

## Burma's *Tatmadaw*: A force to be reckoned with

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*Despite Myanmar's transition from a military dictatorship to a 'disciplined democracy' under a hybrid civilian–military government, the country's armed forces remained the most powerful political institution in the country. The Tatmadaw was also becoming a stronger and more professional military force, supported by continuing high budgets, major arms acquisitions and new operational doctrines.*

Shashank Joshi's recent post on 'India's Incredible Shrinking Air Force'<sup>1</sup> prompts a closer look at Burma's armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*). Since the accession of President Thein Sein in 2011, the *Tatmadaw's* continuing political role has been examined closely.<sup>2</sup> Less attention has been given to strictly military issues, yet the *Tatmadaw's* combat capabilities not only underpin its domestic position, but also help determine Burma's strategic influence.

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1 Shashank Joshi, 'India's Incredible Shrinking Air Force', *The Interpreter*, 21 September 2015, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/09/21/Indias-incredible-shrinking-air-force.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/09/21/Indias-incredible-shrinking-air-force.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indias-incredible-shrinking-air-force](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indias-incredible-shrinking-air-force)].

2 Robert H. Taylor, *The Armed Forces in Myanmar Politics: A Terminating Role?*, Trends in Southeast Asia No.2 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), [www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/Trends\\_2015\\_2.pdf](http://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/Trends_2015_2.pdf).

Despite its dominance of Burma's national affairs for decades, the *Tatmadaw* remains in many respects a closed book.<sup>3</sup> Even the most basic data are beyond the reach of analysts and other observers. For example, the *Tatmadaw's* current size is a mystery, although most estimates range between 300,000 and 350,000 personnel. Official statistics put Burma's defence expenditure this year at 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), but the actual level is unknown.<sup>4</sup>

Given this uncertainty, all reports about the *Tatmadaw* need careful handling. It is clear, however, that since 2011, Commander-in Chief Min Aung Hlaing has implemented wideranging plans to make the *Tatmadaw* more professional and to improve its order of battle. The latter includes an ambitious arms acquisition program that some have compared with the dramatic expansion and modernisation of Burma's armed forces during the 1990s.

In recent years, the army has upgraded its inventory of armoured vehicles with Ukrainian, Russian and Chinese armoured personnel carriers, as well as Ukrainian T-72 and Chinese MBT-2000 tanks. As seen at recent Armed Forces Day parades,<sup>5</sup> it has new surface-to-air missile systems such as the Chinese HQ-12/KS-1A<sup>6</sup> and the Russian Pechora-2M. It has also shown an interest in obtaining more heavy artillery and unmanned ground vehicles.

Under a 2009 agreement with Russia, the air force is acquiring 50 Mi-35 Hind E attack helicopters. In 2010, Burma reportedly bought 50 more K-8 Karakorum jet trainers. The following year, a contract was signed for

3 Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Looking Down the Barrel*, Griffith Asia Institute Regional Outlook Paper No.21 (Brisbane: Griffith University, 2009), [www.griffith.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/148350/Selth-Regional-Outlook-Paper-21.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/148350/Selth-Regional-Outlook-Paper-21.pdf) [page discontinued].

4 Jon Grevatt, 'Myanmar Announces 2015 Budget of USD 2.5 Billion', *IHS Jane's 360*, 27 January 2015, [www.janes.com/article/48370/myanmar-announces-2015-budget-of-usd-2-5-billion](http://www.janes.com/article/48370/myanmar-announces-2015-budget-of-usd-2-5-billion) [page discontinued].

5 Dylan Malyasov, 'Photo: Myanmar Military Parade to Mark Armed Forces Day 2015', *Defence Blog*, 29 March 2015, [defence-blog.com/army/photo-myanmar-military-parade-to-mark-armed-forces-day-2015.html](http://defence-blog.com/army/photo-myanmar-military-parade-to-mark-armed-forces-day-2015.html).

6 Dylan Malyasov, 'Myanmar Receive First Batch SAM missiles HQ-12/KS-1A', *Defence Blog*, 16 June 2015, [defence-blog.com/news/myanmar-receive-first-batch-sam-missiles-hq-12-ks-1a.html](http://defence-blog.com/news/myanmar-receive-first-batch-sam-missiles-hq-12-ks-1a.html).

an additional 20 MiG-29 Fulcrum fighters and, in 2014, an unspecified number of CAC/PAC JF-17 Thunder multirole combat aircraft was ordered.<sup>7</sup> It has also received new transport aircraft and air-to-air missiles.<sup>8</sup>

A particular effort has been made to improve Burma's naval capabilities.<sup>9</sup> In 2012, China delivered two decommissioned Jianghu II-class frigates. In 2011, a locally built Aung Zeya frigate was launched and another two in the same class followed in 2014. Five more are planned. A third Anawrahta-class corvette was launched in 2014 and construction has begun on a fleet of fast attack craft. Rumours that Burma will purchase two submarines, however, remain unconfirmed.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, Burma's naval diplomacy has increased and Naypyidaw has signed defence agreements with several foreign countries. Some arrangements—like those with China, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus—seem to relate mainly to local defence production, but others are more broadly based, such as that with India.<sup>11</sup> Burma claims it has severed military ties with North Korea, but some, including the US, dispute this.<sup>12</sup>

There have been repeated claims that Burma has tried to develop, or has even acquired, WMD. The former government's interest in nuclear technology fell well short of a weapons program, however, and no hard evidence has been produced to support reports the *Tatmadaw* has chemical and biological weapons. Accusations that Burma is producing ballistic missiles are harder to dismiss, but reliable data are scarce.

Together, all these developments invite a number of observations.

7 Zachary Keck, 'Burma to Purchase Chinese-Pakistani JF-17 Fighter Jets', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 25 June 2014, [thediplomat.com/2014/06/burma-to-purchase-chinese-pakistani-jf-17-fighter-jets/](http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/burma-to-purchase-chinese-pakistani-jf-17-fighter-jets/).

8 Mrityunjoy Mazumdar, 'Myanmar Commissions Helos, Transport Aircraft', *IHS Jane's 360*, 16 July 2015, [www.janes.com/article/53049/myanmar-commissions-helos-transport-aircraft](http://www.janes.com/article/53049/myanmar-commissions-helos-transport-aircraft) [page discontinued].

9 Shahryar Pasandideh, 'Modernization of the Myanmar Navy', *NATO Association of Canada*, 17 August 2015, [natocouncil.ca/modernization-of-the-myanmar-navy/](http://natocouncil.ca/modernization-of-the-myanmar-navy/) [page discontinued] [now at [natoassociation.ca/modernization-of-the-myanmar-navy/](http://natoassociation.ca/modernization-of-the-myanmar-navy/)].

10 Andrew Selth, 'Is Burma Really Buying Submarines?', *The Interpreter*, 29 January 2014, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/01/29/Burmas-submarine-dream.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2014/01/29/Burmas-submarine-dream.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-really-buying-submarines/](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-really-buying-submarines/)].

11 Prashanth Parameswaran, 'India, Myanmar Eye Future Defense Cooperation', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 28 July 2015, [thediplomat.com/2015/07/india-myanmar-eye-future-defense-cooperation/](http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/india-myanmar-eye-future-defense-cooperation/).

12 Andrew Selth, 'Burma and North Korea: Again? Still?', *The Interpreter*, 10 July 2013, [www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx](http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/07/10/Burma-and-North-Korea-Again-Still.aspx) [page discontinued] [now at [www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still/](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/burma-and-north-korea-again-still/)].

First, several of these acquisition and construction programs were initiated before the handover of power to the hybrid civilian–military government in 2011. This suggests the then ruling military council wanted to ensure that the *Tatmadaw* had the revenue and hardware necessary to handle any challenges that arose after that time. The programs launched after 2011 illustrate the *Tatmadaw*'s continuing political clout.

Second, the military leadership still sees a need to guard against both internal and external threats. Before the recent ceasefires, the *Tatmadaw* faced more than 72,000 armed insurgents.<sup>13</sup> Also, the security environment has changed. A US invasion is no longer considered likely, but Burma's neighbours are improving their own armed forces and the Bay of Bengal is fast becoming an arena for economic and strategic competition.<sup>14</sup>

Third, in the 1990s, Burma largely bought cheap, obsolete weapons. More modern systems are now both available and affordable. The helicopter gunships seem aimed primarily at countering insurgencies, while the fighters, tanks and surface-to-air missile (SAMs) are a hedge against conventional threats. The new naval vessels are to help police Burma's resource-rich territorial waters and protect it against developing maritime threats.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, the proportion of Burma's budget allocated to defence is likely to remain high, not only to pay for these new weapon systems, but also to keep them operational. Of the US\$1.15 billion (A\$1.82 billion) allocated to defence in 2013, for example, more than US\$600 million (A\$947 million) was earmarked for the procurement of military hardware. About \$200 million (A\$315 million) was reserved for aircraft, \$93 million (A\$147 million) for ships and \$30 million (A\$47.3 million) for military vehicles.<sup>16</sup>

13 Ye Mon and Lun Min Mang, 'Ceasefire Pact is "Historic Gift": President', *Myanmar Times*, [Yangon], 16 October 2015, [www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17051-ceasefire-pact-is-historic-gift-president.html](http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/17051-ceasefire-pact-is-historic-gift-president.html).

14 David Brewster, 'The Bay of Bengal: The Indo-Pacific's New Zone of Competition', *The Strategist*, 2 December 2014, [www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-bay-of-bengal-the-indo-pacifics-new-zone-of-competition/](http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-bay-of-bengal-the-indo-pacifics-new-zone-of-competition/).

15 Pushan Dash, 'A "Three-Dimensional" Bangladesh Navy in the Bay of Bengal', *The Diplomat*, [Washington, DC], 12 February 2015, [thediplomat.com/2015/02/a-three-dimensional-bangladesh-navy-in-the-bay-of-bengal/](http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/a-three-dimensional-bangladesh-navy-in-the-bay-of-bengal/).

16 Tha Lun Zaung Htet, 'Burma Parliament Approves Controversial Defence Budget', *The Irrawaddy*, 1 March 2013, [www.irrawaddy.org/military/burma-parliament-approves-controversial-defense-budget.html](http://www.irrawaddy.org/military/burma-parliament-approves-controversial-defense-budget.html).

Some observers have seen the latest arms contracts in more political terms. The reforms announced since 2011 have developed a life of their own, and probably exceed what was envisaged by the former military regime, but arguably they have occurred only because the armed forces have allowed them to. The continuing flow of funds and hardware to the *Tatmadaw* is seen by many as a payoff for stepping back from day-to-day politics.

If this is so, it remains to be seen whether such an arrangement can survive a new administration. Should the opposition win a majority of seats in the national parliament next month—as many predict—the *Tatmadaw*'s relationship with the central government will change. The NLD has long been critical of the fact that the defence sector receives more in the annual budget than education and health combined.<sup>17</sup>

However, major cutbacks to defence spending would be difficult to implement. The *Tatmadaw* remains Burma's most powerful political institution. Also, the military leadership will try to persuade the new government that its latest modernisation program is justified. It knows that, regardless of who is in power in Naypyidaw, Burma's internal stability, sovereignty and independence will remain important factors in any consideration of the country's military capabilities and its annual defence expenditure.

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17 'Statement: Suu Kyi's NLD Slams Burma Junta's Budget', *Democracy for Burma*, 6 March 2011, [democracyforburma.wordpress.com/2011/03/06/statementsuu-kyi%E2%80%99s-nld-slams-burma-junta%E2%80%99s-budget/](http://democracyforburma.wordpress.com/2011/03/06/statementsuu-kyi%E2%80%99s-nld-slams-burma-junta%E2%80%99s-budget/).

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