

94

Myanmar: Pariah status no bar to defence modernisation

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Despite widespread condemnation of Myanmar's armed forces for their brutal 'area clearance operations' against the Rohingyas and other ethnic groups, the Tatmadaw continues to acquire modern arms and develop the country's defence industries. Geostrategic and commercial considerations on the part of Myanmar's neighbours and friends clearly trumped any concerns expressed over its violations of international law and universal human rights.

It has been more than two years since military 'clearance operations' against Myanmar's Rohingyas began in October 2016. Since then, the international community has relied on public criticism, unilateral sanctions and a range of measures in the UN and the International Criminal Court to hold Myanmar's government and armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*) accountable for their actions.

Myanmar's political and military leaders have refused to acknowledge the crimes committed in Rakhine State—described by UN officials as ethnic cleansing, if not genocide.¹ As it has done so often in the past, Naypyidaw seems to be relying on the weakness of the international system and the passage of time to escape any serious consequences.

From the lack of effective measures taken against Myanmar to date, this strategy seems to be working.²

Indeed, a survey of recent security developments reveals that, despite all the criticisms levelled against it, the sanctions introduced and the embargoes imposed, Myanmar is still strengthening its defence relations with neighbours and friends and the *Tatmadaw* is continuing to acquire modern arms.

Since the advent of a 'disciplined democracy' in Myanmar in 2011, China has sold it two Jianghu II-class frigates, 76 Type-92 armoured vehicles, 12 CASC CH-4 unmanned aerial vehicles and up to 16 CAC/PAC JF-17 fighters, at an estimated cost of almost US\$1 billion (A\$1.6 billion).³ Most of these arms have already been delivered. The first four JF-17s were commissioned by the Myanmar Air Force in December 2018.

The JF-17 was jointly developed with Pakistan, which has joined in criticism of Myanmar over its treatment of the Muslim Rohingyas. However, this does not appear to have affected the current contract. Two two-seater JF-17B training variants were delivered to Myanmar in March this year.

Since 2016, the Myanmar Air Force has also received 12 Yakovlev Yak-130 jet trainers from Russia, with a reported four more due for delivery. In October 2017, four of the Myanmar Air Force's Mil Mi-24P helicopter gunships were serviced in Russia. In January 2018, Myanmar and Russia agreed on the sale of six Sukhoi Su-30 multirole fighters. The contract is reportedly worth about US\$204 million (A\$321 million).

1 'Prosecute Myanmar Army Chief for Rohingya "Genocide": UN Envoy', *Al Jazeera*, 25 January 2019, www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/1/25/prosecute-myanmar-army-chief-for-rohingya-genocide-un-envoy.

2 Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and University of Queensland, 'Regional Atrocity Risk Assessment', *Asia Pacific Regional Outlook*, No.11, April 2019, r2pasiapacific.org/files/3292/AsiaPacificOutlookV11%20FINAL.pdf.

3 'How Dominant is China in the Global Arms Trade?', *China Power* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2018), chinapower.csis.org/china-global-arms-trade/.

In December 2018, it was announced that India would donate six HAL HJT-16 Kiran jet trainers to the Myanmar Air Force and station a team in Myanmar to help train their pilots and ground crew. India has also agreed to help Myanmar's army and navy upgrade their arms and equipment as part of an expanding defence partnership.⁴ It is currently considering the sale of offshore patrol boats to the Myanmar Navy.

Last year, the Myanmar Air Force commissioned two French/Italian ATR 72-500 transport aircraft and an Airbus AS365 Eurocopter. They were purchased despite EU arms embargoes, suggesting that the sale involved a third party. While both types are designated as civilian aircraft, the *Tatmadaw* has stated that they will be used to upgrade Myanmar's defence capabilities.⁵

Shortly before the Rohingya crisis began, Israel agreed to provide the Myanmar Navy with four or more Super-Dvora Mk III gunboats. Despite an international outcry against the sale, it went ahead, with the first two boats being delivered in April 2017. According to media reports, the contract is part of a broader defence relationship.⁶

In some cases, with foreign help, Myanmar's defence industries are continuing to produce a wide range of arms and equipment, including armoured vehicles, missiles and naval vessels.⁷

In March this year, it was announced that Ukrspecexport, Ukraine's military import/export agency, had signed a joint-venture agreement with Myanmar to build a plant capable of manufacturing BTR-4U wheeled armoured personnel carriers and 2S1U Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers.⁸ The new facility is due to start production in late 2020.

4 Bibhu Prasad Routray, 'India's Defence Diplomacy with Myanmar: State of Play', *Mantraya*, 30 January 2019, mantraya.org/analysis-indias-defence-diplomacy-with-myanmar-state-of-play/.

5 Thomas Kean, 'Despite EU Embargo, Tatmadaw Buys European Aircraft', *Frontier Myanmar*, 9 January 2019, frontiermyanmar.net/en/despite-eu-embargo-tatmadaw-buys-european-aircraft.

6 Ali Abunimah, 'Myanmar Shows Off Its Israeli Weapons', *The Electronic Intifada*, 23 October 2017, electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/myanmar-shows-its-israeli-weapons.

7 'Myanmar Navy Commissions Seven Vessels to Commemorate 71st Anniversary', *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, [Yangon], 25 December 2018, www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com/myanmar-navy-commissions-seven-vessels-to-commemorate-71st-anniversary/.

8 Bertil Lintner, 'Myanmar, Ukrainian Firm Ink Arms Plant Deal', *Asia Times*, [Hong Kong], 9 March 2019, www.asiatimes.com/2019/03/article/myanmar-ukrainian-firm-ink-arms-plant-deal/.

Myanmar has also been engaged in an active program of defence diplomacy. Senior *Tatmadaw* officers have made visits overseas and several foreign officials have visited Myanmar.⁹

Myanmar has participated in several naval exercises, including one with China in 2017, another with ASEAN (and 10 other invitees) the same year and two more with India, in 2018 and 2019. Warships from China, India and Russia have made port calls. Earlier this year, frigates from Vietnam and Brunei both made their first 'friendship visits' to Myanmar. In March, a Myanmar Navy vessel attended the seventieth anniversary celebrations for China's People's Liberation Army Navy.

All these developments underscore three enduring characteristics of Myanmar's foreign relations and defence policies.

First, geostrategic and commercial considerations on the part of Myanmar's neighbours and friends trump any concerns expressed over its violations of international law and universal human rights. China and India appear untroubled by the widespread condemnation of the *Tatmadaw* for its harsh treatment of the Rohingyas. Russia, the Ukraine and Israel are still prepared to sell arms to Myanmar if there is a profit to be made.

Second, even under Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar is determined to decide its own policies and set its own priorities, regardless of international opinion. In these circumstances, and bearing in mind the support Myanmar receives in the UN and elsewhere from China and Russia, the international community is quite restricted in what it can do to hold Naypyidaw to account for its appalling treatment of the Rohingyas.

Third, regardless of the widespread condemnation of its military operations in Rakhine State, not to mention atrocities perpetrated in other parts of the country, the *Tatmadaw* is still able to secure funds for its ambitious arms acquisition program and the expansion of its military support

9 'Renewed EU Sanctions Don't Affect Us: Military Spokesperson', *The Irrawaddy*, 30 April 2019, www.irrawaddy.com/news/world/renewed-eu-sanctions-dont-affect-us-military-spokesperson.html?fbclid=IwAR190_9AEEWz8agjKJKgDQG3EMdLuw11qwNeQFOxHjLwoulvdxRHGc2bnqM.

facilities. Myanmar's defence budget increased dramatically just before power was transferred to a quasi-civilian government in 2011, and it has remained high ever since.¹⁰

This is not to argue against concerted efforts by governments and multilateral organisations to hold Myanmar to account for its actions. Even symbolic gestures are important to uphold the laws and principles of conduct that have been endorsed by the international community. Also, there is still much to be done in practical terms to assist the million or more Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

However, expectations regarding the outcomes of such measures must be tempered by an understanding of Myanmar's intense nationalism and determination to conduct its own affairs—a position made easier by the readiness of some countries to help pariah states strengthen their coercive capabilities and escape retribution for unacceptable behaviour.

10 'Myanmar: Arms Imports in Constant Prices of 1990', *World Data Atlas*, knoema.com/atlas/Myanmar/Arms-imports.

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