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MYANMAR: THE FUTURE OF THE ARMED FORCES

I. OVERVIEW

The release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest on 6 May 2002 has generated some optimism about political progress in Myanmar.[1] It remains to be seen, however, whether all political actors will be able to translate the new cooperative atmosphere into actual compromises in key policy areas.

This briefing focuses on some of the most critical issues that will have to be dealt with in a political transition – the composition, management and responsibilities of the Myanmar armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) as a military institution. First, it reviews the ongoing expansion and modernisation of the *Tatmadaw*, and lays out the visions of respectively the State, Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and the National League for Democracy (NLD) for the armed forces of the future. Secondly, it considers the prospects for a compromise between the two protagonists that satisfies core values on both sides; it outlines the possible contours of such a compromise, and it identifies key problem areas.

Since 1988, the military government has carried out an ambitious expansion and modernisation of the armed forces. As a result, the *Tatmadaw* today is an entirely different organisation from that of a decade ago.[2] It is now able not only to crush civil disturbances in the cities and respond to periodic guerrilla attacks in the countryside, but also to conduct much larger and more effective counter-insurgency operations. For the first time in its history, it also has the means to carry out extended conventional operations in defence of Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

While the military government faces pressing concerns from both within and outside the country, including serious economic problems, the SPDC has given clear signs that it is determined to continue its comprehensive defence improvement program. Whatever differences members of the military hierarchy may have over other policy questions, they share a vision of the *Tatmadaw* being the envy of its regional neighbours, and capable of defending Myanmar against even the most sophisticated and well-equipped adversaries.[3] There also seems to be a shared conviction that – regardless of any changes that might need to be made in the way the country is governed – the armed forces should remain the ultimate arbiters of power in Myanmar and have all

[1] This briefing uses the official English names for the country, as applied by the UN, most countries outside the U.S. and Europe, and the national government – that is, "Burma" for the period before 1989 and "Myanmar" after 1989. The same criteria are used for other place names such as Rangoon (now Yangon). This should not be perceived as a political statement or a judgement on the right of the military government to change the names. In Burma/Myanmar, "Bamah" and "Myanma" have both been used for centuries, being respectively the colloquial and the more formal names for the country in the national language.

[2] An earlier ICG report *Burma/Myanmar: How Strong is the Military Regime?* (Bangkok/Brussels 21 December 2000) suggested that there was a serious over-stretch in the Myanmar military. Although there are clearly areas of weakness such as the retention of forces, central control over troops and low morale among lower-rung officers that impact on its real operational capabilities, our present assessment is that the military has the firepower and ability to deal with internal uprisings and with ethnic insurgencies. There is no force that could effectively challenge its grip on power and given its monopoly of coercive capacity, there is now little resistance to its rule from the population. See also ICG Asia Report N°27, *Myanmar: The Role of Civil Society*, 6 December 2001.

[3] For an analysis of the mindset and policies of the SPDC, see ICG Asia Report N°28, *Myanmar: The Military Regime's View of the World*, 7 December 2001.

the means necessary to impose their will on the country.

The NLD, which has operated under enormous restrictions including the imprisonment of most of its leadership, was slow to formulate and articulate its views on defence issues. Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, however, have made repeated references to the place of the armed forces in Myanmar society, and in 1999 these views were incorporated into a formal defence policy platform, which clearly set out a broad vision for the *Tatmadaw* under a democratic government. In some key respects, this vision is not too different from that of the military hierarchy. Yet, given the profound differences between the two sides in their approach to governing and defending Myanmar, there is also a considerable divergence of views. The NLD, for example, favours smaller, more professional armed forces under full civilian, political control. Particularly contentious issues would likely include the role of the powerful intelligence apparatus, the question of amnesty for members of the armed forces guilty of human rights violations, and the ideological foundations and indoctrination of future members of the armed forces.

The NLD has made it clear that it is ready to discuss the position of the armed forces under a democratic government. The military leaders, however, remain convinced that they alone have the right and the ability to decide such core issues as the size, shape and management of the armed forces, which not only constitute their main power base, but also are central to their self-image and world view. Thus, they have dismissed the NLD's attempts to devise and promulgate an alternative defence policy not only as having little worth but, more importantly, as having no legitimacy. Indications are that advice from foreign governments and independent groups on this subject is accorded much the same treatment.

On the amnesty issue, even though Aung San Suu Kyi has already made it clear that a NLD government would not engage in a campaign of reprisals against serving or retired members of the *Tatmadaw*, these assurances have so far failed to meet the concerns of the officers most likely to be affected.

To outside observers, it would seem to be in the long-term interest of the *Tatmadaw* itself to reach an accommodation with the NLD and other political forces that would reduce the opprobrium it currently faces both domestically and internationally. Yet the military hierarchy appears to feel that it is already capable of defending its own policies and – despite the costs to the wider community – sees continuing high levels of defence expenditure as both necessary and justifiable. It believes that the armed forces are behaving honourably, holding the Union together, maintaining internal peace and stability, and defending the country against diverse external threats. The senior ranks of the armed forces thus do not share the sense of urgency felt by the international community over the need for a compromise with the democratic opposition, at least not in the critical area of national security.

II. THE ARMED FORCES TODAY

Before 1988, the *Tatmadaw* enjoyed the respect, albeit often grudging, of many people in the country. Yet it suffered from serious structural problems. The army was essentially a poorly equipped light infantry force capable only of limited counter-insurgency operations. It was battle-hardened and resourceful, but had limited mobility, insufficient fire support, poor logistics and inadequate communications. The air force, similarly, was small, ill equipped and crippled by its dependence on foreign logistics. It was hard-pressed to keep its obsolete and over-worked aircraft flying, and could only perform a very limited role in support of the army. It had no credible air defence capability. The navy was confined to patrolling Burma's inland waterways and coastal fringes in a few ageing and poorly armed vessels.

Despite its military foundations, Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party government (1974-88) had been reluctant to expend the resources required to significantly upgrade the *Tatmadaw*'s capabilities. After 1988, however, the new military leadership resolved to address all these problems, regardless of the cost. Freed from any public or political scrutiny, and with the full resources of the country at its disposal, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) – later renamed the SPDC – formulated and implemented a comprehensive plan to expand and modernise all three armed services. Given the ad hoc nature of policymaking by the military government over the years and its unpredictable economic fortunes, this plan has no doubt been revised and amended many times.

Nonetheless, it has been pursued with remarkable success, producing the far-reaching results that can be seen today.[4]

A. EXPANSION AND MODERNISATION

Over the past fourteen years, the *Tatmadaw* has dramatically increased in size. Estimates vary greatly, but the number of men and women in uniform appears to have doubled from around 190,000 in 1988, to about 400,000 now.[5] This has been achieved by a variety of means, including campaigns in the state-controlled news media, financial inducements for new recruits, and conscription. With society tightly controlled and most tertiary institutions closed for lengthy periods in the 1990s, a career in the *Tatmadaw* has offered young men (and, to a much lesser extent, women) one of the few means to gain professional and technical skills.[6] By joining the armed forces, they also protect their families from arbitrary official action, get access to scarce services and consumer goods, and achieve a measure of social mobility.

The military government has purchased a wide range of new and more modern weapon systems. The army, for example, has taken delivery of battle tanks, light amphibious tanks and armoured personnel carriers. It has also acquired new field and anti-aircraft artillery (including 155mm guns, multiple rocket launchers and surface-to-air missiles), transport and construction vehicles, communications equipment, infantry weapons and ammunition.[7]

The air force has been provided with more than 180 new combat aircraft, including MIG-29 interceptors, F-7 fighters, A-5 ground attack aircraft, G-4 counter-insurgency aircraft and a range of attack helicopters. It has also received Y-8 turbo-prop transport aircraft, FT-7 and FT-6 dual-seat jet trainers, and smaller K-8 training aircraft.[8]

Since 1988, the navy has commissioned about 30 new vessels, including *Hainan* class coastal patrol boats, *Houxin* class guided missile fast attack craft, and PB-90 inshore patrol boats. It has also built a number of gunboats in local shipyards.[9]

Most of these weapon systems and much of the *Tatmadaw*'s new military equipment has come from China, under very favourable purchasing arrangements. Other arms suppliers have included Yugoslavia, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Pakistan, North Korea, Vietnam and Israel.[10]

The government's comprehensive defence expansion and modernisation program has been accompanied by a sweeping reorganisation of Myanmar's military command and control system. In 1990, the Ministry of Defence was reshaped and a powerful Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) formed under the Director of Defence Services Intelligence. Control of the *Tatmadaw*'s main fighting units was placed under a single Bureau of Special Operations. In addition, the number of regional military commands was increased from nine to twelve. A range of sub-regional commands

[4] For a comprehensive and detailed examination of the modern *Tatmadaw*, see Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory* (New York, 2002).

[5] In addition, the regime considers the paramilitary Myanmar Police Force (MPF), the Myanmar Red Cross, and the Fire Brigades as part of the wider "Defence Services", which can be called upon in times of national emergency. There are about 72,000 in the Myanmar Police Force (including 4,500 fully armed paramilitary police). All these "auxiliary services" march with the *Tatmadaw* in the annual Armed Forces Day parade. Basic military training has also been given to civil servants and members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA). See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Order of Battle: An Interim Assessment*, Working Paper N°351 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000); also Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: The Organisational Development of the Armed Forces in Myanmar, 1948-98*, Working Paper N°327 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1998).

[6] It is estimated that less than 2 per cent of the *Tatmadaw* are women. Some have technical military skills, for example as signalers, but most are confined to medical and administrative roles.

[7] Andrew Selth, "The Myanmar Army Since 1988: Acquisitions and Adjustments", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 17/3 (December 1995), pp. 237-64. See also Micool Brooke, "The Armed Forces of Myanmar", *Asian Defence Journal*, January 1998, p. 13.

[8] Andrew Selth, "The Myanmar Air Force Since 1988: Expansion and Modernization", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 19/4 (March 1998), pp. 388-415.

[9] Andrew Selth, "The Burma Navy Under the SLORC", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 29/2 (1999), pp. 227-47.

[10] Andrew Selth, *Burma's Arms Procurement Program*, Working Paper N°289 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1995); Andrew Selth, *Burma's Secret Military Partners*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence N°136 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000).

has also been created, to provide greater operational focus and flexibility, and to permit closer military administration of critical areas like Eastern Shan State. A large number of new army units have been formed, including two mobile light infantry divisions, armour and artillery formations, and specialised engineer battalions. Army bases have been established or expanded in areas where, before 1988, there had been little or no permanent military presence. Also, the number and geographical distribution of Myanmar's major naval and air force bases have been increased.

A major effort has been put into the improvement of the *Tatmadaw*'s antiquated military communications network. With the help of countries like China, Singapore and Israel, computers and other electronic equipment have been installed in the Ministry of Defence and at the headquarters of the regional military commands. Radios and other communications equipment at the operational and tactical levels have been upgraded. Through a new computer centre, the *Tatmadaw* has even developed a modest capacity to conduct information warfare.[11] Also, Myanmar's electronic surveillance capabilities have been enhanced significantly, at both the strategic and operational levels.[12]

Other parts of the country's already formidable intelligence apparatus have been expanded and improved. In large part, this has been to help the military government predict and counter any signs of renewed internal unrest (including in the *Tatmadaw* itself), in order to retain its firm grip on political power. A considerable effort, however, has also been put into purely military intelligence, to improve the regime's strategic assessments and the *Tatmadaw*'s operational capabilities.[13]

Most of the major arms deals negotiated by the government over the past fourteen years have included training packages. Personnel from all three services have received extensive training in China, while members of the air force have been sent to Poland, Yugoslavia and Russia. The navy has also trained in Yugoslavia. There have been reports that specialist courses, for example for army parachutists and military intelligence officers, have been provided and hosted by Singapore. Pakistan has offered the *Tatmadaw* numerous courses ranging from armour and artillery to submarine training. In some cases, instructors from China, Russia, and possibly Singapore, Israel and Pakistan have conducted technical training in Myanmar itself.

As far as can be determined, most of this training has been directly related to the operation and maintenance of new weapons and equipment purchases.[14] Less attention has been devoted to foreign approaches to war fighting, or to incorporating foreign ideas into the development of new military doctrines, operating procedures or tactics. Some steps, however, have been taken to increase the number of officers studying and attending staff colleges in places like China, India, Pakistan, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines.[15]

To underpin all these initiatives, the SLORC and later the SPDC have taken a number of important steps to strengthen Myanmar's defence scientific and industrial base. The aim seems to be two-fold: to increase the logistic support available to the new, expanded and more diversified *Tatmadaw*, and to help release Myanmar from its former dependence on outside suppliers for critical defence materiel. For example, the government has launched a major defence import substitution program. Details are difficult to obtain but it is clear that the country's already extensive network of arms and ammunition factories is being modernised and expanded.[16] Older plants are being refurbished and new ones are being built, some with the help of China and Singapore. An effort has also been made to upgrade Myanmar's abilities to produce its own naval vessels, armoured cars, and specialised fighting vehicles.[17] Ancillary industries, like iron and steel

[11] William Ashton, "Myanmar boosts cyberwar abilities", *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, 27/6 (October 2001), pp. 20-21. See also "Asian infowar: the top ten", *Jane's Foreign Report*, 2617 (16 November 2000), pp. 5-6.

[12] Desmond Ball, *Burma's Military Secrets: Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) from the Second World War to Civil War and Cyber Warfare* (Bangkok, 1998).

[13] Andrew Selth, "Burma's Intelligence Apparatus", *Intelligence and National Security*, 13/4 (Winter 1998), pp. 33-70.

[14] William Ashton, "Myanmar: Foreign military training a mixed blessing", *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, 24/2 (February/March 1998), pp. 10-11.

[15] Myoe, *Officer Education*, op. cit.

[16] Andrew Selth, "Burma's Defence Expenditure and Arms Industries", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 19/2 (August 1998), pp. 23-49.

[17] Bruce Hawke, "Exposed: Burma's weapons industry", *Jane's Pointer*, December 1998, pp. 8-9.

plants, are being modernised to provide the necessary support for local arms production.[18]

The dramatic increase in Myanmar's order of battle has been achieved through a massive expansion of defence spending. Accurate statistics are impossible to obtain, a problem probably even shared within the regime itself. However, it is estimated that annual defence expenditure has more than doubled since 1988. Although the government has been greatly assisted by a range of soft loans and other special sales arrangements provided by its new arms suppliers, notably China, defence spending in some years has exceeded 45 per cent of central government expenditures, and on occasions may have gone even higher.[19] Faced with a shortage of hard currency, the government has at times resorted to barter and counter-trade agreements to acquire new arms and equipment, using Myanmar's abundant natural resources to pay for purchases in kind.

B. CAPABILITIES

The armed forces still face many challenges before their new arms and equipment can be translated fully into real operational capabilities.

The *Tatmadaw* appears to be having difficulty attracting and retaining enough recruits to fill all the new positions on their formal establishment. The army in particular is facing personnel retention problems, primarily arising from poor personnel management, harsh conditions of service and low morale. There is a shortage of experienced pilots in the air force, and the navy has found it difficult to crew all its new ships. In fact, there is evidence that the rapid expansion of the armed forces since 1988 has occurred more on paper than in reality. While the number of combat units has increased dramatically, few army battalions seem to be up to full strength. Also, the increased demands of government and administration have absorbed a considerable proportion of the *Tatmadaw*'s human resources.

In addition, all three services are having difficulty keeping their new weapon systems serviceable. The army is complaining about much of the equipment it has received from China.[20] There are reports that new artillery pieces often misfire and armoured vehicles frequently break down. Chinese trucks have also proven less sturdy and reliable than the Japanese vehicles used before 1988. The air force, similarly, has accused the Chinese of not providing some important parts with their new fighters, or giving sufficient training in their use. Continuing logistics problems are exacerbated by the regime's lack of hard currency and its attempts to diversify its arms suppliers. The airforce, for example, now has aircraft from nine different countries in its inventory, all requiring different maintenance skills and imported components. Some are grounded for lengthy periods due to a lack of spare parts. There have been complaints that some naval vessels acquired from China and Yugoslavia are unsuited to conditions in Myanmar and difficult to maintain. For the *Tatmadaw*'s new acquisitions to become fully effective, further attention will need to be given also to the critical areas of command, control, communications, intelligence, and training.

Despite these problems, the massive expansion and reorganisation of the armed forces, the acquisition of a wide range of new weapon systems and equipment, and the improved defence industrial base, have given the *Tatmadaw* the potential for greatly increased operational capabilities. The army is now much larger, more widely distributed, more mobile, and better supported by armour and artillery. It can sustain operations at a higher tempo, and for longer periods, than at any time in the past. It is also in a much better position to fight on multiple fronts at the same time.

The airforce, with its new aircraft, upgraded bases and improved munitions, also has more flexibility and operational reach than ever before, and is capable of much greater striking power. Its communications and radar equipment for the first time can provide a basic air operations picture of

[18] Despite claims by a number of ethnic insurgent groups, most recently the Southern Shan State Army, there is no conclusive evidence that the *Tatmadaw* is either manufacturing or using chemical or biological agents. See Andrew Selth, *Burma and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Working Paper N°334 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999).

[19] "Burma's Defence Expenditure and Arms Industries", op.cit., pp. 43-45. See also *Defence Economic Trends in the Asia-Pacific 2000* (Defence Intelligence Organisation, Canberra, 2001), p. 19.

[20] See, for example, Anthony Davis, "China's Shadow", *Asiaweek*, 28 May 1999, p. 34.

the country. This contributes, with new interceptors and air-to-air missiles, to a more credible national air defence capability. Similarly, the navy's modernisation and expansion program places it in a much better position to patrol Myanmar's waters and protect its maritime resources from unauthorised exploitation. The *Houxin* guided missile patrol boats give the navy its first anti-ship cruise missile capability.

The *Tatmadaw* is also developing its capacity to conduct major conventional campaigns. It has been experimenting with much larger, mixed formations and with joint operations. There have been efforts to create mechanised brigades, with supporting armour and artillery, and to transform regular infantry battalions into motorised battalions.[21] There has also been an attempt to develop air-mobile units capable of rapid deployment in emergencies. Joint military exercises held in 1995 and 1997 reportedly involved over 30,000 troops, 100 field artillery pieces, 300 armoured vehicles, six squadrons of combat aircraft, and 30 naval vessels. Members of the People's Militia, auxiliary forces (such as the Myanmar Red Cross and Fire Brigades), and members of the mass Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), were also mobilised.[22] More recently, large-scale amphibious exercises were reported to have been held in southern Myanmar, involving infantry, armour, artillery, and both naval and air force assets. Reports of combined exercises between the *Tatmadaw* and the Chinese People's Liberation Army, however, are incorrect.

The *Tatmadaw* is an entirely different military organisation from that which existed in 1988. It is now able not only to crush civil disturbances in the population centres and respond to periodic guerrilla attacks in the countryside, but also to conduct much larger and more complex counter-insurgency operations for longer periods. For the first time in its history, the *Tatmadaw* also has the means to carry out extended conventional operations in defence of Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity. After decades of struggling to achieve its core military goals with limited resources, it will soon stand equal in many respects to the armed forces of other regional countries. Myanmar's armed forces are already the second largest in Southeast Asia after Vietnam. Compared to its counterparts in other ASEAN countries, the *Tatmadaw's* order of battle is very comprehensive, and it has the most combat experience. From any perspective, it has been an intensive transformation in a relatively short time.

III. THE SPDC'S VISION FOR THE FUTURE ARMED FORCES

Though the military government faces pressing concerns from both within and outside the country, and economic problems threaten to slow down or even derail some of its plans, the SPDC has given clear signs that it is determined to continue its comprehensive defence improvement program. Whatever differences members of the hierarchy may have over other policy questions, they share a vision of the *Tatmadaw* becoming the envy of its regional neighbours, and capable of defending Myanmar against even the most sophisticated and well-equipped adversaries. There also seems to be a shared conviction that – regardless of any changes that might need to be made in the way the country is governed – the armed forces should remain the ultimate arbiters of power in Myanmar, and have all the means necessary to impose their will on the country.

The government's commitment to the continued development of the armed forces has been emphasised by SPDC Chairman, Senior General Than Shwe, in several public statements. In a keynote speech in March 1996, the top leader announced that:

> To be a *Tatmadaw* which is capable of defending a peaceful, modern and prosperous nation, it is essential to be modern, strong and highly capable... History has taught us a great lesson, that our nation was subjugated because we lacked a modern *Tatmadaw*.[23]

[21] See *Burma's Armed Forces: Power without Glory*, *op.cit.*, chapter 7.

[22] Maung Aung Myoe, *Military Doctrine and Strategy in Myanmar: A Historical Perspective*, Working Paper N°339 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999), pp. 15-16.

[23] Senior General Than Shwe, Address on the 51st Anniversary of Armed Forces Day, Yangon, 27 March 1996 (Embassy of the Union of Myanmar, Canberra, *Newsletter* No.Sp.A/96, 4 April 1996, p. 1).

Three years later, in April 1999, he pledged that Myanmar would continue to acquire "high technology or state-of-the-art weaponry and other modernisation" to ensure that the *Tatmadaw* could "measure up to armies around the world".[24] There is a firm belief by the military leadership that "only if the Armed Forces is strong, will the Nation be strong".[25]

Despite recruitment problems, Myanmar's armed forces seem likely to remain at least as large as they are now. Also, the overall quality of the *Tatmadaw* will continue to improve. Progress may be slow in some areas, and it may take time for the three services to learn how to use their new weapons systems to the greatest effect. However, technical problems can be overcome, and new operating procedures can be learnt. The *Tatmadaw* has a well-deserved reputation for adaptability and improvisation. According to a high-ranking intelligence officer:

> [A range of measures is being taken] to nurture highly proficient human resources [and] to give personnel of the Armed Forces comprehensive training in the strategy and tactics of conventional warfare and from there to proceed to advanced methods of modern warfare.[26]

Many soldiers probably lack commitment to the military government's ideology, and even to its survival. Yet, the quality of core personnel can be expected gradually to rise. A number of foreign governments seem prepared – albeit covertly – to assist in this process.[27]

Numerous reports suggest that the SPDC has a long list of weapon systems and military equipment that it wants to acquire. The army has recently taken delivery of more armoured vehicles, artillery pieces and communications equipment from China. It also has plans to buy light anti-tank weapons, medium range anti-armour missiles, three-D air-space surveillance radar and radio trunk communications.[28] The navy has just acquired five more Chinese patrol boats and hopes to buy up to six Chinese ocean mines sweepers.[29] It has also commissioned three new corvettes, built in Myanmar's own shipyards using Chinese hulls, Israeli electronic technology, and Italian guns.[30]

The air force in February 2002 signed a contract with Russia for ten advanced MiG-29 interceptors, at a reported cost of U.S.$130 million. More MiG-29s will probably follow, as well as some Russian assault helicopters.[31] The air force is also seeking more transports and training aircraft (mainly from China and Russia), dual-use air traffic control systems and ground-to-air communication systems.[32] The Defence Ministry is actively pursuing the installation of a sophisticated military satellite communications network to cover the entire country.[33]

The military government's determination to insulate itself from external pressures, both diplomatic and economic, is likely to encourage the construction of additional arms factories, similar to those built over the past few years to manufacture landmines and indigenously designed light arms.[34] Also, resources are still being poured into a massive military infrastructure development program, which has already seen the construction or upgrading of bases, training facilities and military medical institutions,

[24] "Junta to buy hi-tech arms", *Bangkok Post*, 9 April 1999.
[25] Thein Swe, "Human Resource Development in Nation Building: The Role of the Armed Forces", in *Human Resource Development and Nation Building in Myanmar*, Papers Presented at the Symposium at the International Business Centre, 18-20 November 1997 (Office of Strategic Studies, Ministry of Defence, Yangon, 1998), p. 155.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 160.
[27] See *Burma's Secret Military Partners*, *op.cit.*

[28] Ibid. See also "Chinese-made army equipment crossing Muse border", *BurmaNet News*, 19 December 2001; and "China ships arms to Burma", *BurmaNet News*, 14 January 2002.
[29] William Ashton, "Myanmar Navy boosts sea power with corvettes", *Jane's Navy International*, 105/8 (October 2000), p. 39.
[30] Ibid.
[31] William Ashton, "Myanmar's new MiG-29s: a threat to regional stability"?, *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, 29/2 (February 2002), pp. 20-23.
[32] "Myanmar", *Asian Defence Journal*, Asian Defence Yearbook 1998-1999, p. 106.
[33] Robert Karniol, "Myanmar to set up military satellite network", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 19 May 1999, p. 15. See also "Myanmar", *Military Procurement International*, 9/12 (15 June 1999), p. 4.
[34] Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power Without Glory*, chapter 6. See also Selth, *Landmines in Burma: The Military Dimension*, Working Paper N°352 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000).

all around the country.[35] A number of new airfields and army bases are planned or under construction, and the facilities at several ports are being upgraded to support increased naval deployments. Certain critical maintenance and support functions, once performed only in Yangon, are being de-centralised for greater efficiency.

Over the past few years rumours have been circulating in Myanmar to the effect that the country's military hierarchy has even more grandiose plans to expand the *Tatmadaw*'s capabilities. The posting of Myanmar navy officers to Pakistan to study submarine warfare, for example, has sparked speculation that the regime wishes to acquire at least one diesel submarine, possibly from North Korea. Also, there was discussion among Yangon's diplomatic community in the late 1990s that the SPDC had approached China regarding the possible purchase of M-11 short-range ballistic missiles. The Chinese were said to have given approval "in principle". Neither report has yet been supported by hard evidence. However, the military government has often surprised observers by the scope of its ambitions and the determination with which it has been prepared to pursue costly acquisition programs without direct or immediate strategic rationale.[36]

There appear also to be plans underway once again to revamp the *Tatmadaw*'s command and control system. In a major restructuring in November 2001, the number of Bureaux of Special Operations were expanded from one to four, and a range of other tri-service command positions were established in the Ministry of Defence. In a possibly related move, the Office of Strategic Studies was renamed and re-absorbed into a re-organised and strengthened Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence. The full significance of these changes is still unclear. Some new positions may simply have been established temporarily to make room for ten regional commanders, who at the same time were promoted and recalled to Yangon. However, a key aim would seem to be better management of the larger, more diverse armed forces created since 1988, in particular improved integration of different arms of the *Tatmadaw* and more efficient conduct of joint operations.

The *Tatmadaw's* future is clouded by persistent questions over its professional role, lack of popular support and, not least, the country's persistent economic and social problems. However, there is little doubt that, under the SPDC, the armed forces will continue to get the lion's share of scarce economic resources. This will permit further improvements to the *Tatmadaw*'s order of battle, and ultimately its fighting capabilities. It will also enable the military hierarchy to consolidate its political position and develop what has already become a virtual military state within the state.

IV. THE NLD'S VISION FOR THE FUTURE ARMED FORCES

The NLD was slow to formulate and articulate any formal policies on defence issues. The party has largely focused its attention on matters that have more immediate relevance to its constituents, in particular those relating to democratic freedoms and human rights. The extreme sensitivity of defence issues in Myanmar – and the harsh reaction of the regime to any perceived challenges to the current role of the armed forces – has also made it difficult to formulate or articulate views on this subject without incurring the wrath of the authorities.[37] Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, however, have made repeated, general references to the place of the armed forces in society. In 1999, these views were incorporated into a formal defence policy platform, which set out a broad vision for the *Tatmadaw* under a democratic government. Personal Statements

As General Secretary of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's personal views on Myanmar's defence and armed forces are influenced by discussions with her party colleagues, and informed by her commitment to a democratic government and improved human rights. Her guiding principles, however, derive from the writings of her father,

[35] See *Building the Tatmadaw, op.cit.*, p.19.

[36] The SPDC's decision in 2001 to purchase a squadron of MiG-29 fighters and a nuclear reactor from Russia, for example, flew in the face of strong political, economic and technical arguments.

[37] It is widely believed that Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest in 1989 (and subsequent incarceration without trial for six years) was triggered by her public criticisms of Ne Win's leadership of the armed forces since the assassination of her father, Aung San, in 1947.

Aung San, the man widely regarded as the founder of the country's armed forces during the independence struggle.[38]

The opposition leader, on many occasions since 1988, has appealed for the sympathy of the members of the armed forces and asked them to support demands for the military government to convene the parliament elected in 1990. At the same time though, she has made it clear that neither she personally, nor the NLD as a party, have any desire to divide the *Tatmadaw*:

> The people and the military personnel cannot be separated. We have been accused of working to split the army, to drive a wedge between them and the people. This is absolutely false. We have no desire for the army to split. That is why we always claim that the people include the army... It is necessary that the people love and trust the defence forces. The people and the defence forces must work together to form a modern and effective army.[39]

True to her family legacy and the beliefs of her father, Aung San Suu Kyi has made it clear that she fully accepts the legitimacy of the armed forces as an institution of the state, and personally holds it in high regard.[40] Indeed, she envisages an important national role for the armed forces in the future, provided that they fully respect the rights of the Myanmar people and are subject to their direction (as exercised through a democratically elected civilian parliament).[41]

Other senior members of the NLD have also referred back to Aung San, whose broad vision for the armed forces of Myanmar is still considered a viable model for the modern *Tatmadaw*. Deputy Chairman Tin Oo, for example, has drawn a clear distinction between the *Tatmadaw* envisaged by Aung San and that developed since 1948 by Ne Win and his proteges:

> When a genuine democratic government is born it will be possible to revive and establish an armed forces envisaged by our martyred leader General Aung San, father of the army and architect of our independence; an armed forces that appreciates his spirit and will abide by his instructions; an armed forces that will be loved and revered as in the days when resistance was launched against the colonial and fascist systems.[42]

More specifically on the nature of the *Tatmadaw* under a democratic government, Tin Oo has said that the armed forces need not be large in numbers but should "strive for quality and excellence, individually and as a group". They should become a force, which is "modernised and developed", but "respects the people as their mothers and fathers and is loved by the people in return".[43]

A. FORMAL POLICY PLATFORM

Since 1989, the views of Aung San Suu Kyi, Tin Oo, and other senior party figures have all stemmed from, and contributed to, a number of formal documents. The NLD's original party manifesto outlined a number of broad principles on defence:

> The military is born out of the people, and it must be for the people, loved by the people, free from politics, and one that the people can rely upon… It must be a modern military

[38] For a selection of Aung San's writings, see, for example, Josef Silverstein (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Aung San*, Southeast Asia Program Series N°11 (Ithaca, 1993).

[39] Aung San Suu Kyi press conference, 29 November 1995. It is not clear though, given what appears to be the implacable opposition of many senior officers to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, how the armed forces can support the cause of democracy in Myanmar without there being in some way "discord and dissension" in the ranks.

[40] See, for example, Aung San Suu Kyi, "Speech at the Shwedagon Pagoda, 26 August 1988", reproduced in *Freedom from Fear and other writings* (Penguin, London, 1995), pp. 193-4; also "The General Secretary's, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Request", (undated), statement by Aung San Suu Kyi provided by the NCGUB, 20 April 1999.

[41] Cited in Josef Silverstein, "Aung San Suu Kyi: Is She Burma's Woman of Destiny"?, *Asian Survey*, 30/10 (October 1990), p. 1013.

[42] Speech issued by the NLD's Central Executive Committee as "A Discourse on the Fifty Fourth Anniversary of Resistance Day, Statement N°50 (3/99), Rangoon, 27 March 1999.

[43] "NLD's Tin Oo Urges Soldiers to Work Towards Democracy", *BurmaNet News*, 9 August 1999. This statement directly challenged a comment made by former SLORC Chairman Senior General Saw Maung, who in 1990 told the armed forces that "only the *Tatmadaw* is our mother and father" ("Address on the 45th Anniversary of the Armed Forces Day'", Yangon, 27 March 1990).

> practising strategies in accordance with the geography and environment of the country… There must be plans for looking after the welfare of the families of those who fell in battle, and also of veterans.[44]

Later, the NLD has progressively developed and refined its policy position. In a document entitled *Political Goals and Intent of the NLD*, the party states:

> As in the practice of democracy the Power of the State will lie in the three pillars such as the Judiciary, the Executive and the Legislature. The *Tatmadaw* and the whole mechanism for defence will fall under the Executive. It will have to abide by the Constitution, and be a *Tatmadaw* for the people and loved by the people. Only in specific and necessary times will the military stand as a separate pillar owing to the importance of the task ...The country's defence will be undertaken according to Burma's geopolitics, the military will be equipped with a qualitative and effective strategy, and built to a modern and high standard.[45]

The statement adds that Myanmar's national defence would depend on the participation of all citizens through people's militias and compulsory military service. This would 'transform the *Tatmadaw* into a People's *Tatmadaw* in reality, not just in name'.[46]

In September 1998, the Defence Affairs Committee of the new Committee Representing People's Parliament (CRPP) was asked to prepare a report on "the establishment of a modern army in a democracy", and placed under the leadership of Tin Oo.[47] By November 1999, it had produced a *Report on the Formation of a Modern Tatmadaw in the Democratic Era*, which rehearsed earlier statements by the party on defence issues and set out a number of key policy principles. The report stressed that the speeches, teachings and policies of Aung San should be taken as a guide for the implementation of the party's defence policy. It further recommended that [paraphrased]:

1. The Ministry of Defence should no longer be under military control, but be answerable to a minister of defence who, as a member of the executive branch, would report to the elected parliament.
2. The commander-in-chief of the armed forces should be a political post with a fixed term of appointment.
3. Military intelligence should be confined to operational issues. Broader defence and national security matters should be the responsibility of a body reporting directly to the head of state.
4. The Tatmadaw should be a modern force, emphasising quality before quantity. Its current size should be reconsidered, taking into account the country's economic development, technological base and human resources.
5. Defence expenditure should be decided by the People's Parliament according to available resources.
6. There should be only one national *Tatmadaw*. All other armed groups, including those with official or semi-official status, should be disbanded.
7. The recruitment and training of military officers and other ranks should be reviewed. Greater attention should to be given to the role of women in the armed forces. The current ideological indoctrination of military

[44] Unofficial translation of mimeographed original.

[45] Quoted in Defence Committee of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament, *Report on the Formation of a Modern Tatmadaw in the Democratic Era* (Yangon, 1999). Unofficial translation.

[46] It is not clear what form the proposed national service scheme would take. One senior NLD figure has suggested that it would be similar to that which operated before 1988, under which people with specialist skills (like doctors and engineers) could be called up. Other NLD officials, however, envisage the selective conscription of healthy Burmese men and women of a certain age for set periods. Interviews, Yangon, November 1999.

[47] The Committee Representing the Peoples' Parliament (CRPP) was the NLD's answer to the government's consistent refusal to call the parliament elected in 1990. It was set up as a parallel government with ten smaller committees, each charged with certain policy studies. See "Resolutions Taken on the 27th May 1999 by the Committee Representing the Peoples' Parliament", *BurmaNet News*, 30 May 1999.

personnel should be replaced by teachings on democracy and related issues.

8. The *Tatmadaw* should be armed with modern and standard equipment and ammunition. Rather than obtain arms from "any or every country", advantage should be taken of the country's expected close ties with other democracies when seeking new equipment. Local factories should also provide arms and ammunition.
9. The national strategy should be "defence in depth", which requires the full commitment of the entire country. A national service law should be passed to facilitate this.
10. Military personnel should be confined to military functions and, except in emergencies, should not be used to fill civil service positions. Their conditions of service and benefits should be regularly reviewed in light of the dangers of their profession.[48]

The Defence Affairs Committee encouraged further discussion on these issues and promised that a more comprehensive report on "the formation of a democratic and modern *Tatmadaw*" would be presented after the People's Parliament had been convened.[49]

B. THE ARMED FORCES UNDER A DEMOCRACY

Extrapolating from these policy statements, wider reference to Aung San's writings, and personal interviews, some picture can be gleaned of the ideal *Tatmadaw*, as envisaged by the NLD. First, the *Tatmadaw* would remain a key institution of the state. Secondly, it would be a single, unified force under a prescribed organisational structure, responsible through a defence minister and cabinet to an elected civilian parliament.[50] Thirdly, the *Tatmadaw* would be a smaller and more professional organisation. It would also be more representative in terms of its ethnic composition, gender balance and the socio-economic background of its members. Fourthly, the political, economic, and social roles of the armed forces would be severely curtailed, although they would retain a heavy responsibility to assist the new government with reconstruction and nation building. In particular, the intelligence arm would be required to eschew the dominant political role it has adopted since 1962 and concentrate on purely strategic and operational matters. Finally, while coercive recruitment would be abolished, a form of selective national service would be retained to fill specialist positions like engineers and doctors.

The new *Tatmadaw* would most likely be organised along conventional lines, with a ministry of defence serving as both a government department and integrated joint military headquarters. There would be three discrete services, divided into subordinate commands around the country, much as today. The army would remain the largest service, but greater attention would be given to the navy and air force. There would be no pressing reasons to change the two-tier structure, with the army divided into mobile formations and garrison troops, but there could be fewer of the latter and wider distribution of "strategic" assets like armoured and artillery battalions. Individual units of all three services would be composed of members of all ethnic groups. Despite the NLD's proposed introduction of a federal political structure giving greater autonomy to the ethnic minorities there would not be a return to the ethnically based regiments created by the British colonial administration. In contrast to existing practice though, members of ethnic minorities, including non-Buddhists, would be free to rise through the ranks to the highest levels.

In purely military terms, the *Tatmadaw* under a democratic government would be structured and trained primarily for defence of the country against external threats.[51] It would also have the capability to respond to serious internal security challenges,

[48] "Report of the Defence Committee of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament".
[49] Ibid.
[50] Suggestions by the military government that, under the NLD, the leadership of the armed forces would be rotated among the military leaders of Myanmar's main ethnic groups are a distortion of comments made by opposition figures some time ago. They were probably designed largely to undermine public confidence in the NLD's ability to manage the country's security interests.

[51] This would mark a major departure for the *Tatmadaw*, which at present sees Myanmar's main security threats as deriving from internal factors. See Tin Maung Maung Than, "Myanmar: Preoccupation with Regime Survival, National Unity and Stability", in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences* (Palo Alto, 1998), pp. 390-416.

such as those posed by the narcotics-based armies in the Northeast, but it would not normally be used to quell domestic political dissent. If such measures were considered necessary, they would be left to a better-led and more independent police force.[52] To be truly "modern and effective" – qualities that both regime and NLD espouse – the *Tatmadaw* would be well armed with modern weapons and equipment drawn from a wide range of countries, as appropriate. Those countries would include not only China and Russia, as at present, but also Myanmar's former arms suppliers in the West. Military training programs would also reflect a wider range of international contacts, although it is unlikely that restrictions would be removed on the number and roles of foreign instructors actually resident in Myanmar.

In some key respects, this vision of the future armed forces is not too different from that of the military hierarchy. This suggests that, in some areas at least, the transition to a *Tatmadaw* more acceptable to a civilian democratic government might be a little easier than usually imagined. There are still major differences, however, which would need to be overcome for such a compromise to materialise. A key question is whether the military leaders could ever contemplate a more open debate on defence questions and thus a departure from their jealously guarded monopoly of national security issues.

V. PROSPECTS FOR A COMPROMISE

Compromise in any area requires that all sides are prepared to discuss and actively seek ways to overcome differences of perspective and interests. The NLD has made it clear that it is ready not only to discuss the position of the armed forces under a democratic government, but also to recognise the special role the *Tatmadaw* has played in the country's history and society. The military leaders, however, show no signs of relinquishing their monopoly on the formulation and implementation of national security policy, or indeed of any willingness to reconsider the content of such policy.

Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, as shown earlier, draw inspiration from the ideas of Aung San, whom they perceive to have favoured an apolitical armed forces compatible with liberal democratic principles. Yet, they realised at an early stage that they needed to overcome the *Tatmadaw*'s fears, and win its confidence, if they were ever to loosen its grip on power and form a viable civilian government. Thus, while actively seeking the *Tatmadaw*'s support for democratic rule, they have repeatedly acknowledged the dangers of a split in the armed forces. They have made it clear that the *Tatmadaw* has an important role to play in any future system and that there is no intention to sacrifice the armed forces, or its current members, in the name of democracy. It is not clear how far the NLD would indeed be prepared to diverge from its broader principles to facilitate a compromise. The imperatives of the ongoing negotiation process motivate all sides to keep their exact positions a closely guarded secret. However, the party has taken care not to rule anything out or set any conditions for dialogue.

The NLD's invitation to dialogue and compromise, however, runs up against long-established attitudes within the officer corps. For the past 40 years at least, the discussion of national security affairs has been monopolised by the senior ranks of the armed forces.[53] The public has received very little information about any aspect of military activities and has been actively discouraged from discussing, or even endorsing, government defence policies.

Despite suggestions in recent years that the military government would consider producing an official White Paper, it has published almost nothing on its formal defence policy. Speeches and statements about the perceived role of the armed forces and their strategic goals have tended to be highly politicised pronouncements designed in large part to justify continuing military rule. Also, citing "national security", the government has consistently refused to reveal any detailed or accurate information about the *Tatmadaw*'s threat perceptions, organisation, force structure, order of battle or combat capabilities. The same is true for annual defence expenditure and arms acquisitions.

[52] About one-third of the Myanmar Police Force consists of former military personnel. Its top ranks are dominated by former army officers, most of whom still see themselves as members of the *Tatmadaw*.

[53] In the BSPP period (1974-1988), Ne Win and other military leaders discarded their uniforms and led a nominally civilian government. Yet, they remained for all intents and purposes military men.

The SPDC's blue print for the future of Myanmar presented by the military-controlled National Convention, which is charged with drawing up a new constitution, shows its intent to maintain not only a leading role in politics, but also absolute control over all matters relating to national security and the internal affairs of the armed forces. According to 104 basic principles established by the Convention in 1993, the future president must have military experience; the ministerial portfolios for defence, internal affairs and border areas will be reserved for the armed forces; and neither military appointments nor the defence budget will be subject to legislative approval. Clearly, the military hierarchy means to ensure that civilians do not meddle in security affairs.

To outside observers, it would seem to be in the long-term interest of the armed forces themselves to reach an accommodation with the NLD and other political forces that would reduce the opprobrium they face both domestically and internationally. The level of internal security threats is directly related to the legitimacy of the government and the military as an institution. Moreover, unless the *Tatmadaw* can restore its historical reputation as the guardian of the Myanmar people, it is likely to find it difficult to attract the kind of recruits it will increasingly need to serve in a more complex and technically demanding environment.

The armed forces may continue to increase in size and acquire more modern weapons systems but, as long as these critical issues are left unresolved, its real military capabilities will remain limited and its professionalism suspect. In the external dimension, the *Tatmadaw* needs international aid to develop the national economy to a level that can sustain continued high levels of defence expenditure. Political and economic progress would also remove the latent threat of international humanitarian or other intervention in Myanmar.

Yet the SPDC appears to feel that it is already capable of defending its own policies and – despite the costs to the wider community – sees continuing high levels of defence expenditure as both necessary and justifiable. Ever since General Ne Win's coup in 1962, defence of the state and defence of the military government have been viewed as one and the same. The military hierarchy essentially sees the armed forces as embodying the state, and what is good for them is considered to be good for the country. The SPDC believes that the *Tatmadaw* is behaving honourably, holding the Union together, maintaining internal peace and stability, and defending the country against diverse external threats. The senior ranks of the armed forces thus do not share the sense of urgency felt by the international community over the need for a compromise with the democratic opposition, at least not in the critical area of national security.

The SPDC may be prepared to amend certain policies to overcome immediate political and economic problems. In time, it may even be persuaded to modify its position on a few major issues. Yet, military leaders remain convinced that the *Tatmadaw* alone has the right and ability to decide matters of national security, a term they define liberally. Thus, they have dismissed the NLD's attempts to promulgate an alternative defence policy as having not only little worth but, more importantly, also no legitimacy. Indications are that advice from foreign governments and independent groups on this subject is regarded much the same. The prospect of genuine dialogue about the composition, management, and responsibilities of the armed forces – not to speak of actual concessions – therefore appears remote.

VI. WHAT A COMPROMISE MIGHT LOOK LIKE

Given the military's total dominance of Myanmar politics and openly hostile attitude to suggestions that its security policies be re-examined, any discussion of a meaningful compromise concerning the future armed forces risks being a highly theoretical exercise. Nevertheless, unlikely changes have taken place in other military regimes around the world over the past few decades, and a failure to discuss opportunities, however remote, only plays into the hand of those who resist change. It thus seems prudent to canvass possible ways in which a future compromise involving the *Tatmadaw* might be implemented. As with all such transition arrangements, there would be elements of continuity as well as of change.

A. ELEMENTS OF CONTINUITY

The armed forces constitute such a powerful and all-pervasive influence in the country that some compromise or agreement would have had to be reached with the military leaders simply for a new government to be permitted to take office. Any such deal would include, as a core condition, an undertaking by the democratic movement not to attack the institution of the *Tatmadaw*, or to deprive it of its historically important place in society. The new defence minister would have to be someone trusted by the military hierarchy. It may even be necessary, at least as an interim measure, to grant the armed forces control over other security-related ministries, such as home affairs and border areas. The armed forces would also insist on retaining control over all military appointments, including the supreme commander-in-chief. While some officers would doubtless be asked to resign or retire, this would have to be with the agreement of the military leadership.

The military hierarchy would have to give the new government sufficient freedom to exercise its popular mandate. For such an arrangement to work, it would have to relinquish critical areas of decision-making, including economic and social policy. Yet, the top generals would almost certainly demand to be included in discussions on certain key policy issues, including those relating to external relations and internal security. Even if it were never explicitly stated, the armed forces would retain an effective power of veto over certain issues. For example, they would bring severe pressure to bear at any suggestion that the Union would be seriously weakened – or dismembered – by the new government under its proposed power-sharing arrangements with the ethnic minorities . As a last resort, the *Tatmadaw* could even stage another coup, a threat that would be well understood by the civilian leadership.

There would also be other, more "positive" reasons why a new democratic government would not want to seriously weaken the armed forces or precipitously overturn current policies. It would clearly be unwise to demand that the *Tatmadaw* simply walk away from all its old administrative positions before a new government structure and expanded civilian bureaucracy was in place. To do so could risk even greater economic and social problems than at present. Indeed, with its extensive resources, modern equipment, technical expertise, tested command structure and internal communications networks, the *Tatmadaw*'s role in national reconstruction and development is likely to be crucial.

Similarly, the new government would be a very fragile body, vulnerable to pressures from both inside and outside the country. Knowing this, it would almost certainly share the military hierarchy's wish to have a strong, capable defence force able to preserve Myanmar's sovereignty, defend its territorial integrity, and protect its natural resources from unauthorised exploitation. It would probably support, in principle at least, the arguments in favour of achieving a greater balance in the *Tatmadaw*, improving its supporting infrastructure and modernising its weapons inventory. The idea of raising the level of Myanmar's scientific and industrial defence base, and becoming more self-sufficient in arms production, also has appeal on both sides of the political divide.

A new democratic government would be anxious to win support of the armed forces' rank and file and to prevent continuation of the human rights abuses that are commonplace today. It would, therefore, accept the need to improve the lot of the average serviceman and servicewoman and support any existing programs aimed at doing so.

B. ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

Perhaps the most obvious and immediate changes, should a democratically elected government come to power in Yangon, would be cuts in the overall size of the armed forces, reduction in defence expenditure, and greater pressure on the *Tatmadaw* to observe a range of international instruments governing its behaviour.

During the 1990 election campaign, members of the NLD suggested that, by abandoning the long-established policy of crushing the ethnic insurgencies and imposing a highly centralised, ethnically Burman-dominated political system on the country, the then 190,000-strong armed forces could be reduced to a border protection force as small as 20,000-30,000.[54] For the reasons given

[54] Rodney Tasker and Bertil Lintner, "The plot thickens", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 21 June 1990, pp. 21-22.

above, it is most unlikely that any attempt would in fact be made to reduce the *Tatmadaw* so radically (this, of course would also be strongly resisted by the armed forces). However, through negotiations with the military leadership, it could probably be halved to around 200,000 without weakening Myanmar's security.

Such a reduction would need to be carried out gradually. A vulnerable new administration would not want to be faced with large numbers of resentful, ex-soldiers wandering around the countryside making trouble, as occurred after Independence. In any case, the abolition of forced recruitment, voluntary resignations, retirements and other natural wastage would all help to reduce the *Tatmadaw* markedly. The expected growth of the domestic economy under a democratic government would offer a major attraction for military personnel with technical and entrepreneurial skill. More efficient administration of the three services, stronger measures against corruption, and reduced opportunities for abuses of power, would further reduce the ranks without recourse to large-scale dismissals.

Though personnel costs have always been low, manpower cuts would help reduce the financial burden of the *Tatmadaw*. Drastic measures would be required to help fund the comprehensive economic rehabilitation of the country and greatly improved social services, which have long been demanded by the civilian population. Sectors like health and education, starved of funds since 1988, would get much higher priority, and development projects ignored or bypassed by the regime would have a greater chance to win state funding.[55]

Fortunately for a new democratic government, efforts to renew infrastructure and improve living conditions would inevitably attract significant support from Western democracies and other aid donors. International financial flows would quickly be restored. With such help, and under more professional management, the domestic economy could be expected to improve significantly. Still, the *Tatmadaw* would be bound to suffer a major reduction in its share of the national budget.

Defence spending is a very contentious issue. Yet, it could be argued that Myanmar's essential needs have already been met by the massive expansion and modernisation program of the past fourteen years and all that would be required in the foreseeable future would be funds for salaries, equipment repairs, and base maintenance. At the same time, military-controlled private companies, such as the Union of Myanmar Economic Holding and Myanmar Economic Corporation, would cushion the armed forces against cuts in the official defence budget. These companies already provide off-budget resources for the *Tatmadaw*, as well as its individual members, and would probably continue to do so under a civilian government during a transition period.

In any case, if the *Tatmadaw* genuinely stepped back from domestic politics and took measures to curtail human rights abuses, defence assistance might be forthcoming. Some Western countries, including the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, would probably be prepared to assist with the reform of the armed forces through training courses, equipment, and possibly even arms. Genuine anti-narcotics campaigns would almost certainly attract generous U.S. assistance, as occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, regional countries, like Singapore and Malaysia, would feel able to publicly acknowledge and expand their already close security ties.

In these circumstances, it might be expected that the close defence relationship between Myanmar and China would weaken. No government in Yangon could afford to ignore China's overwhelming strategic weight, and for some years the *Tatmadaw* would still be heavily dependent on China for spare parts. However, a democratically elected government in Yangon would be both able and willing to cultivate strategic relationships with a wider range of countries, adding to Myanmar's security through both military and non-military means. This would be welcomed and supported by most of Myanmar's neighbours, as well as by many countries beyond the region.

A democratic government could be expected to be more sensitive to, and observant of, a wide range of international conventions governing the behaviour of armed forces in both peace and war. Myanmar is already a signatory, or even a state party, to many such agreements. However, few have been observed closely, if at all, by the *Tatmadaw*. Under a

[55] The World Bank in 1999 estimated that, on a per capita basis, spending on the military was nine times that on health and twice that on education. "Myanmar: An Economic and Social Assessment", 18 August 1999 (draft).

democracy, Myanmar is much more likely to conform to accepted international practices regarding the recruitment of children into the armed forces, the use of forced labour to provide logistical support during military operations, and recognition of the rights of both combatants and non-combatants in insurgencies and other forms of domestic conflict. The NLD has already stated its strong support for the 1997 Ottawa Convention against the manufacture and use of landmines, which has been opposed by the SPDC. In addition, a democratic government is likely to be sympathetic to current UN-sponsored negotiations aimed at reducing the traffic in small arms and light weapons, a problem that has plagued Myanmar since Independence. In these and other areas, there is significant scope for improvements in the way the *Tatmadaw* sees and conducts itself.

In some respects, it would not seem too difficult for a new, civilian government to give form to this vision of a new *Tatmadaw*. Much would remain largely the same. In other ways, there would probably be support for change from within the armed forces themselves. In a number of key areas, however, it would prove very difficult to translate this theory into practice.

VII. KEY PROBLEM AREAS

Should the kind of compromise mooted above ever be possible, there would inevitably be a number of key problem areas where changes would be strongly resisted, either by the armed forces or by parts of the democratic movement. Yet, despite the difficult challenges they would present, progress in these areas would be critical to any longer term transition process.

A. THE INTELLIGENCE APPARATUS

One of the greatest challenges which would face any government seeking to change the *Tatmadaw* would be the reform of Myanmar's immensely powerful military intelligence apparatus.

The immediate aim would be to redefine the role of military intelligence and turn its focus away from surveillance of the civil population to military duties. Responsibility for this aspect of internal security could be given to the police force and other specialised, civilian security services and intelligence agencies, as was indeed the case before 1962.[56] However, the Military Intelligence Service and Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence have become so much a part of the armed forces' power base, and such a strong arm of government, that this reform process inevitably would prove very difficult. The military hierarchy would be reluctant to lose such a powerful weapon in its arsenal, at least until it was completely satisfied that a new civilian government could be trusted not to threaten the *Tatmadaw* and its core interests.

Even so, reform of the country's intelligence services would have to be given a very high priority. If the current system were to remain in place, a democratic government would not be able to function freely or effectively. Also, the new government would lose credibility with the civilian population (and the international community) if it were unable to dismantle the repressive machinery of the old regime.

B. THE QUESTION OF AMNESTY

Amnesty for members of the armed forces – and other government officials, including members of the Myanmar Police Force – accused of human rights abuses would be another thorny issue that would need to be confronted very early by a democratic government.

The fear of having to face the consequences of the *Tatmadaw's* harsh rule over the past 40 years is one reason why so many officers are reluctant to contemplate the transition to a genuinely democratic government. During the popular uprising in 1988, and again after the 1990 elections, there were numerous calls by students – and some senior political figures – for members of the armed forces to be brought before tribunals of the kind convened to judge war criminals after the Second World War.[57] More recently, there have been demands for military leaders to be tried by the international

[56] The other security and intelligence agencies in Myanmar would need to be included in these reforms. While theoretically civilian, they have long been led by former or serving military personnel and effectively subordinated to the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence. See *Burma's Intelligence Apparatus*, *op.cit.*

[57] "Staying Cool", *Asiaweek*, 22 June 1990, p. 21; "We'll play fair", *Asiaweek*, 13 July 1990, p. 28.

community *in absentia*, as has occurred in some instances with respect to crimes against humanity in the former Yugoslavia, perhaps by the International Criminal Court. There is little chance that the military hierarchy would willingly permit anything that would put its members in a vulnerable position. In 2001, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who is close to members of the military government, stated that "the SPDC would not hand over power to a civilian government unless there is a guarantee that no reprisals will be mounted".[58]

Aung San Suu Kyi has already made it clear that a NLD government would not engage in a campaign of reprisals against serving or retired members of the *Tatmadaw*, or indulge in wholesale dismissals of the officer corps as a punishment for years of harsh military rule. Yet these reassurances have failed to meet the concerns of those officers most likely to be affected. While they may feel justified for their actions and policies over the years, they are aware of the deep antagonism felt against the armed forces, both within and outside the country. Also, the military hierarchy has long distrusted the promises of civilian politicians. The trial of former South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan, and attempts by expatriate groups in Europe to bring Chile's General Augusto Pinochet to trial, have reminded senior Myanmar officers that, even years later, they could still be called to account for their past misdeeds.

Virtually all countries making the transition from military to civilian rule have had to find the right balance between reconciliation and accountability that permits the nation to come to grips with its past without endangering the transition itself. The introduction of a comprehensive amnesty for members of the armed forces would probably face considerable popular opposition. However, unless the next civilian government is able to put the *Tatmadaw*'s fears to rest, both institutions would enter a new democratic era gravely weakened.

C. INDOCTRINATION

Reforms relating to the morale, outlook and commitment of the men and women in uniform would be critical to any major, lasting changes to how the *Tatmadaw* saw itself and behaved under a democratic government. These may be more intangible and more difficult to implement. Yet, over the longer term, they would likely prove more important than any practical legal, financial, or institutional measures.

Under a democracy, there would need to be a considerable improvement in the standards of personnel management and conditions of service in the armed forces, to attract and retain the best recruits. Even more importantly, a major effort would need to be put into the recruitment, education and training of a new kind of officer, one prepared to give his or her allegiance to a national ideal quite different from that put forward by military governments since 1962.[59] This would be necessary not only to ensure the immediate survival of a new democratic government, but also the long-term development and consolidation of a more professional and apolitical *Tatmadaw*. Unless this fundamental shift occurred – and initial grudging acceptance of an elected government became genuine support – democracy in Myanmar would always be under threat.

Such changes would also be needed to sustain the young officers and their troops when called upon to protect Myanmar from external pressures and to carry the government's fight to the narcotics-based armies in the border areas. The central government will eventually have to confront large, well-armed and independent criminal organisations, like the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), to halt their narcotics production. Ultimately, this can probably only be done by physically wresting back control of their territory and disarming them. Such campaigns would not be easy, and casualties would most likely be high but they could help the rebirth of the *Tatmadaw*. Conducted professionally and for clearly defined reasons against an easily identifiable and well-recognised threat, they would help nourish a sense of national purpose, a greater degree of personal commitment, and the development of an *esprit de corps* among the next military generation.

[58] *Asia 2002 Yearbook*, p. 87.

[59] Many of the broad principles expounded by the military hierarchy since 1962 may originally have been valid in themselves. However, they have been corrupted and distorted through years of propaganda to serve narrower and less legitimate ends.

Wider nation-building efforts, such as infrastructure development, aid to the civil population, de-mining operations and disaster relief, would also be important in helping to restore the *Tatmadaw*'s pride and self-respect. Its standing in society, eroded by Ne Win's 1962 *coup d'état* and grievously harmed by the army's role in crushing the 1988 uprising, would be greatly improved. The people at large would be encouraged to look upon the *Tatmadaw* as their protectors, and not as their oppressors.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In order for Myanmar to progress politically and economically, it is imperative that the military government and the pro-democratic opposition reach a compromise on the composition, management and responsibilities of the armed forces. This would not only benefit the country and its people, but would also seem to be manifestly in the self-interest of both sides in the decades-long struggle for central state power.

There is some common ground on which it might be possible to begin building a broad consensus on what the *Tatmadaw* might look like in the future. If open discussion on such issues were permitted, this would constitute a useful first step in canvassing areas of agreement, and in rebuilding the public's trust and confidence in the armed forces.

The obstacles to such an outcome, however, are formidable. The character and position of the *Tatmadaw* are not only key to the military hierarchy's continued grip on political power but also fundamental to its internal self-image and external world-view. The SPDC shares a firm conviction that the roles and responsibilities of the *Tatmadaw* are the exclusive preserve of the military leadership and that core national security issues of this kind can only be understood and managed by the armed forces themselves. So far, the top leaders have strongly and consistently rejected any attempts by "outside" forces, whether domestic or foreign, to influence how the *Tatmadaw* is constituted, controlled or used. In fact, public discussion of "defence" or "security" is seen as a direct challenge to the military government itself and incurs harsh penalties.

Clearly, the ability of the international community to influence the military government directly in this critical area is very limited. Any public attempts to dictate or even propose specific changes in the size, shape or role of the armed forces would be rejected out of hand and could easily backfire. The latter would particularly be the case if such intervention were perceived to be aimed at weakening the ability of the *Tatmadaw* to defend the country. Private approaches by fellow military officers, particularly from neighbouring countries, would be more acceptable but still unlikely to have direct or immediate impact.

Therefore, the best advice that can be given to international actors at this point – keeping in mind that their influence will at best be long-term and greatly circumscribed by domestic factors – is to focus on establishing an "enabling environment".

Foreign governments and international organisations must be prepared to follow the lead of domestic actors on any issue relating to national security and internal military affairs. There is need to be pragmatic and accept such compromises as the NLD and other civilian groups might be able to negotiate with the military leadership, even if they were not to fulfil liberal democratic or rational economic principles. In particular, the U.S. and European governments should be careful not to impose Western ideas of military professionalism, which could undermine any attempt to find a less dominant, yet meaningful and useful role for the armed forces in the nation-building process. It is, for example, quite possible that the *Tatmadaw* for some time to come would have a positive role to play in the administration of the country. This should be left up to the Myanmar people, or their representatives, to decide.

Concrete steps should be taken to help alleviate the military hierarchy's fears of international intervention in Myanmar's domestic conflicts. This might be accomplished, for example, by: (a) supporting domestic efforts to bring an end to the civil war, aid to rebuild war-torn societies and economies in former conflict areas, and other peace initiatives; (b) having regional powers – or an appropriate international body – guarantee Myanmar's existing borders; and (c) broader diplomatic and cooperative efforts aimed at enhancing understanding and trust with the military leadership and government at large.

There is a need to consider international assistance for economic reforms not only for humanitarian and general development reasons, but also as a way of creating a win-win situation for all political stakeholders. The struggle over scarce resources in Myanmar's undeveloped economy contributes to tension at all levels of society, among state sectors, between the state and private sector, and between the centre and the periphery. Conversely, in a revived and expanding economy, it would be possible for the government to fund legitimate defence needs, while increasing much needed social and other productive investments in the country at large and ethnic minority regions in particular. Defence spending has to be reduced as a percentage of central government expenditure, but not necessarily in absolute terms. The multilateral lending agencies, through structural adjustment loans and strict technical conditions, could play an important catalytic role in this area.

The *Tatmadaw*, like other institutions facing the loss of traditional areas of power and responsibilities, should be helped to find an alternative focus and take pride in a more apolitical role. International actors could eventually facilitate such a reorientation, for example, by supporting the ongoing efforts to build a more conventional, modern armed forces on par with those found in neighbouring countries, and by encouraging and assisting an expansion of the army's anti-drugs campaigns. The UN should also explore the possibility of engaging the *Tatmadaw*, if and when it were willing, in international peacekeeping missions.

There is a fine line between supporting a more "professional" armed forces, and one better able to dominate politics and control its own population. However, some conventional warfare capabilities of the Myanmar armed forces should not be too sensitive, at least not from a political point of view (some countries in the region may feel differently about the security implications). The apparent willingness of the military government to increase its cooperation with neighbouring countries in anti-drugs campaigns would also seem to warrant a reassessment of current levels of international support in this area. Care should be taken, though, to ensure that any monetary or material assistance is used for the intended purpose and not diverted to military campaigns against political forces elsewhere in the country.

Ultimately, substantial reform of the *Tatmadaw* will require a shift in internal perceptions about the role of the armed forces in society. This is likely to be accomplished only over years, or even decades, as part of a broader process of domestic political and social change. However, international actors, both government and private, should actively seek to accelerate attitudinal change by facilitating increased exposure of the officer corps, including its younger members, to alternative information and ideas about politics, economics and military doctrine. This may be done indirectly through publishing more information or more directly by increasing military exchanges and providing training opportunities for Myanmar officers at defence academies and civilian universities around the world. There is also an urgent need to develop a cadre of civilian experts in all security and military matters. This could be started immediately by stepping up educational opportunities in military and security issues abroad for civilians. Training for civilians in matters of policing, emergency work and internal security would also be useful in facilitating eventual reforms of these areas.

The international community must recognise that there are no easy, quick fixes to the complex structural and cultural problems that for a half century have impeded political and economic progress in Myanmar, and certainly none that it can impose. Instead, the aim should be to unlock frozen patterns of behaviour and thinking inside the country by encouraging new actors, policies and ideas – and paths to democracy, military professionalism, a strong market economy and broader social development that can actually reach this destination.

There is a need to abandon the kind of thinking that sees any progress achieved under the military government as an obstacle to democratisation and therefore something to be neither supported nor encouraged or even acknowledged. The reality, whether Western policymakers feel comfortable with it or not, is that the military leadership is more likely to compromise in an atmosphere of progress than it is under siege. It is, after all, five decades of self-imposed isolation that has created the mindset against which the domestic opposition and its international supporters are now struggling.

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