

CHAPTER 9

Tatmadaw and Myanmar's Security Challenges

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Introduction

Myanmar after gaining independence from Britain in January 1948 has been beset by insurgencies, some of which began even before it became a sovereign state.¹ Soon after gaining independence the state was in turmoil as ideological and ethnic rebellions broke out in succession². The Burma Communist Party (BCP), sections of the People's Volunteer Organization (PVO, a paramilitary force composed of veterans of World War II), and major elements of two army battalions rebelled in quick succession. The Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) rebellion began in January 1949 and some dissident ethnic minorities also took up arms.³ Thus, right from the beginning of its formation, security challenges to the Myanmar state took the form of hard security threats posed by armed rebellion that warranted the military's robust responses. As such, Myanmar's state leaders have been fixated on military might in responding to perceived threats emanating within its border or from abroad.

Throughout the first four decades of Myanmar's independence, troops of the Tatmadaw (royal force) or Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) were continually engaged in military operations against ideological and ethnic insurgencies as well as remnants of the Kuomintang (KMT) army that had fled to the Thai-Myanmar border after losing control of China to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁴ Given the continual military threat posed by domestic rebels, MAF had been, until the 1990s, largely

¹ Rakhine (Arakan) separatists and the Trotskyite faction of the Communist Party (popularly known as Red-Flag Communists) initiated armed insurrection in 1947.

² For accounts of the 'civil war', see, e.g., Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed, 1991), pp. 106–22, 125–54. For the government's view, see *Burma and the Insurrections* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1949); and *Is it a People's Liberation? A Short Survey of Communist Insurrection in Burma* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1952).

³ For a summary, see Smith, *op cit.*, pp. 44–48, 50–53, 62–64, 71–87, 110–18. See, also, *KNDO Insurrection* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationary, 1949). For a different perspective, see, e.g., Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-Foot Colonel*, Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 113 (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1980).

⁴ See Maung Maung, *Grim War Against KMT* (Rangoon: n.p., 1953); and Robert H. Taylor, *Foreign and Domestic Consequences of the KMT Intervention in Burma*, Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, Data Paper no. 93 (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1973).

geared towards counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. The result was an infantry-heavy army dominating the force structure.

Hence, though there was a variety of successive governments of Myanmar — from the elected multi-party parliamentary government of the 1950s, through the military Revolutionary Council (RC) which took power in the 1962 coup, to the one-party socialist government instituted in 1974— the defence posture based on COIN thrust remained unchanged with very little upgrading or modernization of the armed forces.⁵ However, after the junta (State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC) came to power in September 1988, there has been a significant expansion in the size of the armed forces as well as substantial modernization through an acquisition of more potent weapons to replace outdated armaments. Meanwhile, beginning with the Kokang and Wa ethnic forces of the BCP (in 1989) altogether 17 major armed groups (perhaps 80 per cent of the armed opposition) had made ceasefire agreements with the junta by 1997. Only some Shan and Kayin ethnic insurgents continue to pursue armed struggle. Nevertheless, the expansionary trend and force modernization efforts continue under the present State Peace and Development Council (SPDC; formed in 1997) even as it prepared itself to transfer power to a constitutional government in 2010.

Military's National Security Perspective and Threat Perceptions

The Myanmar language word for the term security is *lon-choan-yei*. Its connotation implies a sense of safety through an enveloping impermeability. For various reasons associated with Myanmar's historical experience with colonialism, World War II, the civil war (in the first decade of independence) and the Cold War, as well as the multi-ethnic nature of its polity (officially identified as 135 nationalities in eight major ethnic groups)⁶, successive Myanmar governments have always adopted a state-centric national security approach with much emphasis on national sovereignty, territorial

⁵ However, there had been some organizational changes and steady expansion of combat infantry units from the mid sixties to the late-seventies to counter the growing strength of armed insurgents; especially the Communists (see Tin Maung Maung Than, "Burma's National Security and Defence Posture," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* [hereafter *CSEA*] 11, no. 1 (1989), pp. 44–45.

⁶ See Hla Min, "Political Situation in the Union of Myanmar and Its Role in the Region" (Yangon: Ministry of Defence, April 2004).

integrity and national unity (of all ethnic nationalities).⁷ Apparently, the ruling elites, be they parliamentarians or military commanders), like their counterparts in many Asia states have always “felt that states were the best (and perhaps only) providers of security and.... ferociously guarded the principles of absolute sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs.” It follows that the “state, usually referred to as *naing-ngan-daw* (literally, royal state) has been the primary referent for ‘national’ security” and led to the reification of the state.⁸ Moreover, the conceptualization and scope of national security in Myanmar since its independence in 1948, “have essentially been determined by a small elite [dominated by the military] who, for all practical purposes, seem to be insulated from societal” concerns.⁹ All along, Myanmar’s security outlook has been preoccupied with domestic threats, the most serious being internal war characterized by armed challenges from a variety of ethnic and ideological insurgencies that constitute a distinctly military threat.

On the other hand, external aggression has also been on the minds of military leaders not only because some neighbours did have ideological and logistic links with internal insurgencies (at times even supported them)¹⁰ but also due to the fact that the United States together with its Western allies had until recently¹¹ supporting calls for regime change and had imposed sanctions and arms embargoes to punish the military junta

⁷ This section draws heavily from Tin Maung Maung Than, “Myanmar: Preoccupation with Regime Survival, National Unity, and Stability” in Alagappa op. cit., pp. 390–416. See, also, Mary P Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 2003) for the historical roots of Myanmar’s state security concerns.

⁸ See Tin Maung Maung Than, op. cit., p. 394.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

¹⁰ The Chinese Communist Party had supported the Burma Communist Party rebellion for nearly three decades until Deng Xiopeng put a stop to it (see Maung Aung Myoe, “The Counterinsurgency in Myanmar: The Government’s Response to the Burma Communist Party”, PhD dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999). Thailand used ethnic rebel groups straddling its border with Myanmar as a buffer for decades until the late 1990s, providing opportunities for soliciting logistic support and using the Thai side of the border as a safe haven (see *idem.*, *Neither Friend nor Foe, Myanmar’s Relationship with Thailand Since 1988: A View from Yangon* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2002), chapter 2. Others have harboured dissidents and rebels vowing to overthrow the military government (see, David Steinberg, “Prospects for democratisation in Myanmar: Impact on India”, *Indian Defence Review*, 3 December 2009, in *BurmaNet News*, 3 December 2009.

¹¹ The New Obama administration, after reviewing its Asia policy decided to engage Myanmar diplomatically without lifting sanctions. See, e.g., “US renews hand to Myanmar”, AFP, 30 December 2009. Nevertheless, in May 2010, President Obama extended the sanctions regime imposed under the “national emergency” executive order first invoked by President Clinton in 1997 (Lalit K. Jha, “Obama Extends National Emergency Against Burma for One more Year”, *Irrawaddy online*, May 15, 2010, at www.irrawaddy.org)

for what they deem as suppression of democracy and violation of and human rights.¹² Even the United Nations (UN) has been critical of Myanmar's domestic political situation thereby reinforcing the regime's perception of external interference.¹³ On the global front, Myanmar's military leaders saw the unipolar post-Cold War situation as threatening as well. This was evident in the speech by the (then) SLORC Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the MAF Senior General Than Shwe at the graduation ceremony of the 36th intake of the Defence Services Academy, on 7 April 1995 as: "The concept of the balance of power is non-existence today with the collapse and disintegration of some big nations. Thus small countries like ours are in a situation where serious consideration must be given to security."¹⁴

Security and State Building

In the larger context of state-building, once can say that Myanmar under the military junta had been an exemplar of a typical 'national security state' in which the military leaders seem to have conflated national interest with the armed forces' corporate interests represented and define by the junta.¹⁵ To them nation and state is also interchangeable and regime and state are conflated. The MAF professed to uphold the national interest in the form of three "Main National Causes" presented as "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national (i.e. multi-ethnic) solidarity", and "perpetuation of national sovereignty".¹⁶ These three together with the following slogans are seen in huge billboards all over Myanmar and are printed on the front page of every authorized publication in Myanmar (including area maps and business directories):

— *People's Desire*

— *Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views*

¹² See Andrew Selth, "Even Paranoids Have Enemies: cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion", *CSEA*, 30, no. 3 (2008): 379–402.

¹³ See, e.g., "U.N. assembly condemns Myanmar rights record" Reuters, December 24, 2009, in *BurmaNet News* (online news group), December 23–26, 2009; and Margaret Besheer, "UN Chief to Burma: Create conditions for free & fair elections," Voice of America, March 25, 2010, in *BurmaNet News*, March 25, 2010.

¹⁴ *The New Light of Myanmar*, April 8, 1995.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Callahan, op. cit. on the military's state building record in Myanmar history.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Nawrahta, *Destiny of the Nation* (Yangon: News and Periodicals Enterprise, 1995).

- *Oppose those trying to jeopardize the stability of the state and progress of the nation*
- *Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State*
- *Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy*

National unity is also portrayed as the paramount national interest and security is the overriding factor in all spheres of human activity in Myanmar.

Meeting the Challenges

As the first decade of the 21st century draws to a close, Myanmar's security challenges, as seen by MAF leaders, remain both internal and external. Domestically, remnants of the decades old ethnic insurgency linger on at the eastern border regions adjacent to Thailand. There are two significant insurgent groups to contend with. One is the breakaway faction of the MTA ((Mong Tai Army led by narco-warlord Khun Sa that surrendered in 1996), led by Colonel Yawd Serk (Ywet Sit), known as the Shan Sate Army-South (SSA-South) that is ensconced in Eastern Shan States with a force reportedly numbering several thousand fighters and the weakened (by factionalism) Karen National Liberation Army (the military arm of the Karen National Union or KNU) with some 2–4,000 troops.¹⁷ There are also two minor armed groups (Chin National Front or CNF) on the Indian border and the armed wing of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) near the Thai border) both of which are no more than irritants to the powerful MAF. Meanwhile, all armed groups have been under constant pressure from the MAF and are basically in a defensive holding posture with the KNU/KNLA at its weakest in six decades plagued by attrition, factionalism, depleted resources and weak leadership.¹⁸ However, some troops from the Shan and Kayin ceasefire groups who do not accept the junta's demobilization plan could break away from their mother units and defect to the SSA (South) and KNU camps respectively.

Despite being fellow members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral, Technical and Economic

¹⁷ See International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2009* (Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2009), Table 47, p. 474. It is likely to be at the low end of that estimate, due to further factionalism and attrition.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Smith, "Ethnic Politics", pp. 221–22.

Cooperation), there have been tensions with Thailand and Bangladesh. In fact, a ranking official from the ruling Democrat Party in Thailand publicly expressed concern over MAF's modernization efforts and Bangladesh and Myanmar have unresolved border security issues and territorial dispute over potentially hydrocarbon rich offshore waters that led to a naval confrontation in November 2008.¹⁹ Furthermore Myanmar's ruling generals still remember the intrusion of the U.S. carrier battle group into its special economic zone during the height of the 1988 upheaval that brought down the one party socialist regime led by military establishment. Such a spectre of the United States' intervention was again raised during the May 2008 Cyclone Nargis disaster when another U.S. carrier battle group, a British warship and a French naval vessel came on station off Myanmar's territorial waters, ostensibly to deliver supplies directly to the victims bypassing the regime's established procedures for delivering assistance and aid.²⁰

"War fighters, first and foremost"²¹ that expect even the non-combat supporting units (like the medical corps) to fight when necessary²², the present SPDC regime (and its predecessor SLORC) seems to believe that the security challenges threatening to displace the regime and destroy the state of Myanmar could only be countered by modernizing and strengthening the MAF and allowing it to play a vital role in governing Myanmar, even after transferring power to a constitutional government from direct military rule.

MAF: Modern and Strong

At the Armed Forces Day commemoration on 27 March 2009 in Naypyitaw (new capital of Myanmar), Senior General Than Shwe, Commander-in-Chief of MAF and

¹⁹ See Simon Roughneen, "Burma threatens Thailand's stability: Bangkok Governor," *Irrawaddy*, December 9, 2009, in *BurmaNet News*, December 9, 2009; and "Bangladesh: BDR chief to visit Myanmar next week," *Right Vision News* (Pakistan), December 3, 2009, in *BurmaNet News*, December 3, 2009. Regarding the maritime dispute with Bangladesh, see, e.g., "Bangladesh diplomats head to Myanmar for energy row talks" Associated Press, November 5, 2008, in *BurmaNet News*, November 5, 2009, and *The Voice* (Myanmar language journal), November 10–16, 2008, special supplement.

²⁰ See Selth, *op. cit.*, pp. 381, 382, and 388.

²¹ Callahan, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²² In his speech to medical doctors at the graduation parade of the 11th intake of the Defence Services Medical Academy, Than Shwe exhorted them "to keep pursuing studies in ever changing military tactic[s] so that you will be able to lead your troops in the battle fields [sic] in time of need" (*New Light of Myanmar*, December 26, 2009).

SPDC chair, in his speech to the assemble troops reiterated the oft-repeated adage: (t) he immediate task before us is the building of a strong and capable modern patriotic Armed Forces that can ensure total all-round defence...We must be combat-ready forever to defend the nation and protect the life and property of the people.²³

The building of a strong and modern MAF has been a continuing task for the MAF leadership since it began in the early 1990s with initial Chinese assistance following the visit to China by (then) Deputy Chief of Staff of MAF Lt. General Than Shwe in October 1989. The most significant move was the 1990 deal with the PRC involving weapons and military equipment worth an estimated value of some US\$ 1.2 billion.²⁴ This indicates Myanmar's intention to follow the path of upgrading and modernization taken by other Southeast Asian countries since the early 1980s.²⁵ Another agreement with PRC to supply additional weapons and equipment worth US\$ 400 million was reported in 1994.²⁶ Taken at face value, such deals struck between 1988 and 1994, seem to have considerably expanded the capability of Myanmar's armed forces.

Weapons and equipment were procured not only from China but also from Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Singapore, (then) Yugoslavia, and Ukraine. They may be classified into three categories. The first involved the acquisition of similar or improved versions of current equipment; either to replace obsolete ones or to supplement the existing stock. This type of procurement comprising ammunition, light and crew-served weapons, and transport equipment was essentially aimed at building up the military's war stocks to counter the threat posed by the upsurge of insurgency in the aftermath of the 1988 upheaval. The second category comprises armaments that represent a substantial upgrading in terms of force multiplication and enhanced capability. It comprises armoured personnel carriers, artillery, anti-aircraft (AA) weaponry, helicopters and light attack aircraft. Their procurement, in contrast to that of the first category, was not a short-term COIN-oriented measure but constituted an attempt to modernize the armed forces in preparation for the eventuality of conventional war. As such, those weapons and equipment ostensibly

²³ *The New Light of Myanmar*, March 28, 2009.

²⁴ See, e.g., the report by Yindee Lercharoenchok in *The Nation*, November 27, 1990.

²⁵ Cf. Amitav Archaya, *An Arms Race in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia? Prospects for Control*, Pacific Strategic Papers, no. 8 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994), pp. 66–71.

²⁶ See Bertil Lintner's report in *Jane's Defence Weekly*, December 3, 1994, p. 1.

represent a vast improvement over the pre-1988 inventory in terms of technology and firepower. The last category is concerned with the introduction of new classes of weapons hitherto absent in Myanmar's inventory. These include modern corvettes, a frigate (built locally), missile armed patrol craft, helicopter gunships, supersonic fighters, multiple rocket launchers (MRL), air-to-air missiles (AAMs), and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and perhaps even surface-to-surface missiles (SSM of SCUD genre). Among the major weapon purchases were for 12 MiG 29 fighters from Russia in 2001 that were augmented by another order for 20 in 2009, worth US\$ 570 million.²⁷ Factories for producing light weapons, mortars and associated ordnance were also constructed and the military's C4I (command, control, communications, computers and intelligence) capabilities were upgraded and expanded. Military infrastructure, including dockyards and tunnels (for storage, shelter and strategic communications), were constructed, presumably with North Korean assistance.²⁸

The volume of acquisitions from abroad that were carried out over a short period of less than five years was huge when compared to the imports of armaments over the preceding two decades. This is evident from Table 1 where estimates of cumulative imports for different periods are shown.²⁹ In fact, the reported value for the last period (1989–93) was more than double the sum of all four preceding periods.

Table 1: Imports of Major Conventional Armaments

Period	Value (US\$ million)
1969–73	15
1974–78	25
1979–83	160
1984–88	150
1989–93	780

Source: World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers (Washington, D.C.: ACDA), various issues.

²⁷ See Wai Moe, "Junta Buys 230 Military Aircraft in 21 Years," *Irrawaddy* online, December 26, 2009. Available at www.irrawaddy.org, archives.

²⁸ For details, see Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), chapter 4; and unauthorized copy of a secret draft report of the MAF delegation, led by Chief of Joint Staff General Thuya Shwe Mann, to North Korea and China from 21 November to 2 December 2008 (in author's possession; hereafter referred to as Secret Trip Report). The fact that this report is based on a genuine leak of official secrets is attested by the fact that the alleged perpetrators were recently sentenced to death (Wai Moe, "New Enemies of the State in Burma," *Irrawaddy* online, January 9, 2010).

²⁹ The data are derived from various issues of *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers* published by the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA).

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows a similar trend (Table 2, below). If taken at face value they represent a large sum of expenditure given that the Myanmar economy was small and suffered trade deficits for the period from 1989 to 2002.

Table 2: Imports of Major Conventional Armaments

Period	Value (US\$ million)
1989–93	846
1994–98	757
1999–03	453
2004–08	55

Source: *SIPRI Yearbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1994, 1997, 2001, 2005, and 2009.

Myanmar's annual government expenditures including defence allotments are only denominated in local currency and grossly underestimate imported values because the official rate pegged to the IMF special drawing rights (SDR) has been used for conversion. The pegging formula has remained unchanged and the market value of the local currency has progressively depreciated over two decades. While the open market rate of the US dollar was trading at around 10 times the official value in 1990 it went up to about 20–30 times in the mid-1990s, then to 60 times at the end of the decade. Thereafter, it increased to 160 times the official value in the middle of the decade and had been fluctuating between 170–200 times range till 2009. Given that trend, the value of armaments procured from abroad over the last two decades appearing in the budget statements in local currency (based on the unrealistic official conversion rate) did not accurately reflect their market value in relation to locally incurred expenditures. However, it may still be useful to look at the trend in annual defence expenditures as a share of total state administrative expenditure (excluding state-owned economic enterprises) as an indicator of budgeting priorities in government spending. In that context, it turned out that the percentage share of defence among non-commercial government expenditures was in the low twenties during the early 1990s and increased to the high thirties in the mid-1990s and then declined to the low thirties in the rest of the decade. In the beginning of the decade of 2000, the percentage share of defence spending dipped to around thirty and slowly declined

to 23 per cent in fiscal year 2007/08.³⁰ Attempting to estimate defence spending as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) is also not worthwhile not only because the value of foreign exchange expenditures for defence would grossly underestimated as in the previous case but also because the GDP's double digit growth trend since the turn of the century is regarded as unrealistic by knowledgeable observers.³¹

While the state was expending substantial amounts of scarce foreign exchange on arms purchases, the MAF's troop strength and its number of combat units were also being expanded considerably from pre-1988 levels. It had been estimated that the number of infantry battalions increased from 168 in early 1988 to 504³² in 2007, divided between 13 regional commands, 10 light infantry divisions (LIDs of brigade strength), 10 regional operation command (ROC, under regional command) and 20 military operation commands (MOC). Furthermore other combat arms were also expanded with the formation of air defence, artillery and armoured divisions. Support units in signals, logistics, engineering, transport ordnance and medical fields were also augmented with manpower and modern equipment. Training facilities were also upgraded and expanded while new training institutions for engineering, computing, nursing and medicine were established. The navy was also expanded in line with new acquisitions while the air force also benefited from new squadrons and support units formed to accommodate increases in the aircraft inventory and associated equipment. As a result the total strength of the MAF in 2002 was estimated to have been around 400,000 with 16,000 in the navy and 15,000 in the air force. The current strength may have declined to about 350,000 due to endemic desertions and inability to recruit enough replacements.³³

Whether MAF's expansion of armaments and manpower over the last two decades had actually resulted in raising its capabilities to the level of an effecting conventional

³⁰ For fiscal years up to 1999/00, see Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, Table 6.9, p. 172. Estimates for years beginning 2000/01 are based on budget data published by the SPDC, appearing in annual summaries of laws enacted during the year concerned.

³¹ For a critique on high GDP growth in the last decade, see, e.g., U Myint, "Myanmar's GDP growth and investment: lessons from a historical perspective," in Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (eds.) *Dictatorship, Decline and Disorder in Myanmar* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2008), pp. 51–61.

³² Many are believed to be operating at less than half strength. See Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw*, p. 78.

³³ See Andrew Selth, "Known Knowns and Known Unknowns: Measuring Myanmar's Military Capabilities", in *CSEA* 31, no. 2 (2009), pp. 282–83.

fighting force on par with other professional armed forces in the region is still a subject to debate and speculation. War-fighting capability is difficult to measure even in the aftermath of actual combat operation but it is obvious that its assessment requires more than just the numerical values of troops and weapon platforms at one's disposal in the order of battle. The so-called bean counting exercise though not completely irrelevant is inadequate to gauge the ability of a particular armed force to achieve victory or deter the potential enemy. A multitude of factors such as morale, discipline, leadership, command and control protocols and procedures, operational readiness, quality and frequency of training and exercises, logistics, technical proficiency, doctrine and tactics must be considered and weighed to arrive at an informed judgement. Moreover, in the case of Myanmar, the inward-looking and secretive nature of the military regime and its tight control over information gathering and dissemination make it even more difficult to gauge the capabilities of the MAF. On the other hand, observers had pointed out the apparent problems of "doctrine, training, integration, logistics and maintenance", associated with "rapid expansion and acquisition of so many weapon systems from so many different" sources.³⁴ There are also issues relating to the poor quality of some weapons and equipment and lack of indigenous technological base to keep Myanmar's "modernized armed forces operational without external assistance".³⁵ Inadequacy of skilled manpower, be they frontline personnel or technical support staff, combined with financial constraints restricting fuel consumption and usage of platforms on land, sea and air substantially degrade MAF's ability to perform optimally. With many imponderables and lack of hard data one tends to concur with Selth's conclusion that "known unknowns vastly outnumber the known knowns" and the MAF's new found strength is numbers is deceptive as far as its conventional war-fighting capabilities are concerned.³⁶

Moreover, the major concern of the military leadership since the coup of 1988 has been the perpetuation of corporate solidarity within its ranks ostensibly in the national interest. Dire warnings of catastrophic consequences arising from disunity have been repeatedly issued by the leadership together with a reference to internal and external threats posed by communists, ethnic insurgents, neo-colonialists, neo-imperialists, Western media, self-serving expatriates, meddling NGOs, hypocritical proponents

³⁴ Ibid., p. 288.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 290.

of human rights and democracy, and a hostile superpower.³⁷ The reification of the Tatmadaw as the “parent” of the armed forces members exploits Myanmar traditional values and culture and serves as a constant reminder to maintain corporate loyalty and group solidarity within the armed forces. Nevertheless, there had been purges in the upper echelons of the MAF and persistent rumours of factionalism between graduates of the prestigious DSA (Defence Services Academy), OTS (Officer Training School) and between the intelligence arm and the combat arms as well as tensions between the chair and vice-chair of the SPDC the MAF as an institution has withstood the test of time thus far and had not broken out into open confrontation at the top. Senior General Than Shwe, at the apex of the hierarchy, appears to have a firm grip over his subordinates through a combination of patronage, personalized rule, and unpredictable behaviour.³⁸

Finally, the MAF is undergoing a leadership transition from the current leaders (Table 3) to a new crop of commanders. In this context, the first generation led by the late General Ne Win could be identified with the anti-fascist struggle and the birth of the Tatmadaw while the second generation that came into power after the 1988 coup advanced their careers during the Socialist era under the ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party and were cadres of that party. On the other hand, the third generation leaders who are expected to take over the reins of post-elections Tatmadaw would, in all probability, be those who were born a decade or so after independence and had learnt the ropes under SLORC/SPDC tutelage. They neither have the “revolutionary” credentials of a patriotic independence struggle accorded to the first generation leaders nor the absolute authority of a military junta and may have to rely more on military professionalism to prove their mettle in a new setting of civil-military relations.³⁹ However, the strategic outlook, threat perception and defence posture are likely to remain unchanged despite the changing of the guard at the top.

³⁷ This theme is present in almost all speeches made by military leaders in their addresses at graduation ceremonies for military cadets, commemorative speeches on Independence Day, Armed Forces Day and other national commemorative events as well as in addresses to military commands and units during tours and field trips.

³⁸ See, e.g., Win Min, “Internal dynamics of the Burmese military: before, during and after the 2007 demonstrations”, in Skidmore and Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–47.

³⁹ See, e.g., Andrew Selth, “Civil-Military Relations in Burma: Portents, Predictions and Possibilities”, *Griffith University Regional Outlook Paper*, No. 25, 2010.

Table 3: Army Command Hierarchy (March, 2010)

6710	Sen. Gen. Than Shwe	C-in-C (SPDC Chair)	OTS-9
7875	V. Sen. Gen. Maung Aye	Dy. C-in-C & Army C-in-C (SPDC Vice Chair)	DSA-1
11534	Gen. Shwe Mann	Joint Chief of Staff	DSA-11
11701	Gen. Tin Aung Myint Oo	(SPDCSecty.-1, QMG)	DSA-12
11236	Lt. Gen. Tin Aye	Chief OP.	DSA-9
13041	Lt. Gen. Tha Aye*	BSO-1	DSA-16
14232	Lt. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing*	BSO-2	DSA-19
14235	Lt. Gen. Ko Ko*	BSO-3	DSA-19
13242	Lt. Gen. Khin Zaw*	BSO-4	OTS-49
12629	Lt. Gen. Myint Swe*	BSO-5	DSA-15
13903	Lt. Gen. Ohn Myint*	BSO-6	DSA-17
13970	Lt. Gen. Thura Myint Aung*	Adj. G	DSA-18
13107	Lt. Gen. Thein Htaik	IG	DSA-16
12674	Lt. Gen. Hsan Hsint	MAG	DSA-15
13875	Lt. Gen. Myint Hlaing*	Chief Air Defence	DSA-17
12607	Lt. Gen. Ye Myint*	Chief MAS	DSA-15
14799	Lt. Gen. Hla Htay Win*	Chief Training	DSA-20
14756	Lt. Gen. Maung Shein*	IAG	DSA-20

Notes: *: non-SPDC member; the second group's rank ordering protocol is not known.

OP = Ordnance Production; QMG = Quartermaster-General; Adj.G = Adjutant-General;

BSO = Bureau of Special Operations (territorial); IG = Inspector-General; MAG = Military Appointment-General;

MAS = Military Affairs Security; IAG = Inspection and Auditor-General; OTS = Officer Training School;

DSA = Defence Services Academy.

Currently, in terms of operational command General Shwe Mann appears to be in charge of all the three services. Age-wise, he is nearly a generation behind Senior General Than Shwe and a decade behind Vice-Senior General Maung Aye in terms of graduating cohort from the DSA. Moreover, most other officers in the command hierarchy (see Table 3 above) are several years behind Shwe Mann's cohort and Than Shwe is like a father figure to them. These young generals in their early fifties owed their rapid promotions to the patronage system practiced by the current leadership and are believed to be particularly beholden to Than Shwe who reportedly hand-picked them for the top postings.

Institutionalizing Tatmadaw's Leading Role in Myanmar

According to the military's vision, a firm constitution that avoids the pitfalls of both the 1947 and 1974 constitutions is necessary for a stable political environment in which indigenized rules of "multi-party democracy" can be "formulated". As such, SLORC envisaged a political configuration institutionalizing the military's role in "national politics" as a solution to the problem of dysfunctional "party politics".⁴⁰ The junta initiated a process in 1992 to hold a national convention (NC) that would lay down "the basic principles for the drafting of a firm and stable Constitution".⁴¹ The resulting deliberations that began in 1993 were concluded only in 2007 after a long recess between 1996 and 2004. The results of the NC were distilled and formulated into a draft constitution by a committee in February 2008. The draft constitution drew harsh criticism and calls for rejection by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other opposition groups, student activists, human rights and democracy advocacy groups and Western governments who accused the SPDC of perpetuating military control under the guise of a civilianized political regime and skewed electoral rules.⁴² Unfazed by criticisms from home and abroad, the PDC conducted a national referendum in May 2008 that reportedly endorsed by over 92 percent of the voters. Elections to be held in 2010 would usher in a new era of constitutional government in which the MAF has a major role to play in accordance with the following provisions in Myanmar's third constitution since independence: The military's complete autonomy to manage its own affairs (Chapter 1, Basic Principles, article 20); Designation of the military Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) as supreme commander of all armed forces (Chapter 1, Basic Principles, article 20); Reserved seats for the military in the form of C-in-C's nominees amounting to 25 percent of the seats in both house of the national parliaments (Chapter 4, The Legislature, articles 109 and 141); Reserved seats for the military in the form of C-in-C's nominees amounting to one-third of the elected representatives in the parliaments of the (14) States and Regions comprising the Union (Chapter 4, The Legislature, article 161); Reserved positions for the nominees of the C-in-C as ministers and deputy ministers for defence, home affairs and border areas (Chapter 4, The Executive, articles 232 and 234); Exemption for military personal to

⁴⁰ Lt. Gen. Myo Nyunt's speech, *New Light of Myanmar*, June 8, 1993.

⁴¹ SLORC Declaration No. 11/92, 24 April 1992 (*Working People's Daily [WPD]*, April 25, 1992).

⁴² For a summary of reactions to the new constitution see, e.g., Robert H Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (London: Hurst, 2009), pp. 503–4.

remain in military service while serving as ministers and deputy ministers whereas civilians have to resign from their positions as parliamentarians or civil servants or suspend their party affiliations (Chapter 4, The Executive, articles 232 and 234); The President, after coordinating with the National Defence and Security Council, may declare a national emergency and then hand over executive, legislative and judicial powers to the C-in-C in situations “if there is sufficient reason for a state of emergency to arise that may disintegrate the Union or that may cause the loss of sovereignty, due to acts or attempts to take over the sovereignty of the Union by insurgency, violence and wrongful forcible means” (Chapter 11, Provisions on State of Emergency, articles 417 and 418); Requirement for the powerful executive President to be “well acquainted with the affairs of the Union such as political, administrative, economic and military”, have 20 years continuous domicile, and be born of full citizen parents. Moreover, the candidate, one of the parents, the spouse, any of the children or his/her spouse must not be a subject or citizen of a foreign country or has sworn allegiance to a foreign country, or enjoy the same privileges and benefits bestowed by the foreign country to its subjects and citizens (Chapter 3, Head of State, article 59)⁴³; All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services (Chapter 7. Defence Services, article 338); Amendment of any of the major provisions in the constitution could only be made if it secures more than 75 percent of the votes in the national parliament (a combined upper and lower house) together with more than 50 percent votes of all eligible voters in a national referendum (Chapter 12, Amendment of the Constitution, article 436); and An “immunity” clause that protects the junta and all government personnel from being persecuted for any act carried out “in the execution of their respective duties” (Chapter 14, Transitory Provisions, article 445).

As such, the military appears to have all the cards in place to ensure its continued dominance of Myanmar's politics and society in the name of upholding the three main national causes and apparently designed to overcome security challenges to the regime and state.

⁴³ This article effectively excludes the candidature of DASSK for president due to her marriage to an Englishman and her son's foreign nationality. However the constitutional provisions do not rule out her eligibility for becoming a member of parliament (article 120) or even a minister (article 232).

Conclusion: Blind Spots?

Both the aforementioned measures to modernize and strengthen the MAF as well as the institutional measure of formulating a constitutional arrangement for some form of electoral participation are meant to ensure continuity and sustainability of the military's vision of national security. However, the very constitutional provision (article 338) that was meant to anoint the MAF as the sole armed organization with a monopoly on the use of force has now created a security dilemma for the SPDC in dealing with the ceasefire groups (CFG). When they entered into ceasefires with the government all CFGs except the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO) had only verbal agreements that allowed them to keep their arms and engage in business activities and allow some localized autonomy. The larger CFGs like the KIO (Kachin Independence Army or KIA, its armed wing, has about 5–6000 troops) and those on the Chinese border (Wa, Kokang and Mong La groups comprising a majority of ethnic Chinese inhabitants) were allowed greater autonomy to administer and control their designated areas officially known as "special regions". Among them the Wa led by the leaders of the United Wa State Army (UWSA, 15,000 to 25,000 strong and reputedly armed with heavy mortars, artillery and air defence missiles) were given wide latitude to run their area almost like a state within a state with almost no intervention by the central government. Even the MAF was not allowed to enter Wa territory without prior arrangement. These three CFGs had more socio-economic and quasi-political links with China than with the SPDC government and set their own judicial and administrative rules and are believed to have engaged in illegal border trade and suspected of dealing in narcotics.⁴⁴

In accordance with the Constitutional rule forbidding independent armed forces other than the MAF, the SPDC, in early 2009, had demanded that the ceasefire groups (CFGs) either turn their armed forces into a border guard force (BGF, reduced strength and truncated command structure) or local militia (lower status and strength than the BGF) before the new constitution comes into force. In fact, the first deadline was end October, which was later extended to end of the year. This goes against

⁴⁴ See International Crisis Group (ICG), "China's Myanmar Dilemma," *Asia Report*, No. 177, Brussels, September 14, 2009, pp. 0–13; and Mary Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma's Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation, and Coexistence*, East-West Center Policy Studies 31 (Washington D.C.: East-West Center, 2007).

the grain of most CFGs which have expressed their preference to keep their forces intact and negotiate the terms and conditions of the demobilization with the new elected government after 2010. The larger CFGs, the Kachin Independent Army (KIA), United Wa State Army (USWA), the Koakang group (MNDAA or Myanmar National Democratic Alliance; estimated 2000 strong) and Mong La group (NDAA or National Democratic Alliance Army, several thousand troops) all refused to comply as the SPDC also refused to change the terms of the government's demands for transforming the CFG's armed wings into units under its direct command. The ethnic Mon CFG under the New Mon State Party (NMSP) with a few thousand man-at-arms also declined the military's offer to demobilize its troops into a smaller BGF. Even the DKBA (Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army), seen as the military's staunch ally against the KNU recently indicated that they would maintain their status quo instead of conforming to the military's BGF proposal.⁴⁵

In fact, the BGF format requires the CFGs to downsize their brigades and divisions (Wa) to 326-men battalions embedded with MAF personnel who would control supplies and logistics and apparently devoid of heavy weapons. Tensions had been rising between these four major CFGs on account of this proposal and exacerbated when the MAF subdued the defiant Kokang group in August by supporting an internal revolt by pro-junta leaders following violent clashes as the army enforced the indictment against the leader Pheung Kya-Shin for illegal weapon production. These four CFGs had formed an alliance called Myanmar Peace and Democratic Front (MPDF) in March 2009 but then alliance failed to act in support of the Kokang group. Nevertheless the remaining three CFGs pose a formidable challenge to the MAF if it had to use force to make them comply to the SPDC's plan for transforming them into a fragmented force under direct MAF control. Hence, the issue of CFGs

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Salai Han Thar San, "Five ethnic militias join forces amid junta threat," Mizima News, May 28, 2010, online at www.mizzima.com/news/; Nam Kham Kaew, "Wa army operations 'worry' junta," Democratic Voice of Burma, May 25, 2010, in *BurmaNet News*, May 25, 2010; Kyaw thein Kha, "KIO leaders meet with Burmese commander," *Irrawaddy*, May 25, 2010, in *BurmaNet News*, May 25, 2010; and Lawi Weng, "Rift between Junta and DKBA deepens," *Irrawaddy*, April 29, 2010. Available at www.irrawaddy.org/news/.

refusing to play by the SPDC's rules to demobilize their armies has unexpectedly become the most acute security challenge for the SPDC.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the neglect of human security by the SPDC is a chronic problem that is eroding the quality of life of a substantial portion of Myanmar's polity, especially in the border regions and ecologically disadvantaged areas such as the Chin hills and the poorest sections of society in the heartlands of Myanmar. Some had even argued that the military junta by failing to stem the narcotics trafficking (even allegations of colluding), the sub-regional spread of communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS and a persistent stream of refugees to neighbouring states resembles a "failed state" and constitutes a regional threat that warrants international intervention through the action of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).⁴⁷ Currently, the so-called 'chronic emergency' in Myanmar is also affecting the areas devastated by Cyclone Nargis and whose rehabilitation had been hindered by the lack of donor response partly due to lack of trust and confidence on the SPDC by the international community. The prevailing poor human security situation could lead to social unrest. Unless the SPDC and its successor regime take the human security dimension of the national security problematique seriously and formulate appropriate measures to redress this security deficit no amount of military power nor operationalization of the elaborate constitutional set up to perpetuate military control could ensure lasting security for all in Myanmar.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., "The Kokang Clashes-What Next?" *EBO Analysis*, Paper No. 1/2009, September 2009; Maximilian Wechsler, "No united army for us, rebels vow," *Bangkok Post*, December 13, 2009; and "No kowtowing by dissident ceasefire armies," *S.H.A.N.*, December 28, 2009. Available at www.shanland.org.

⁴⁷ A summary of this line of reasoning may be found in Bruce Matthews, "Myanmar's Human and Economic Crisis and Its Regional Implications," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2006*, edited by Daljit Singh and Lorraine C. Salazar (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), pp. 208–23; For a different perspective, see, Mary P. Callahan, "Forecasting Failures in Southeast Asia: Burma since the 1990s," in *Dislocating Nation-States: Globalization in Asia and Africa*, edited by Patricia N. Abinales, et. Al. (Kyoto & Melbourne: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press, 2005), pp. 122–46.