to have been delayed. It was reported that Myanmar had still not signed the Global Mine Ban Treaty or the Convention on Cluster Munitions.⁴⁴

Tatmadaw command and modernization

Tatmadaw C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had made new appointments both due to the resignation of senior command and staff officers to contest the 2015 General Election and also perhaps in anticipation of the next five-year cycle which might see a different government coming into office.

Table 2: Generational Change in Army Leadership

Position	September 1988	November 1997	November 2015
C-in-C	Gen. Saw Maung (OTS 6)	Snr. Gen. Than Shwe (OTS 6)	Snr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (DSA 19)
Dy. C-in-C	Lt. G. Than Shwe (OTS 9)	Gen. Maung Aye (DSA 1)	V. Snr. Gen. Soe Win (DSA 22)
JCS	n.a.	n.a.	Air Force Chief Gen. Khin Aung Myint (DSA 19) dual charge
AG	B. G. Aung Ye Kyaw (OTS 6)	Lt. G. Win Myint (OTS 28)	Lt. G. Hsan Oo (DSA 24)
QMG	M. G. Phone Myint (OTS 9)	Lt. G. Tin Hla (DSA 3)	Lt. G. Nyo Saw (DSA 23)
BSO 1	M. G. Sein Aung (OTS 10)	Lt. G. Tin Oo* (OTS 22)	M. G. Tun Tun Naung (DSA-25)
BSO 2	M. G. Chit Swe (OTS 8)	—	Lt. G. Yar Pyae (DSA-22)
BSO 3	n.a.	n.a.	M. G. Aung Kyaw Zaw (DSa-24)
BSO 4	n.a.	n.a.	M. G. Min Naung (OTS-66)
BSO 5	n.a.	n.a.	Lt. G. Mya Tun Oo (DSA-25)
BSO 6	n.a.	n.a.	Lt. G. Kyaw Swe (DSA 22) concurrently Army Chief of Staff*
CMAS (DDSI)**	B. G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)	Lt. G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)**	Lt. G. Mya Tun Oo (DSA 25)

Notes: * He became the Minister of Home Affairs in March 2016 in the new NLD government n.a. = not applicable; — = vacant; Snr.= Senior; V. Snr. = Vice Senior; Gen. = General; Lt. G. = Lieutenant General; M. G. = Major General; B. G. = Brigadier General; C-in-C = Commander-in-Chief; Dy. = Deputy; JCS = Joint Chief of Staff; AG = Adjutant General; QMG = Quartermaster General; BSO = Bureau of Special Operations (Chief); CMAS = Chief of Military Affairs Security (intelligence); OTS = Officer Training School (for graduates); DSA = Defence Services Academy (for high school leavers); *Lt. G. Tin Oo was killed in a helicopter crash in 2001. **(Then) Gen. Khin Nyunt was removed and arrested in October 2004 and Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI) was replaced by MAS.

Sources: Maung Aung Myo. *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009); media reports; and personal communications

The generational change up to the pre-election setup can be seen in Table 2 whereas Table 3 shows the change of personnel in the command hierarchy between the beginning of the current administration and the tail-end of it.

Table 3: Change in Army Leadership under Constitutional Government (2011-2015)

Position	November 1997	November 2015
C-in-C	Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (DSA 19)	Snr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing (DSA 19)
Dy. C-in-C	Lt. G. Soe Win (DSA 22)	V. Snr. Gen. Soe Win (DSA 22)
JCS	Lt. G. Hla Htay Win (DSA 20).	Air Force Chief Gen. Khin Aung Myint (DSA 19) dual charge
AG	Lt. G. Khin Zaw Oo (OTS 56)	Lt. G. Hsan Oo (DSA 24)
QMG	Lt. G. Wai Lwin (DSA 18)	Lt. G. Nyo Saw (DSA 23)
BSO 1	Lt. G. Myint Soe (OTS 61)	M. G. Tun Tun Naung (DSA-25)
BSO 2	Lt. G. Aung Than Htut (DSA 20)	Lt. G. Yar Pyae (DSA-22)
BSO 3	Lt. G. Hla Min (DSA 22)	M.G. Aung Kyaw Zaw (DSa-24)
BSO 4	Lt. G. Thet Naing Win (OTS 56)	M. G. Min Naung (OTS-66)
BSO 5	—	Lt. G. Mya Tun Oo (DSA-25)
BSO 6	—	Lt. G. Kyaw Swe (DSA 22) concurrently Army Chief of Staff*
CMAS	Lt. G. Kyaw Swe (DSA 22)	Lt. G. Mya Tun Oo (DSA 25)

Notes: * He became the Minister of Home Affairs in March 2016 in the new NLD government; n.a. = not applicable; — = vacant; Snr.= Senior; V. Snr. = Vice Senior; Gen. = General; Lt. G. = Lieutenant General; M.G. = Major General; C-in-C = Commander-in-Chief; Dy. = Deputy; JCS = Joint Chief of Staff; AG = Adjutant General; QMG = Quartermaster General; BSO = Bureau of Special Operations (Chief); CMAS = Chief of Military Affairs Security (intelligence); OTS = Officer Training School (for graduates); DSA = Defence Services Academy (for high school leavers);

Sources: Tin Maung Maung Than, "Myanmar Security Outlook and the Myanmar Defence Services", p. 93, in *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, NIDS Joint Research Series No.7 (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2012), pp. 89-102; and personal communications.

The Tatmadaw C-in-C had appointed a new defence minister, promoted the naval chief of staff to the naval C-in-C position while assigning the C-in-C of the Air Force to concurrently hold the third highest ranking position of Tri-Service Chief of Staff. Regional commanders were also promoted to fill the theatre commander positions at the Bureau of Special Operations at the Office of the C-in-C as well.

Major exercises are expensive and logistically demanding so it was no surprise that after one combined arms overland exercise and one naval live-firing exercise in 2014 only one naval exercise was conducted in April 2015. It was code named Sea Shield 2015 and involved frigates, corvettes and fast attack crafts. It involved live-firings of weapons such as surface-to-air missile (SAM), surface-to-surface missile (SSM), anti-submarine ordnance and large-calibre naval guns.

Meanwhile the Myanmar Navy publicized the fleet induction of its first locally-built stealth frigate, named Hsinbyushin (Lord of the White Elephant; the name of a famous warrior king of Myanmar) with pennant number F14, on 24 December 2015 in a ceremony commemorating Navy Day. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing who attended that ceremony to launch eight naval vessels (including Myanmar's first seagoing hospital ship) was reported to have "proudly" said that the "Myanmar Navy aims to become a Blue Water Navy." In a similar manner, the air force also inducted a batch (unspecified number and make) of fixed and rotary wing aircraft on 15 December (Air Force Day).⁴⁵

Concluding remarks

2015 was a taxing year for the Tatmadaw as it suffered heavy losses in the campaign against the MNDAA in the Kokang campaign but learned valuable operational lessons on urban warfare and tactics of conventional warfare and close air support. It had to contend with an international incident when China reacted robustly to accidental bombing of its territory. It had successfully participated in the peace process which reached a milestone by the signing of the NCA in October but the fact remained that less than one-third of the combined armed strength of the EAOs signed the agreement leaving a formidable chunk of well-organized and armed adversaries in a hostile situation. Moreover the overwhelming electoral victory of the NLD which had expressed strong desires to reduce the MDS role in politics and business and its share of the budget was another uncertainty that manifested toward the year end.

Notes

¹ See, e.g., Danielle Bernstein, "Burma's President Orders Ceasefire in Kachin State", VOA News, 13 December 2011, at <http://www.voanews.com/content/burmas-president-orders-ceasefire-in-kachin-state-135582003/168275.html>; and Ba Kaung, "Stop Offensive President's Ceasefire Order Fails to Stop Offensive", *Irrawaddy* online, 28 December 2011, available at http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id+22741. However, EAGs had, all along, argued that since then fighting had erupted time and again due to the Tatmadaw's aggressive actions and offensive operations.

² The information in this section was collated from the following sources: *Burma Bulletin* published monthly by ALTSEAN-BURMA (Alternative Asean Network on Burma) at www.altsean.org; Yee Mon and Lun Min Mang, "Ethnic allies join Kokang fight", *Myanmar Times*, 13 February 2015 at <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13108-tmla-arakan-army-join-kokang-fight.html>; "More Questions than Answers in Kokang Dilemma", editorial, *Irrawaddy*, 25 February 2015, at <http://www.irrawaddy.com/editorial/questions-answers-kokang-dilemma.html>; and Lun Min Mang, "Tatmadaw silent on Kokang casualties", *Myanmar Times*, 28 April 2015, at <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/14153-tatmadaw-silent-on-kokang-casualties.html>.

- ³ See, e.g., *The Global New Light of Myanmar* (hereafter *GNLM*), 27 April 2015, p. 3.
- ⁴ See, *GNLM*, 18 February 2015, p. 1.
- ⁵ See *GNLM*, 19 May 2015, p. 3.
- ⁶ See, *GNLM*, 19 August 2015, p. 1; and *GNLM*, 18 November 2015, p. 3.
- ⁷ See “MNDAA group fired heavy and light weapons into Laukkai city” (in Myanmar language), Myawaddy News, 28 November 2015, reproduced by Thit Htoo Lwin online Myanmar language news site at <http://www.thithtoolwin.com/>.
- ⁸ See, e.g., Guy Dinmore, “Thousands return to Kokang but others flee recent clashes”, *Myanmar Times*, 12 May 2015, at <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/14407-thousands-return-to-kokang-but-others-flee-recent-clashes.html>.
- ⁹ See, e.g., Jared Ferrie, “Myanmar military wins rare praise in war with ethnic Chinese rebels”, Reuters, 26 February 2015, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-clashes-idUSKBN0LU0QQ20150226>.
- ¹⁰ See Qiao Lon, “Chinese Nationals Help Out in Northern Myanmar Conflict Zone”. RFA, 23 February 2015 (for RFA’s Mandarin Service; translated and written in English by Luisetta Mudie) at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/help-02232015105026.html>; and “More Questions than Answers ...” op. cit.
- ¹¹ “N. Myanmar unrest detrimental to Chinese interest”, editorial, Xinhua, 25 February 2015, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-02/25/c_134017676.htm.
- ¹² Xiang Bo, “Chinese diplomat clarifies China’s policy on N. Myanmar conflict”, Xinhuanet, 2 March 2015, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/01/c_134028115.htm.
- ¹³ Guy Dinmore and Lun Ming Mang, “President warns China and rebels over Kokang”, *Myanmar Times*, 3 March 2015, at <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13332-president-warns-china-and-rebels-over-kokang.html>.
- ¹⁴ “The monthly radio address delivered by President U Thein Sein”, 3 April 2015, Myanmar President Office, at <http://www.president-office.gov.mm/en/?q=briefing-room/2015/04/06/id-5250>.
- ¹⁵ “Myanmar commander-in-chief gives exclusive interview to *Mainichi Shimbum*”, (Mainichi Japan) 11 June 2015, at <http://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20150611/p2a/00m/0na/005000c>
- ¹⁶ “Action to be taken if deadly bombing happens again”, Xinhuanet, 14 March 2015, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/14/c_134066699.htm.
- ¹⁷ See “PLA chief of general staff meets with Myanmar military delegation”, China Military Online, 3 April 2015, at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-04/03/content_6428254.htm
- ¹⁸ See “Burmese military denies shelling China”, Democratic Voice of Burma, 19 May 2015, at <http://www.dvb.no/news/burmese-military-denies-shelling-china-myanmar-burma/51115>.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ See BNI, *Deciphering Myanmar’s Peace Process: A Reference Guide* (Chiang Mai: Burma News International, 2015), pp. 140-41; and *Burma Bulletin*, January through June, 2015, passim.
- ²¹ *Burma Bulletin*, November 2015, p. 9.
- ²² BNI, op. cit., pp. 225-26; and *Burma Bulletin*, January through May, July, August and December 2015, passim.
- ²³ BNI, op. cit., p. 106.
- ²⁴ See *Burma Bulletin*, March, April, September and December 2015, passim.
- ²⁵ See BNI, pp. 207-8; *Burma Bulletin*, October through December 2015, passim; and *Political Monitor* No. 31, Euro-Burma Office, 5-19 December 2015, p. 5.
- ²⁶ See BNI, pp. 216-17; and *Burma Bulletin*, August and September 2015, passim

- ²⁷ See *Burma Bulletin*, March 2015, p. 6; and *idem.* April 2015, p. 3.
- ²⁸ See Phanida, “DKBA sacks Brigadier General Saw Kyaw Thet and Colonel Saw San Aung”, *Mizzima*, 24 July 2015, at <http://mizzima.com/news-domestic/dkba-sacks-brigadier-general-saw-kyaw-thet-and-colonel-saw-san-aung>; *Burma Bulletin*, March 2015, p. 6; and *idem.* July 2015, pp. 7, 8.
- ²⁹ Ei Ei Toe Lwin, Military insists on its conditions for peace, *Myanmar Times*, 2 April 2015, at <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/13880-military-insists-on-its-conditions-for-peace.html>
- ³⁰ See “Tatmadaw outlines 6-point policy for peace talk”, *Myanmar Eleven*, AFP, 23 September 2014, at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/aec/Tatmadaw-outlines-6-point-policy-for-peace-talk-30243970.html>.
- ³¹ See BNI, p. 47; and “Speech Delivered by Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services, Senior General Thayaysithu Min Aung Hlaing at the Parade of the 70th Armed Forces Day Held on 27th March, 2015”, available at <http://globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/speech-delivered-by-commander-in-chief-of-defence-services-senior-general-thayaysithu-min-aung-hlaing-at-the-parade-of-the-70th-armed-forces-day-held-on-27th-march-2015/>.
- ³² Min Aung Hlaing interview (*Mainichi Shimbun*), *op. cit.*
- ³³ See BNI, pp. 49, 52.
- ³⁴ See *Burma Bulletin*, June 2015, p. 3; the 15-member SD was led by Naw Zipporah Sein (known to be a hard-line KNU leader) who was not on the NCCT and eight other new members among whom was a TNLA leader that made it difficult for the government which was determined to exclude TNLA from the NCA. See BNI, annex. 2, p. 2 for the list of SD members.
- ³⁵ See *Burma Bulletin*. October 2015, pp. 9, 10; and BNI, pp. 93-95.
- ³⁶ See Hnin Yadana Zaw, “Myanmar military retains veto after constitution change vote fails”, *Reuters*, 25 June 2015, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-idUSKBN0P50Q820150625>.
- ³⁷ The C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was reported to have said on 20 October in Nay Pyi Taw that the military families should be candidates “who have empathy for the army, are able to correctly guard the race and religion and who have no influence from foreign organizations and foreigners.” See Swe Win, “Can soldiers vote in Myanmar elections without fear?”, *Myanmar Now*, 1 November 2015, at <http://mizzima.com/news-election-2015-election-features/can-soldiers-vote-myanmar-elections-without-fear>.
- ³⁸ See, e.g., *Burma Bulletin*, August 2015, pp. 8, 9; and Renaud Egreteau, “A Generals’ Election in Myanmar”, *Diplomat*, 4 November 2015, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/a-generals-election-in-myanmar/>.
- ³⁹ See, e.g., Maung Aung Myoe, “Presidential Hopefuls in Myanmar’s 2015 Elections”, *Perspective* No. 62 (2015), ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. 3 November 2015.
- ⁴⁰ See, e.g., Renaud Egreteau, “The (Few) Generals That Don’t Exit in Myanmar”, *The Diplomat*. 20 November 2015, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/the-few-generals-that-dont-exit-in-myanmar/>,
- ⁴¹ See Gili Cohen, “Israel Tightening Security Ties With Myanmar, Despite Western Sanctions”, *Haaretz*, 17 September 2015, at <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.676289>
- ⁴² See *GNLM*, 24 November 2015, p. 2.
- ⁴³ Timothy McLaughlin, “Myanmar military releases 53 underage recruits: U.N.”, *Reuters*, 30 November 2015, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-military-idUSKBN0TJ0M120151130>.
- ⁴⁴ Jaiden Coonan, “Pestilent mines plague Myanmar’s people”, *Mizzima News*, 27 November 2015, at <http://mizzima.com/news-domestic/pestilent-mines-plague-myanmar%E2%80%99s-people>.
- ⁴⁵ See *GNLM*, 24 December 2015, p.1; *Myanma Alin* (Myanmar language), 25 December 2015, p. 31; and *idem.*, 16 December 2015, p. 6.

