

CHAPTER 3

Myanmar Security Trend and Outlook: Tatmadaw in a New Political Environment

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Introduction

In March 2016, the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF), or Myanmar Defence Services (MDS) which goes by the name “Tatmadaw (Royal Force),” supported the smooth transfer of power from President Thein Sein (whose Union Solidarity and Development Party lost the election) to President Htin Kyaw (nominated by the National League for Democracy that won the election).¹ Despite speculations that the winning party and the Tatmadaw would lock horns as the former challenges the constitutionally-guaranteed political role of the military, the two protagonists seemed to have arrived at a *modus vivendi* that allowed for peaceful coexistence throughout the year.

On the other hand, the last quarter of 2016 saw two seriously difficult security challenges that took the MDS by surprise both in terms of ferocity and suddenness. The consequences of the two violent attacks initiated by Muslim insurgents in the western Rakhine State, and an alliance of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the northern Shan State, have gone beyond purely military challenges in view of their sheer complexity involving complicated issues of identity, ethnicity, and historical baggage as well as socio-economic and political grievances. Occurring at the border fo Bangladesh, the Rakhine conflagration, with religious and racial undertones, invited unwanted attention from Muslim countries while the fighting in the north bordering China raised concerns over potential Chinese reaction to serve its national interest. As such, Tatmadaw’s massive response to these challenges came under great scrutiny from the international community in general and human rights advocacy groups in particular.

¹ In the general election held on 8 November 2015, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (daughter of Tatmadaw founder and independence hero General Aung San) won an unexpected landslide victory over the incumbent Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP; a military-backed party led by ex-military officers) chaired by incumbent President Thein Sein.

The fighting continues

Although the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in Nay Pyi Taw on 15 October 2015, fighting continued with some non-signatory EAOs which claimed to be either defending their territories from MDS encroachment or responding to MDS offensive operations. These seemingly disparate skirmishes apparently culminated in the November offensive of the four-EAO coalition called Northern Alliance–Burma (NA-B comprising the Kachin Independence Army or KIA, Ta'ang National Liberation Army or TNLA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army or MNDAA and Arakan Army or AA)² against Tatmadaw outposts and border towns along the Myanmar-China border in Northern Shan State. Thereafter, the MDS intensified its “clearing” operations against the perpetrators, resulting in heavy fighting in Kachin and Shan states. Whereby artillery, armour, and air attacks were used against particularly KIA strongholds resulting in many casualties on both sides. The intensity of the conflict with the NA-B and KIA in the aftermath of the NA-B offensive could be inferred from the unprecedented number of Tatmadaw officers and other ranks who received gallantry medals in the list of annual honors and awards proclaimed on Independence Day (4 January 2017). One officer (posthumously) was conferred the “Thiha Thura” (the second highest bravery award) and nine officers and five other ranks (seven of them posthumously) were conferred the “Thura” (third highest title). Another 75 military personnel got the gallantry medal for serving heroically. Most of these recipients earned the awards for their part in the operations in northern Myanmar.³

The MDS had also occasional clashes (mainly localized small unit actions), in the Kayin State with DKBA (Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army) elements who had split from the mainstream Democratic Kayin Benevolent Army (an NCA signatory bearing the same acronym) as well as some units of the RCSS/SSA-S (Restoration Council of the Shan State/Shan State Army-South which is an NCA signatory).⁴

² Among them, the AA is believed to be under the tutelage of KIA. Three of them, except the KIA, were responsible for the 2015 assault on Kokang Self-Administered Zone and subsequently excluded from the ongoing peace process (see e.g., Tin Maung Maung Than, “Myanmar Security Outlook: A Taxing Year for the Tatmadaw,” in *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*, NIDS Joint Research Series No. 14 (Tokyo: NIDS, 2016), p.33-43.

³ See, *Kyemon* (Myanmar language daily), 5 January 2017, p. 9; and *Global New Light of Myanmar (GNLM)*, 5 January 2017, p.3.

⁴ Those unwarranted clashes were due to unintentional trespassing by units on the ground with disregard to the agreed boundaries of territories controlled by each side. See, e.g., *GNLM*, 20 November 2016, p.2; and *GNLM*, 18 December 2016, p.3.

There was also intra-EAO fighting: between Kayin armed factions; RCSS against TNLA; and NMSP (New Mon National State Party) forces against KNU (Karen National Union) units in the Mon State.⁵ The AA made occasional forays in the Rakhine State as well leading to clashes with the Tatmadaw.

The NA-B offensive and its aftermath

The NA-B offensive against MDS and police outposts, and soft targets bordering China in the north-eastern Shan State that started on 20 November, was neither as ambitious nor prolonged as the MNDAA Kokang campaign in 2015 but was equally intense and similarly unanticipated. The government forces apparently lost some ground in the beginning but managed to recover quickly and retaliate with overwhelming force.

The onslaught began with coordinated attacks in the Muse district. They first targeted bridges, roads, and the Tatmadaw, and then local militia and police positions in Mongkoe, Muse, Kyukok (Panghseng), and surrounding areas. Border trade was also disrupted as fighting erupted in close proximity to the Muse 105-mile Myanmar-China border trading post and checkpoint, disrupting commerce for five days and thereafter reducing traffic as tensions remained high. The NA-B reportedly marshalled some 2,000 combatants for the campaign and the first wave of pre-dawn attacks targeted four different locations while the second wave in the morning attacked four more places. Roads and bridges leading to the conflict areas were also destroyed with mines and explosives to cut off military reinforcements coming to the aid of outnumbered troops under siege. The town of Mongkoe was partially infiltrated and some government positions inside the town were lost as the battle of Mongkoe raged from 22 November till 4 December when reinforcements arrived and the security forces regained complete control. According to the government, the NA-B assault left 29 dead (15 police, one militia person, and 13 civilians) and 49 wounded (two service personnel and 47 civilians) while 49 firearms were lost (mainly from the police post that was overrun).⁶

⁵ The clashes between EAOs were generally attributed to territorial disputes and 'turf' issues.

⁶ See "Muse border trade value drop by US\$ 210 million," *GNLM*, 3 December 2016, p.5; "Tatmadaw counter attacked and destroyed allied armed groups who forcibly attacked the north-eastern region of the Shan State," (in Myanmar), *Myanma Alin (MAL)*, 9 December 2016, p.9; and "Death toll in fighting against KIA, TNLA, MNDAA, AA totals 29," *GNLM*, 10 December 2016, p.2.

As the result of the conflict, local residents fled to other towns as well as across the border into China. The IDP (internally displaced persons) totaled some 2,600 whereas Chinese authorities disclosed on 29 November that about 14,000 had sought refuge in Yunnan province.⁷

China which has always been concerned about border stability, and security did not remain silent though it was an internal affair of the sovereign Myanmar. Almost immediately the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar issued a statement urging all parties in the conflict to take “concrete and effective measures for an immediate ceasefire” and reminding the “Chinese citizens” in the country to watch out for their own safety.⁸ On 22 November, Chinese defence ministry stated that its military “is keeping high alert and taking necessary measures to resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security” and to “protect” Chinese nationals “in the border areas.” On 26 November, Chinese reinforcements were reportedly seen arriving in Shweli, a border town opposite Myanmar.⁹ On the other hand, Chinese attempts to facilitate talks between the NA-B and the government for the cessation of hostilities in the context of the peace process did not seem to yield any tangible outcome.¹⁰

The NA-B offensive was probably seen by the Tatmadaw, as well as the government, as an escalation of conflict and inimical to the peace process notwithstanding the KIA’s statement on 23 November that it “was a controlled/limited offensive... not intended to destroy national reconciliation.”¹¹ Moreover, the initial setback at Mongkoe might be regarded by the MDS as an affront to its pride and dignity. Despite the TNLA’s assertion that the “main objective” of the “joint offensive” was to force the military to stop attacking the KIA and settle the issue politically, the Tatmadaw refused to yield and stepped up its area clearing operations after the

⁷ See, MAL, 14 December 2016, p.8; and Mizzima, “What had China done during the military conflict in Northern Myanmar?,” 2 December 2016, <http://www.mizzima.com/news-opinion/what-has-china-done-during-military-conflict-northern-myanmar>.

⁸ “Statement of Chinese Embassy on military conflicts in Myanmar,” *Global Times*, 20 November 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1019128.shtml>.

⁹ See, Mratt Kyaw Thu, “China strengthens border amid clashes,” *Frontier Myanmar*, 27 November 2016, <http://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/china-strengthens-border-force-amid-clashes>.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Lun Min Maung, “China, Myanmar meet as fighting continues in Shan State,” *Myanmar Times*, 30 November 2016, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/23969-china-myanmar-meet-as-fighting-continues-in-shan-state.html>.

¹¹ See, Sithu Aung Myint, “Fighting for peace in Muse, the KIA shoots itself in the foot,” *Frontier Myanmar*, 11 December 2016, <http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/fighting-for-peace-in-muse-the-kia-shoots-itself-in-the-foot>; for a different perspective, see Sai Wansai, “CONFLICT IN SHAN STATE: Aftermath of Northern Alliance offensives,” *S.H.A.N.*, 30 November 2016, <http://english.panglong.org/2016/11/30/conflict-in-shan-state-aftermath-of-northern-alliance-offensives/>.

NA-B withdrew from the battlefield.¹² In fact, in December, Tatmadaw zeroed in on the KIA, the apparent leader of the northern alliance, and relentlessly attacked and overran several KIA strongholds using air strikes, artillery, and ground assaults with multiple units.¹³ As the year ended there seemed to be no respite in the fighting against the KIA despite condemnation of the government by the UNFC (United Nationalities Federal Council), the principal organization representing EAOs not party to the NCA, for not acting to prevent the MDS “offensive.”¹⁴

Meanwhile, the Tatmadaw proclaimed it was fighting a “just war” and labeled the NA-B members as “terrorist insurgents.” On 2 December, Myanmar’s defence minister urged the lower house of parliament to designate the NA-B as a coalition of “terrorist organizations” because they attacked civilians, damaged non-military infrastructure, and destroyed public properties. However, the parliament did not carry out this proposal. But on 7 December, the Shan State parliament passed the motion to stipulate the four EAOs of the NA-B as “terrorist organizations” to the dismay of the eight EAOs who are NCA signatories, leading them to issue a statement decrying the terrorist label as “inflammatory and could negatively affect the peace process.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, rallies to support the Tatmadaw’s “just war” against terrorist insurgents were staged involving thousands of supporters in Yangon on 18 December 2016 and Meiktila on 22 December.¹⁶

As the year drew to an end, the knock-on effects of the NA-B’s November provocation remained unabated and likely to continue in the form of sustained fighting in the north with both sides refusing to relent and hold their positions to the detriment of the peace process.

¹² Kyaw Khaw (translated by Thet Ko Ko), “TNLA Spokesman: ‘The Joint Offensive is Necessary,’” *Irrawaddy*, 22 November 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/tnla-spokesman-the-joint-offensive-is-necessary.html>.

¹³ It is likely that the MDS which was almost unscathed in the initial NA-B offensive suffered many casualties in heavy fighting with the KIA and resulting in large number of personnel receiving gallantry titles and medals.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *GNLM*, 18 December 2016, p.2; *GNLM*, 28 December 2016, p.2; Anthony Davis, “Myanmar’s northeastern conflict approaches watershed,” *Nikkei*, 16 December 2016, at <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Anthony-Davis/Myanmar-s-northeastern-conflict-approaches-watershed>; and “Responses to Shan clashes ‘unbefitting a government seeking peace’: UNFC,” *Frontier Myanmar*, 15 December 2016, <http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/responses-to-shan-clashes-unbefitting-a-government-seeking-peace-unfc>.

¹⁵ Saw Yan Naing, “NCA Signatories Against Using the Term ‘Terrorist Organizations,’” *Irrawaddy*, 12 December 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/nca-signatories-against-using-the-term-terrorist-organizations.html>.

¹⁶ See *GNLM*, 19 December 2016, p.9; and “Rally for Support of Tatmadaw Held in Meikhtila,” *RFA Burmese*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUAJXe66C38>.

***The Insurgency in Rakhine.*¹⁷**

Unlike the NA-B offensive, the Muslim insurgency in the restive Rakhine State targeted the Border Guard Police (BGP), who were seen as a somewhat weak link in the security chain in Rakhine. However, it was not a spontaneous uprising but calculated move led by foreign-trained dedicated leaders who had infiltrated the communities in northern Rakhine for years beforehand. Drawing sustenance from the Gulf States, neighbouring Bangladesh, and Pakistan, they had formed underground cells and conducted military and explosive training in remote border areas and, to a lesser extent, in foreign countries as well. Exploiting the frustrations and anger of the disenfranchised local Muslims and playing the religious card they managed to persuade a small group of people in the community to follow them in the armed struggle. Through bribery and intimidation, and operating on a need-to-know basis, the movement - identified as Harakah al-Yaqin (Faith Movement in Arabic or “HaY” for short) -¹⁸ was able to exercise sufficient information security to encourage complacency among the authorities.

On 9 October 2016, hundreds of attackers (mostly armed with primitive weapons) staged a surprise night assault on three BGP posts in Maungdaw Township including the headquarters of the BGP command in the district. The objective appeared to be obtaining firearms and perhaps to create a demonstration effect to enhance its appeal among the sympathetic sections of the Muslim community. They seized 51 weapons and over 10,000 rounds of ammunition, leaving nine policemen dead. When the BGP and military responded later in “clearing operations,” the security forces were subjected to sniping, ambushes, and mob attacks. The insurgents employed IEDs (improvised explosive devices) as well and managed to seize 16 more weapons from the security forces up to mid-December (26 were eventually recovered). They employed guerrilla tactics and utilize their ability to blend with non-combatants in the Muslim villages. There were 21 skirmishes up to 13 November and 69 “Bengalis” were killed, while the Tatmadaw lost seven men including a commanding officer.¹⁹

¹⁷ This section is based on Bertil Lintner, “Militancy in Arakan State,” *Irrawaddy*, 15 December 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/militancy-in-arakan-state.html>; and International Crisis Group (ICG), “Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State,” Asia Report No. 283, 15 December 2016.

¹⁸ The Myanmar government called it Aqa Mul Mujahidin meaning “communities of fighters” (ICG op. cit., p.12).

¹⁹ See, *G/NLM*, 19 December 2016, p.1,3; and Mizzima (AFP), “Almost 70 killed in month of Rakhine violence: Myanmar army,” 15 November 2016.

The Tatmadaw's actions during the clearing operations that included sweeping Muslim villages and arresting suspects were regarded by international human rights organizations, as well as Islamic states and Muslim majority countries, as using excessive force and even "genocide." Accusations of rape, arson, and indiscriminate arrests mounted as thousands of "Rohingyas" fled their villages and many ended up in Bangladesh. On social media and print as well as broadcast media condemnations abound and calls for "jihad" were loudly heard. Intervention by ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations in which Myanmar is a member) was mooted and Malaysian Prime Minister Najib went to the extent of joining a protest rally in Kuala Lumpur.²⁰

The Myanmar Government responded by vigorously refuting the allegations through state-owned media²¹ and diplomatic channels. It garnered the support of the Muslim elders and religious leaders in the heartland and an inquiry commission was formed on 1 December to investigate the "truth" about the attacks and to "investigate whether existing laws, rules, and regulations were observed" in the "measures" taken (an indirect reference to actions related to allegations).²² However, this 13-member commission, chaired by Vice-President U Myint Swe and comprising of the police chief, members of parliament, religious leaders, officials and members of the Myanmar Human Rights Commission (MHRC), tasked to submit a report by 31 January 2017 is unlikely to convince the detractors.

Tatmadaw and peace

Tatmadaw still insists that the EAOs must accept the following six principles for peace:

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;

²⁰ See, e.g., *Human Rights Watch*, "Burma: Military Burned Villages in Rakhine State," 13 December 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/13/burma-military-burned-villages-rakhine-state>; Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq, "The Rohingya Crisis: Regional Security Implications," *RSIS Commentary*, No. 293, 2 December 2016; and Theophilus Qek, Will Najib's vocal defense of the Rohingya backfire?," *The Diplomat*, 6 December 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/will-najibs-vocal-defense-of-the-rohingya-backfire/>.

²¹ See, e.g., *GNLN*, 17 November 2016, p.1,9; *GNLN*, 24 December 2016, p.1.

²² "President's Office Notification 89/2016," *GNLN*, 2 December 2016, p.4.

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.

It had also consistently blocked the inclusion of MNDA, TNLA, and AA in the peace dialogue insisting that they must give up the armed struggle altogether. In general, it had not budged from the position that DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) must come first before SSR (security sector reform) in the sequencing of the peace process. After the NA-B offensive, it seemed that the Tatmadaw's position of the aforementioned issues had further hardened.

Tatmadaw's other activities

To enhance its international standing and professionalism, as well as to participate in national development and state building, the Tatmadaw usually undertakes non-combat activities as well. The past year saw a flurry of military-to-military engagements with foreign militaries through the exchange of visits by military leaders, disaster relief efforts, and releases of child soldiers, among others.

Military-to-military relations

Notwithstanding participation in and hosting of formal ASEAN related military conventions and meetings or bilateral meetings with neighbouring countries' military establishment, military diplomacy was spearheaded by C-in-C Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing and his deputy Vice-Snr, General Soe Win. Their foreign travel agenda often included acquiring major military procurement, training for Myanmar officers, and discussing border security issues.

In 2016 Myanmar C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing paid a visit to China at the end of October and called upon President Xi Jinping on 1 November, reiterating the longstanding friendship and cooperation between the two neighbours. He also visited Kunming in Yunnan and attended a dinner hosted by the political commissar of Yunnan military region. It is believed that border security was on the agenda in

talks there.²³

In September, General Xu Qiliang, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission (CMC), visited Myanmar and held talks with Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing on 6 September. General Xu emphasized that the "Chinese military is willing to work with the Myanmar military to further strengthen strategic communication and push forward pragmatic cooperation in various fields" which includes "reciprocal group visits, personnel training as well as joint training and exercises." In addition he said, "China and Myanmar should strengthen cooperation to ensure the peace and stability in the border areas of the two countries." In response Myanmar C-in-C expressed appreciation for "the long-term support and assistance offered by the Chinese military" and that Myanmar "is willing to further consolidate and develop the friendly relations between the two militaries, expand and deepen pragmatic cooperation, and promote the border security and stability."²⁴

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was invited in November to participate in the meeting of the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) for the first time on 9 November where he spoke and supposedly reiterated "Tatmadaw's guardianship role of the country" and "its stance of refusal to let loose its holds on political power, until such times it sees as appropriate and secure." He also referred to the emergency provisions in the 2008 Constitution that obviate the need for an outright military coup.²⁵

Another significant visitor to Myanmar was Japan's General Nakatani in early June. He became the first Japanese defense minister to visit Myanmar since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1954. On 6 June, he called upon State Counsellor Daw Aung San Su Kyi, Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing, and Defence Minister Lt. General Sein Win. Details of the discussions were unavailable but, referring to unnamed Japanese media sources, one analyst mentioned that "one of the points of discussion during the meetings was support by the Japan Self-Defense

²³ "Military Chief in China to deepen ties," *Eleven News*, 30 October 2016, <http://elevenmyanmar.com/political/6378>; and Military Chief meets with Chinese President," *Eleven News*, 3 November 2016, <http://elevenmyanmar.com/local/6443>

²⁴ "Senior Chinese military leader meets with Myanmar military chief in Myanmar," *China military online*, 7 September 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2016-09/07/content_7245981.html.

²⁵ Sai Wansai, "COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF'S BRUSSELS VISIT: Reiteration of continued quasi military-civilian rule," *S.H.A.N.*, 16 November 2016, <http://english.panglong.org/2016/11/16/commander-in-chiefs-brussels-visit-reiteration-of-continued-quasi-military-civilian-rule/>; and Khin Zaw Win, "More than Just a Threat to the Peace Process: The Beginning of a Full-Fledged Crisis?," *Tea Circle blog* (Oxford), <https://teacircleoxford.com/2016/12/07/more-than-just-a-threat-to-the-peace-process-the-beginning-of-a-full-fledged-crisis/>.

Forces (JSDF) for capacity-building for Myanmar's military, part of Tokyo's efforts to boost its assistance to Naypyidaw across a range of areas."²⁶

Relations with the Indian military has been good despite the existence of Naga separatist rebels in the border area which occasionally leads to adverse incidents of violent raids by them into India. Those attacks apparently elicited hot-pursuit tactics by Indian security forces leading to reports in the Indian press of Indian cross-border incursions into Myanmar. In one case, the *Indian Express* cited unnamed sources that claimed that on 19 August 2016, troops "involved in an operation targeting an NSCN (Khaplang) military camp crossed several hundred metres into Myanmar territory." However, "Indian Army officials had denied that troops crossed the India-Myanmar border."²⁷ Myanmar authorities also dismissed the news that the alleged incursion took place, stating that "Myanmar would neither accept nor encourage any armed group to station on its soil."²⁸

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster relief (HADR)

Due to "incessant rain from mid-July" onwards, "71 townships in six regions and three states" were flooded. As of 13 August, altogether "more than 430,000 people were evacuated" according to Myanmar officials. At the press conference on 14 August, the Union Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement said that there were "close coordination and cooperation with military troops in affected" areas. The military provided helicopters for "immediate airlifts of relief supplies" to inaccessible places. Minister added that "[t]he role of the army in response to disasters is of paramount importance" and added that the "military medical teams would rush instantly to places where there was a shortage of health staff."

Issues concerning human rights

Many of the concerns that had attracted international as well as local attention over many years were related to issues regarding summary executions, child soldiers, and landmines. In 2016, some notable actions were taken by the MDS to address them.

²⁶ See, Prashanth Parameswaran, "Japan, Myanmar Eye Stronger Defense Ties," *The Diplomat*, 8 June 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/japan-myanmar-eye-stronger-defense-ties/>; and for a historical perspective, see Maung Aung Myoe, "Tokyo revives military ties with Myanmar," *Nikkei Asian Review*, 27 July 2016, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305661469_Tokyo_revives_military_ties_with_Myanmar.

²⁷ "Targeting NSCN(K) camp, Army entered Myanmar," *Indian Express*, 21 August 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/targeting-nsnk-camp-army-entered-myanmar-2988133/>.

²⁸ "Myanmar denies gun battle between Indian Army, Naga rebels," *The Tribune*, 22 August 2016, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/myanmar-denies-gun-battle-between-indian-army-naga-rebels/283798.html>.

In an unprecedented move, the military prosecuted and punished a group of soldiers and high-ranking officers for “murdering five civilians in Mong Yaw village [Shan State] in June” 2016. The court-martial found four officers - a colonel, two majors and a captain - and three other ranks guilty and sentenced them to five-years imprisonment (with hard labour) after stripping them of their ranks.²⁹

Tatmadaw continued cooperating with UNICEF (United Nations Children Fund) on preventing the recruitment of child soldiers and discharging those who had been inducted into the army. After investigations, underage (below 18 when recruited; often involuntarily) boys were released in batches to the care of their families or community elders. In 2016, a total of 46 persons were released in mid-March, with a further discharge in early September of 55 child recruits. A grand total of 800 persons were discharged in more than a dozen batches since this cooperation with UNICEF was launched in 2012.³⁰

Addressing a parliamentary session on 12 September, deputy defence minister Major General Myint New admitted that the MDS were still producing and deploying landmines in conflict areas but with “reasonable limits.” He said, “In armed conflict areas, [the Tatmadaw] lays landmines in regions where soldiers can’t be positioned, for the security of the area, with the aim to prevent destroying factories, bridges and power lines or towers.” However, he claimed that affected areas “are fenced and landmine warning signs are posted there.” Myanmar has yet to sign the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty and “is the only state to have laid mines each year since then.” The deputy defence minister stated that efforts had been made to educate the public and Tatmadaw was “working together with local people to conduct humanitarian landmine clearance activities in the confluence of Thumwehta, Hpapun, Khaw Pote, Nat Taung and Dar Gwin in Kayin State.”³¹ It seems that the landmine problem will persist for the foreseeable future.

²⁹ Lawi Weng, “Burma Army Soldiers Sentenced to Five Years With Hard Labor for Killing Civilians,” *Irrawaddy*, 16 September 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burma-army-soldiers-sentenced-to-five-years-with-hard-labor-for-killing-civilians.html>.

³⁰ Sean Gleeson, “Military releases an additional 55 child soldiers, but recruitment issues linger,” *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 September 2016, <http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/news/military-releases-55-child-soldiers-recruitment-issues-linger>.

³¹ Htoo Thant (translated by Thiri Min Htun), “Tatmadaw insists landmine use kept within reasonable minimum,” <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/22475-tatmadaw-insists-landmine-use-kept-within-reasonable-minimum.html>.

Tatmadaw command and force modernization

Tatmadaw C-in-C Senior General Min Aung Hlaing had made important new appointments, both to rejuvenate the command hierarchy and to replace those released to join the executive branch and the peace process. Moreover, in a most significant development, Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing himself obtained an extension of five more years after he reached the mandatory retirement age of sixty in 2016.³² As such he would be able to continue as the Tatmadaw C-in-C throughout the NLD government's five-year term and the period of the 2020 General Election. This allows for continuity of Tatmadaw command and may well provide a stabilizing effect on civil-military relations under the NLD Government.

Table 1: Generational Change in Army Leadership since the coup

Position	September 1988	November 1997	December 2016
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.	Gen. Mya Tun Oo (DSA 25)
AG	B.G. Aung Ye Kyaw (OTS 6)	Lt.G. Win Myint (OTS 28)	Lt.G. San 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)	Lt.G. Tun Tun Naung (DSA-25)
BSO 2	M.G. Chit Swe (OTS 8)	--	Lt.G. Than Tun Oo (DSA-24)
BSO 3	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Aung Kyaw Zaw (DSA-24)
BSO 4	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Min Naung (OTS-66)
BSO 5	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Aung Kyaw Zaw (DSA-24) concurrent
BSO 6	n.a.	n.a.	Lt.G. Soe Htut (OTS 64)
CMAS (DDSI)**	B.G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)	Lt.G. Khin Nyunt (OTS 25)**	Lt.G. Soe Htut (OTS 64) concurrent

Notes: 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

³² See, e.g. *Reuters*, "Myanmar army chief to get five-year extension as talks with Suu Kyi continue-media," 13 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-army-idUSKCN0VM06S>.

The generational change³³ in the command hierarchy up to the end of 2016 is shown in Table 1, while Table 2 depicts the change of top army personnel in the period between the beginning of (USDP) President Thein Sein's elected government and the eve of 2015 General Election.

Table 2: Change in Army Leadership under President Thein Sein's Government (2011-2015)

Position	November 2011	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. San 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), p.89-102; and personal communications.

³³ September 1988 was the month in which the military coup took place after the popular uprising that toppled the Socialist one-party regime. November 1997 was when the ruling military junta known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) replaced the old guard members with younger commanders and rebranded itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The army has always taken the top leadership positions in the Tatmadaw and the short stint served by the air force C-in-C as JCS was an interim measure during the transition from the USDP to the NLD government.

As could be seen from comparing Table 1 and Table 2, the Tatmadaw C-in-C had promoted Lt. General Mya Tun Oo to the position of Joint Chief-of-Staff, which is a four-star general post and is regarded as the third highest position in Tatmadaw command hierarchy.³⁴ While the latter's previous position as the chief of BSO 5 was given to the incumbent BSO 3 chief, the intelligence chief (Chief of Military Affairs Security) position vacated by General Mya Tun Oo was filled concurrently by the new chief of BSO 6 who replace Lt. General Kyaw Swe at BSO 6. Lt. General Kyaw Swe was seconded to the NLD government to serve as the Minister of Home Affairs in President Htin Kyaw's cabinet. Similarly, BSO 2 was given to a new appointee, who replaced Lt. General Yar Pyae, who joined the union-level Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) as chairman.³⁵

Despite the large cost and complex logistics involved, MDS held joint maneuvers at Meiktila in Central Myanmar on 24 September 2016, in which air and land forces including armour and artillery took part. The live-firing exercise was attended by the army and air force top brass, and the C-in-C mentioned that "the joint military drill is aimed at preventing foreign invasion."³⁶

It seems that the maritime live-firing exercise code named "Sea Shield" has become an annual affair. It was conducted from 22 February to 2 March 2016 in the Bay of Bengal near Myanmar's Cocoa Island. Apparently, SSMs (surface-to-surface missile) and air-defence weapons, as well as naval guns, were fired in this combined fleet exercise participated by Myanmar Navy's frigates, corvettes, and fast attack crafts. Unlike in previous years, in which the exclusion zone in the exercise area was undisturbed, three unidentified high-speed aircraft reportedly flew over the area where the Navy was holding its exercise.³⁷

³⁴ See, e.g., "Lt-Gen Mya Tun Oo Appointed Burmese Military's Chief of General Staff," *Irrawaddy*, 29 August 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/lt-gen-mya-tun-oo-appointed-burmese-militarys-chief-of-general-staff.html>.

³⁵ The JMC is the highest body in the hierarchy of monitoring committees responsible for ensuring that the ceasefires agreed upon under the NCA hold.

³⁶ *GNLM*, 25 September 2016, p.2. No such exercise was held in 2015 though it was staged in 2014.

³⁷ No date was mentioned in the report of the incident. See, Akyaw, "Unknown jets fly over Myanmar navy: military," *Eleven Myanmar online*, 27 February 2016, <http://elevenmyanmar.com/local/unknown-jets-fly-over-myanmar-navy-military>; and Anthony Davis, "Myanmar Navy holds exercise in strategic waters," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 2 March 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/58468/myanmar-navy-holds-exercise-in-strategic-waters>.

From 13 to 16 February 2016, the navies of Myanmar and India conducted their fourth joint patrol in the Andaman Sea. Myanmar sent the frigate UMS Aung Zeya (first locally built capital ship) and the fast attack craft FAC 563. Officially known as IMCOR (India-Myanmar Coordinated Patrol), it involved two Indian naval vessels which joined the Myanmar ships to patrol along the International Maritime Boundary Line, and a standard operating procedure between the two navies for IMCOR was signed at the conclusion of the patrol.³⁸

On 24 December 2016, the Myanmar Navy commissioned its first stealth missile corvette, the UMS Tabin Shwe Hti (named after a famous Myanmar warrior king), together with seven support vessels. With reduced radar cross-section and armed with a 76 mm (Oto Melara) cannon, air-defence guns and missiles, as well as Chinese C-802 anti-ship missiles, the corvette was locally built. The commissioning ceremony attended by Tatmadaw C-in-C was held in conjunction with the celebration commemorating the 69th anniversary of the Myanmar Navy Day. The C-in-C lauded the Navy for saving costs and enhancing capability in building all these new naval vessels in its shipyard.³⁹

On 22 August 2016, the Myanmar Air Force inducted two Chinese Y-8F-200W medium lift transport together with 10 German Grob G120P (two-seater, single prop) trainers. On that occasion, Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing reportedly said “that new aircraft and equipment were meant to ensure an integrated national defence.” He also stressed the need to focus on human resources development that would enable “the handling of advanced military hardware.”⁴⁰ Another induction ceremony was performed on 15 December 2016, commemorating the 69th anniversary of Air Force Day. Four EC 120B helicopters and four 1900D light transport aircraft were inducted.⁴¹

³⁸ “Indian, Myanmar Navy conclude joint Andaman Sea Patrol,” *Naval Today online*, 18 February 2016, <http://navaltoday.com/2016/02/18/indian-myanmar-navy-conclude-joint-andaman-sea-patrol/>.

³⁹ Mrityunjoy Mazumdar, “Myanmar Navy commissions first corvette with reduced RCS,” *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 29 December 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/66579/myanmar-navy-commissions-first-corvette-with-reduced-rs>.

⁴⁰ Mrityunjoy Mazumdar, “Myanmar air force commissions transport and trainer aircraft,” *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 31 August 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/63298/myanmar-air-force-commissions-transport-and-trainer-aircraft>.

⁴¹ See, *GMLM*, 16 December 2016, p.4. The light transport aircraft is likely to be the twin-engine Beechcraft turboprop with a capacity for 19 passengers.

Russian sources revealed that during the year three Yakovlev Yak-130 advanced military trainers were delivered to the Myanmar Air Force. The acquisition of the dual use twin-engine aircraft, which reportedly could carry up to 3,000 kg of ordnance in the light attack role, was an important milestone in Myanmar's air combat training infrastructure. Previously, only turbo-prop aircraft (Pilatus P-9) had been used for advanced training.⁴²

A significant development in augmenting the air force's aging fighter inventory (Chinese J-7M and Q-5; Russian MiG-29) was reported in November 2016, stating that Myanmar had agreed to purchase JF-17 Thunder (Chinese FC-1 Xiaolong) advanced multi-role jet fighters jointly manufactured by China and Pakistan.⁴³

The incessant fighting with EAOs and operations in Rakhine, as well as the acquisition of military hardware, meant a military budget that exceeded all other ministries.⁴⁴ Yet, under the NLD government, Tatmadaw did not suffer budget cuts despite the former's policy of financial austerity and trimming expenditure of government ministries and agencies. The proposed defence budget of over Kyats 1.24 trillion (over US\$ 960 million) for fiscal year 2016/17 was passed, uncut by the last sitting of the Union Assembly in January 2016, and just before its five-year term ended.⁴⁵ In fact, the supplementary defence budget of over Kyats 100 billion (US\$ 75 million), or some 8 percent of the proposed total supplementary budget, was the only one left unscathed while all other ministries saw their requests reduced by the Union Assembly.⁴⁶

⁴² See, *Global Security Newswire*, "Russia Supplies to Myanmar First Three Yak-130 Combat Trainers," 21 March 2017, http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/myanmar/myanmar-170321-sputnik01.htm?_m=3n%2e002a%2e1970%2elm0ao0bfy4; it can take off and land on short rough airfields and "is the only trainer available anywhere whose aerodynamic layout is similar to that of modern agile fighters" (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/yak-130.html>).

⁴³ See "Myanmar Air Force confirms purchase of JF-17 «Thunder» fighter jets," *Defence Blog*, 7 November 2016, <http://defence-blog.com/news/myanmar-air-force-confirms-purchase-of-jf-17-thunder-fighter-jets.html>.

⁴⁴ It was reported that the defence budget for fiscal year 2016/17 (ending on 31 March) was over 14 per cent of the government budget. See, "Hluttaw approves over Kyat 100 billion in the supplementary budget for the military," (in Myanmar language), *BBC Burmese*, 14 December 2016, reproduced by Thitoolwin News, http://www.thitoolwin.com/2016/12/blog-post_852.html.

⁴⁵ This was a modest sum in absolute value but it and also in relative terms as Myanmar's GDP for 2015 calendar year was about US\$ 80 billion. See, Htoo Thant (translated by Thiri Min Htun), "USDP majority parliament passes trimmed budget for next govt," *Myanmar Times*, 21 January 2016, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/18574-usdp-majority-parliament-passes-trimmed-budget-for-next-govt.html>.

⁴⁶ Htet Naing Zaw (translated by Thet Ko Ko), "Defense Ministry Gets Lion's Share of Supplementary Budget," *Irrawaddy online*, 14 December 2016, <http://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/defense-ministry-gets-lions-share-of-supplementary-budget.html>.

Concluding Remarks

Under the NLD-led administration, the Tatmadaw appeared to have comfortably settled in despite losing the mutually supportive, or perhaps, the symbiotic relationship it had enjoyed with the previous government due to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's (de facto leader of the government) pragmatic approach and Snr. General Min Aung Hlaing's adroitness in dealing with the State Counsellor. Although the peace process has been driven by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her lieutenants, the proceedings thus far have yet to challenge or erode Tatmadaw's positions on NCA ascension and EAOs' inclusion in political dialogue. Operationally, the MDS appeared to have a rather wide latitude and even some public support despite EAOs condemnations of its use of force.

However, in the two ongoing security threats facing the Tatmadaw there appeared to be no easy solutions due to their complexity and complicated historical baggage carried by the adversaries. The problem of the NA-B is embedded in the larger scheme of ethnic conflict and entangled with the peace process as well. It cannot simply be dealt with in a purely military counter-insurgency (COIN) approach. As demands for peace grow, the MDS could find itself perceived as a stumbling block in future peace-making. On the other hand, if the NA-B and other non-signatories upped the ante, both militarily and politically playing the secession card, a national crisis might emerge. In such a situation compounded by escalated Rakhine insurgency, one cannot rule out a temporary constitutional transfer of power to the Tatmadaw.⁴⁷

In a different way, the Rakhine insurgency could become a quagmire for Tatmadaw's field forces. An elusive and organic enemy led by fanatical shadowy individuals embedded in a sea of sympathetic, disenfranchised and frustrated people, would be a COIN nightmare. The Muslim insurgents engaging in asymmetric warfare would be extremely difficult to deal with. The overwhelming firepower of the Tatmadaw is much less effective in such circumstances. The battle for hearts and minds of the Muslim community would require close cooperation among the military, police, regional and union (central) administration and local stakeholders as well the international community which is sympathetic to the the stateless Muslims' plight. How Tatmadaw leaders accommodate conflicting requirements, demands and

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Khin Zaw Win, *op. cit.*

viewpoints, and translate them into operational terms would determine MDS' future role in this conflict.