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Regional Outlook Paper

'STRONG, FULLY EFFICIENT AND MODERN':
Myanmar's new look armed forces

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Executive Summary

Over the past five years, the political role of Myanmar's armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) has been examined closely, and from many different angles. There have been far fewer accounts of military developments. This is surprising, as the Tatmadaw's material strength and combat capabilities underpin its domestic position and help determine Myanmar's influence in the wider strategic environment. One reason for this lack of scholarly attention is that, despite its dominance of Myanmar's national affairs over many decades, the Tatmadaw's internal workings are in many respects a closed book. Even the most basic data has long been beyond the reach of analysts, academic researchers and other observers. It has become clear, however, that since the ruling State Peace and Development Council handed over formal power to a hybrid civilian–military government in 2011, Myanmar's armed forces have undergone a dramatic transformation.

Under Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the Tatmadaw has introduced a wide range of reforms aimed at creating what President Thein Sein has called a 'world-class Tatmadaw'. A concerted effort has been made to make the armed forces more professional, more capable and more respected, both within Myanmar and internationally. These reforms have included a major arms acquisition program. All three services have benefited from additions to their order of battle and a range of other measures designed to improve their combat capabilities and performance. These arms purchases and the concurrent development of Myanmar's defence industries have reflected the military leadership's perceptions of continuing internal and external threats. They have also brought Myanmar closer to its key arms suppliers, notably China, Russia, Ukraine, India and possibly North Korea. The military leadership also hopes to develop closer contacts with the armed forces of ASEAN and Western countries.

To a large extent the military reform program has been successful, but it is a work in progress. There are still many problems that need to be dealt with, and some will take considerable time and effort. This process has now been complicated by the apparent success of the opposition parties – notably Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy – at the 8 November 2015 national elections. The political picture is still unclear, but the Tatmadaw's relationship with parliament is bound to change, as new MPs take the stage and portfolios other than defence are given a higher priority. That said, the Tatmadaw is likely to remain the most powerful political institution in Myanmar. Thanks to the provisions of the 2008 constitution (which allocates 25% of all parliamentary seats to the armed forces), the Tatmadaw's domination of key ministerial appointments and a range of other measures, it is likely to be able to secure the resources it needs to continue its ambitious modernisation and rearmament programs.

Myanmar's future is uncertain in other ways. For the past five years, there has been an understanding between the politicians and generals that has allowed both to pursue different goals. The Tatmadaw seems to be looking for a controlled withdrawal from government, while retaining a national role. It is the generals' firm intention, however, that they will decide the time frame for such a transition. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has suggested that the country may need another five or even 10 years before it can be entrusted to a fully civilian government. That is unlikely to satisfy Myanmar's population, or please the opposition parties, which are already challenging the 2008 constitution. Thus it remains to be seen whether the current level of accommodation continues as the new parliamentarians and president take office next year and more far-reaching reforms are mooted. The Tatmadaw is unlikely to welcome the constraints on its power that will be required for Myanmar to become a genuine democracy.

'Strong, Fully Efficient and Modern': Myanmar's new look armed forces

Any perceived challenges to Myanmar's unity, internal stability and sovereignty, or to the Tatmadaw's self-appointed national role, will delay the transition process. They could even halt it.

Author's Note

After Myanmar's armed forces crushed a nation-wide pro-democracy uprising in September 1988, the country's official name (in English) was changed from its post-1974 form, the 'Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma', back to the 'Union of Burma', which had been adopted when Myanmar regained its independence from the United Kingdom in January 1948. In July 1989 the new military government changed the country's name once again, to the 'Union of Myanmar'. At the same time, a number of other place names were changed to conform more closely to their original pronunciation in the Myanmar language. In 2008, after promulgation of a new national constitution, the country's official name was changed yet again, this time to the 'Republic of the Union of Myanmar'.

The new names have been accepted by almost all countries, the United Nations and other major international organisations. However, a few governments (notably the United States), some political groups, a number of news outlets and certain high profile individuals (such as Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi) still cling to the old forms, apparently as a protest against continuing human rights abuses and the former military regime's failure to consult the Myanmar public about the proposed name change. In this paper the new names have been used. Also, formal titles introduced after 1989 have been cited in their current form, such as 'Myanmar Army' and 'Myanmar Police Force'. Quotations and references, however, have been given as they originally appeared. Such usage does not carry any political connotations.

The armed forces have effectively ruled Myanmar since 1962 but, from 1974 to 1988, they exercised power through an ostensibly elected 'civilian' parliament. On taking back direct control of the country in 1988, the armed forces abolished the old government structure and created the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled by decree. In November 1997, the regime changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In 2008, it held a constitutional referendum, which was followed by general elections in 2010 and by-elections in 2012. The national parliament, consisting of both elected officials and non-elected military officers, first met in January 2011. A new government was installed under President Thein Sein in March that year.

After the United Kingdom dispatched troops to the royal capital of Mandalay and completed its three-stage conquest of Burma (as it was then known) in 1885, Rangoon was confirmed as the administrative capital of the country. Now known as 'Yangon', it remains the commercial capital, but in October 2005 the regime formally designated the newly built city of Naypyidaw (or Nay Pyi Taw), 320 kilometres north of Yangon, as the seat of Myanmar's government. Where they appear in this paper, the terms 'Yangon regime', or in some cases simply 'Yangon', are used as shorthand for the central government, including the military government that was formed in 1962, re-invented in 1974 and recreated as a military council in 1988. After 2005, the government is referred to as the 'Naypyidaw regime', or simply 'Naypyidaw', to reflect the administrative change that took place that year.

Another term used in this paper is *Tatmadaw* (literally 'royal force'), the vernacular name for Myanmar's tri-service armed forces. In recent years, this term has gained wide currency in English-language publications on Myanmar. While the term 'Defence Services' usually refers only to the armed forces, it is sometimes used in a wider context to refer to the armed forces, the national police force, the 'people's militia' and sundry other government-endorsed paramilitary forces. On occasion, the Fire Services Department and Myanmar Red Cross have also been included in this category.

This Regional Outlook was completed just after national elections were held in Myanmar on 8 November 2015. While it appeared that, as widely predicted, the National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi had won a large number of seats in both houses of parliament, the final outcome of the poll was not yet known. The official result was unlikely to be announced before the end of the month. Also, the old parliament remained in place and planned to continue sitting until January 2016. The new MPs were due to be sworn in next February. Only then would a parliamentary electoral college be able to choose Myanmar's next president. The new administration would probably be installed at the end of March 2016. In those circumstances, it was felt that early publication of this paper would make it more useful to Myanmar-watchers than delaying it until the political picture became clearer. Hence the speculative tone of some comments in the paper.

1. Introduction

I'd like to urge and impart to you to maintain the noble historic traditions of Tatmadaw at the risk of lives and to go on working for the country in accordance with the Objectives of the 70th Armed Forces Day:

- (a) To build strong, fully efficient and modern Defence Services to protect land, water and air territories of the Nation.
- (b) To cooperate hand in hand with people for peace and stability, national solidarity and development of the Nation.
- (c) To safeguard the Nation and people against internal and external dangers and natural disasters, and
- (d) To safeguard the three main national causes: non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty, making the sacrifice of lives (sic).

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing
Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services
Naypyidaw, 27 March 2015¹

It has been almost five years since Myanmar's ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) formally transferred power to a hybrid civilian–military government, and Thein Sein was installed as the country's president.² Elections for a new national parliament were held on 8 November 2015 and it is expected that an electoral college drawn from both Houses will choose the next president in 2016. The role played by the armed forces (the *Tatmadaw*) in this process, and their continuing political influence, have been examined closely, from many different angles.³ Also, the Tatmadaw's extended counter-insurgency campaigns against Myanmar's non-state armed groups have prompted numerous reports (usually written from the point of view of the ethnic and activist communities) in the international news media.⁴ However, except for occasional stories in specialist publications, there have been few considered accounts of other military developments. This is surprising, as the Tatmadaw's material strength and combat capabilities not only underpin its domestic position but also help to determine Myanmar's influence on the wider strategic environment.⁵

One reason for this lack of scholarly attention is that, despite its prominence in Myanmar's national affairs, the Tatmadaw's internal workings are in many respects a closed book. For decades, even the most basic data has been beyond the reach of analysts and other observers.⁶ For example, the size of Myanmar's armed forces is a mystery. During the Ne Win era (1962–88), it was generally accepted that there were about 186,000 men and women in its three services.⁷ The actual number, however, was a state secret. After the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, when the Tatmadaw abolished Ne Win's socialist government and took back direct political power, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) launched an ambitious military expansion and modernisation program. By 2000, the Tatmadaw had doubled in size to an estimated 400,000, about 370,000 of whom were in the Myanmar Army (MA).⁸ Some press stories have since claimed that there are currently 500,000 men and women in the Tatmadaw, but estimates by most well-informed observers now range between 300,000 and 350,000.⁹ A few commentators have suggested that the figure may be even lower.¹⁰

Nor can anyone be sure about the size of Myanmar's annual defence expenditure. Ne Win's curbs on military spending were abandoned by the SLORC and SPDC, lending credence to activist claims that, during the 1990s, the armed forces were allocated around 40% of the national budget. A more likely average annual figure was 30%.¹¹ After a dramatic spike in outlays during Thein Sein's first few years in office, annual defence spending has fallen, but it is still very high. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2012 and 2013 Myanmar spent 4.5% and 4.6% respectively of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defence.¹² In 2014, the portfolio was allocated about 23% of total government expenditure, or around US\$2.5 billion. This was estimated by the Asian Development Bank to be 4.8% of GDP, making Myanmar one of only 20 countries around the world with military spending higher than 4%.¹³ In 2015, defence's allocation fell to 12% of total expenditures, but this was as a proportion of a much larger total budget.¹⁴ However, none of these figures take account of the many ways that the Tatmadaw supplements its income from off-budget sources. Without this information, any official figures must be considered indicative only.

How all these statistics translate into the Tatmadaw's order of battle and operational capabilities are two more 'known unknowns', to quote former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.¹⁵ Under its 1990s modernisation and expansion program, Myanmar purchased a wide range of arms and military equipment. Most came from China, but several other countries contributed to the influx of armoured vehicles and artillery, fighter and transport aircraft, frigates and patrol boats, missiles and munitions. However, few of these acquisitions appear to have been state of the art, or even new, raising doubts about their effectiveness and reliability, particularly if deployed against an adversary equipped with more modern weapon systems.¹⁶ The Tatmadaw's command, control, communications and intelligence capabilities are also largely unknown. Serious questions hang over the Tatmadaw's combat proficiency. Under Ne Win it was considered an experienced and battle-hardened counter-insurgency force, but its ability to perform in a larger, more conventional and multi-dimensional conflict cannot be reliably assessed.¹⁷

Clouding the picture even further, Myanmar's armed forces have been the subject of a long and at times bitter contest between die-hard critics of Naypyidaw and those who have looked at the country from different perspectives. Often, descriptions of the Tatmadaw have been notable more for political and moral arguments than by objective, evidence-based analysis. As a result, a number of myths and misconceptions have gained popular currency. Indeed, by surveying the works produced on the Tatmadaw since 1988, it is possible to gain two quite different impressions. At one extreme, it is portrayed as an enormous, well-resourced and efficient military machine that completely dominates Myanmar and threatens regional stability.¹⁸ At the other end of the scale, it has been characterised as a hollow shell, lacking committed personnel and professional skills, riven by internal tensions and preoccupied with the crude maintenance of political power.¹⁹ In a few publications both propositions have been put forward.

Given this level of uncertainty, all open source reports about the Tatmadaw need to be treated carefully. It has become clear, however, that over the past five years Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (CinC) Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has presided over a number of important policies that are designed to open a new chapter on the Tatmadaw as a disciplined fighting force.²⁰

2. Improvements and Acquisitions

Since 2011, Myanmar's government has made a concerted effort to create smaller, but more professional, more capable and more respected armed forces – what President Thein Sein called in his inaugural speech a 'world class Tatmadaw'.²¹ The CinC has put this goal in more modest terms, describing it simply as the development of a 'standard army', but he clearly has in mind international norms.²² The plan, which is still being implemented, has encompassed a wide range of measures, at all levels.

Perhaps the most obvious change has been in the Tatmadaw's leadership. In one of his first decisions as CinC, Min Aung Hlaing removed several senior officers and rotated others to new positions in what constituted a major generational shift. He also trimmed the top-heavy command structure and replaced most of the country's Regional Military Commanders.²³ The infusion of new talent and (potentially, at least) new thinking has been maintained through periodic reshuffles of personnel.²⁴ At the same time, officer cadet intakes at both the Defence Services Academy and Officer Training School have been severely reduced and there have been large scale transfers of military personnel to the Myanmar Police Force (MPF).²⁵ In order to increase combat proficiency, new training programs have been introduced and others revised. A joint arms exercise (*Aung Zeya*) was held in 2012, the first since 1995, and individual services have conducted a number of major exercises (such as the navy's annual 'Sea Shield' series).²⁶ Efforts have been made to diversify the sources of the Tatmadaw's expertise, including through increased postings to foreign schools and military institutions.

The CinC has also taken steps to strengthen the Tatmadaw's cohesion, unity and morale.²⁷ Greater control is being exercised over the Tatmadaw's finances, and logistical services are being improved. At the same time, Myanmar's military infrastructure is being upgraded, in part to cater to the new arms and equipment being acquired. A number of human resource issues are being addressed. For example, there have been increases in pay and allowances. New uniforms have been issued 'in order to raise the Myanmar armed forces to international standards, to motivate military personnel and to equip them for the weather conditions of Myanmar'.²⁸ General duty female officers are being recruited again, a scholarship program has been introduced for army nurses and, after a hiatus of 25 years, the University Training Corps has been reactivated.²⁹ A program is underway to demobilise child soldiers.³⁰ Greater recognition is being given to the contribution made by dependents and other family members. The CinC has also spoken out against corruption and sought to improve the Tatmadaw's public image through a more sophisticated communications strategy, including the use of social media.³¹

In keeping with the government's determination to build 'a strong, competent, modern, patriotic Tatmadaw', the CinC has also implemented a wide-ranging scheme to improve the armed forces' order of battle.³² This includes an ambitious arms acquisition program that some have compared with the re-armament of Myanmar's armed forces during the 1990s. Between 2011 and 2014 Myanmar reportedly purchased arms valued at US\$1.6 billion, a significant increase over previous years.³³ According to one observer, the figure of US\$700 million for arms imports in 2011 was 'more than double the highest annual figure since 1989'.³⁴ In terms of defence spending per capita, Myanmar still rates below most other regional countries, but over the past five years the Tatmadaw has clearly enjoyed a privileged position in Naypyidaw's accounts. Its main suppliers appear to have been China, Russia, Ukraine, India and possibly North Korea. All three services have benefited.

Over the past several years, the Myanmar Army has upgraded its inventory of armoured vehicles with Ukrainian T-72 and Chinese MBT-2000 main battle tanks. It has also

acquired a range of Ukrainian, Russian and Chinese armoured personnel carriers (APC). As seen at the last few Armed Forces Day parades held in Naypyidaw, the army now has Chinese SH1 155mm self-propelled howitzers, PTL-02 tank destroyers, and mobile surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems such as the Chinese HQ-12/KS-1A and the Russian Pechora-2M.³⁵ One recent report has claimed that Myanmar plans to buy additional BMP-3F amphibious fighting vehicles from Russia.³⁶ Also, the Tatmadaw has expressed an interest in obtaining more heavy artillery and has even been investigating the use of un-manned ground vehicles.³⁷ A recent deal with the Indian firm Tata to manufacture heavy trucks in Myanmar may herald a supply arrangement with the MA, which to date has relied on a range of transport vehicles imported from China, and to a lesser extent Poland.³⁸ Soldiers on operations have been issued with new light arms and, since 2012, Kevlar helmets and body armour.

Under a 2009 agreement with Russia, the Myanmar Air Force (MAF) is acquiring 50 Mil Mi-35P 'Hind-E' attack and transport helicopters. Also, the MAF's ageing F-7, A-5 and G-4 fighters and ground attack aircraft are being phased out and replaced by more modern platforms. A contract has been signed for 20 MiG-29 'Fulcrum-D' fighters, to add to the 12 Fulcrum-As (including two training variants) purchased in 2001. In 2009, Myanmar reportedly ordered 60 more K-8 'Karakorum' jet trainers, followed in 2015 by 16 CAC/PAC JF-17 'Thunder' multi-role combat aircraft.³⁹ Jointly developed by China and Pakistan, the JF-17s are expected to start arriving in 2017. The MAF has also begun taking delivery of 20 German Grob G 120TP basic training aircraft, plus an unknown number of AS365 Dauphin 2 and Bell 206 Jetranger III helicopters. The MAF's airlift capabilities have been strengthened with several Beechcraft 1900D light transports and ATR turboprops.⁴⁰ In 2015 alone, the air force commissioned 36 new aircraft, including fighters, combat helicopters, trainers and light transport aircraft.⁴¹ Its inventory of air-to-air missiles (AAM), which probably includes the Chinese PL-2, PL-5 and PL-7, has reportedly been strengthened with Russian AA-10 'Alamo' and AA-11 'Archer' AAMs.

A special effort seems to have been made to improve Myanmar's blue-water naval capabilities.⁴² In 2012, China delivered two decommissioned 1,960-ton 'Jianghu II' class frigates, declared surplus to requirements by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In 2011, a locally-built 2,500-ton 'Aung Zeya' frigate was launched in Yangon and another two followed in 2014. Five more in the same class are planned. A third 1,105-ton 'Anawrahta' class corvette was launched in 2014.⁴³ In addition, work has begun on a fleet of missile-armed fast attack craft reportedly based on the Houjian/Huang Type 037/2 currently in service with the PLAN.⁴⁴ Most, if not all, the vessels built in Myanmar's shipyards appear to incorporate Chinese, Russian, Indian and Israeli technology. A recent visit to Israel by the CinC prompted a report that the Myanmar Navy (MN) also planned to purchase a number of Super Dvora 3 patrol boats for 'coastguard' duties.⁴⁵ Claims that Myanmar 'is finally taking steps towards developing a subsurface capability', however, and that it plans to purchase two Russian submarines, remain unconfirmed.⁴⁶

In addition to these reports, there have been rumours that the Tatmadaw is in the market for a range of additional platforms, weapons and sensors. For example, during a visit to India in 2013 the Chief of the Myanmar Navy reportedly handed his hosts a list of equipment that the MN wished to purchase. The list was said to include maritime sensors and components for offshore patrol vessels.⁴⁷ Indonesian sources revealed in 2014 that Myanmar was interested in acquiring a number of medium range twin-engine CN235-220 aircraft.⁴⁸ While suitable for transport and reconnaissance duties, it can also be configured for anti-submarine patrols. Discussions had already been held with the Indonesians over the possible sale to Myanmar of SS-2 assault rifles, and South Korean-designed 'Makassar' class landing platform docks built by PT PAL. However, it appears that no sales have yet eventuated.⁴⁹ There were also unconfirmed reports that the MAF was interested in enhancing its airlift capabilities by purchasing Antonov An-148s from Ukraine and XAC MA60s from China, but these negotiations seem to have stalled, or been abandoned.⁵⁰ Before a demonstration model crashed in Indonesia in

2012, the MAF was named as a possible buyer for the Sukhoi Superjet-100 passenger transport.

At the same time, Myanmar has continued to develop its defence industries, and increase its stockpiles of strategic materiel. Over the past 20 years, Myanmar's capabilities for indigenous production have grown significantly. There are now up to 25 factories and other major sites (such as shipyards and research institutes) operated by the Tatmadaw, producing a wide range of arms, ammunition and equipment.⁵¹ As already noted, Myanmar is building several kinds of naval vessels in its Yangon shipyards, albeit with foreign help. Ukrainian BTR-3U and MT-LB APCs are being built locally. The Tatmadaw is also able to build and provide ammunition for its truck-mounted 122mm multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), which are similar to the Chinese Type 81 MLRS. It is understood that 48 of the 60 K-8 aircraft purchased from China in 2009 will be assembled at the MAF's Aircraft Production and Maintenance Base at Meiktila in Upper Myanmar, probably in cooperation with the China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation.⁵² One news report has claimed that the Tatmadaw is looking to produce most of its new JF-17 jet fighters under licence in Myanmar.⁵³

Over the past 30 years, there have been repeated claims that Myanmar has tried to develop, or has even acquired, weapons of mass destruction.⁵⁴ Arguably, before the international community embraced Thein Sein's reform program and sought to develop much closer relations with the new government in Naypyidaw, Myanmar could offer a convincing strategic rationale for the acquisition of such weapons. A US invasion was never a real prospect, but the hostility shown towards the SLORC and SPDC by the Western powers between 1988 and 2011 encouraged military leaders to believe that Myanmar faced an existential threat.⁵⁵ The regime's interest in nuclear technology fell well short of an actual weapons program, however, and no hard evidence has ever been produced to support occasional reports by insurgents, foreign activists and journalists that the Tatmadaw has developed, tested or used chemical and biological weapons.⁵⁶ Accusations that North Korea has assisted Myanmar to produce ballistic missiles are harder to refute, but once again caution is advised.⁵⁷ Little is known about this program, its scope, the stage it has reached and the type of missiles that may be involved.⁵⁸

All these efforts are not just to upgrade and expand the Tatmadaw's weapons inventories, but also to make the country more self-reliant in arms production. Over the past several years, Naypyidaw has signed defence agreements with a number of foreign countries. Some arrangements, like those with China, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, seem to be related mainly to technology transfers and licensed production. They have often accompanied the announcement of major arms contracts. Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Israel in September 2015 seems to have included discussions about industrial contracts. Other defence cooperation agreements, such as one recently negotiated with India, are more broadly based and include references to joint security concerns, such as continuing instability along the Myanmar-India border.⁵⁹ There have also been reports that Myanmar is considering closer defence relations with fellow ASEAN members, notably Indonesia and Singapore, both of which have well-developed defence industries. After considerable pressure was applied, principally by the US, Myanmar claimed to have severed its military ties with North Korea, which probably included assistance with the manufacture of surface-to-air, and possibly ballistic, missiles.⁶⁰ That claim, however, is disputed.⁶¹

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's military reform program is still in a work in progress, and is apparently encountering obstacles. There are reportedly divisions within the Tatmadaw over the loss of certain powers and privileges, both on active service and after retirement. There are continuing problems of poor recruitment levels, low morale and high desertion rates. There are also concerns about an inflated junior officer corps, which threatens a future promotions logjam.⁶² In addition, campaigns against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Shan State Army – South, Shan State Army – North and other ethnic armed groups in recent years have exposed deficiencies in leadership, tactics, training and equipment. Officers and men lack combat experience and have

reportedly suffered accordingly.⁶³ For all its advances since 2011, confidence in the ability of the Tatmadaw concurrently to pursue multiple counter-insurgency campaigns in different parts of the country remains low. Reports of human rights abuses against both combatants and non-combatants in Kachin, Shan, Karen and Chin States have raised serious questions over discipline, an issue that also arose in Rakhine State in 2012, when the army was called in to help quell widespread sectarian violence.⁶⁴ Some of these problems will be very difficult to resolve.

The Tatmadaw's military doctrine is being revised to 'suit the new political context'.⁶⁵ Doubts have been expressed, however, over its ability to reach the levels of professionalism to which Min Aung Hlaing aspires. It has been suggested for example that, in Myanmar military circles, 'professional' is equated with 'mercenary'. Such an approach to soldiering is anathema to many officers, who see themselves as patriots charged with an historical responsibility to protect the country and constitution. This mindset envisages a perpetual role for the armed forces in national politics. At the same time, one activist group has claimed that 'the Tatmadaw's idealism, professionalism and patriotism have over the years been eroded by nepotism and corruption ... Today opportunism rather than professionalism motivates many young men to become officers'. It was suggested that, in these circumstances, 'returning to a more disciplined system is not really practical'.⁶⁶ Whether or not that is true, the CinC needs to consider that, with the expansion of Myanmar's polity, economy and civil society under President Thein Sein, a military career is no longer the only way to obtain an education, technical skills, employment and social status.⁶⁷

Together, all these developments invite a number of observations.

Firstly, it is clear that, despite the changed circumstances since 2011, Myanmar's military leaders remain concerned about both internal and external threats to the country. Before the finalisation of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement on 15 October 2015, the Tatmadaw faced up to 100,000 armed insurgents.⁶⁸ Eight groups have signed the agreement, but the other seven involved in the peace process (including the powerful United Wa State Army and Kachin Independence Army) refused to do so.⁶⁹ Together with a number of other, smaller, non-state armed groups, they continue to pose a challenge to the central government. There is also a high likelihood of further political, economic and religious unrest. For example, communal tensions in Rakhine State, where there is a large number of 'Rohingya' Muslims, remain high. The external security environment too is unpredictable. Relations with Western countries have improved greatly since 2011, but Myanmar's neighbours are improving their armed forces and the Bay of Bengal is becoming an arena for economic and strategic competition.⁷⁰ These are all issues that the Tatmadaw needs to anticipate and address.

Secondly, Myanmar's arms acquisitions during the 1990s were largely of cheap, obsolete weapon systems. Fearing both an invasion and internal instability, the SLORC and SPDC were keen to acquire more and better arms as quickly as possible, and at the lowest cost. China in particular was happy to take advantage of this situation by offering the military regime a wide range of second-hand arms and equipment at knock-down prices. Not all the Chinese platforms, however, met Myanmar's expectations. The old F-7 and A-5 fighters, for example, caused numerous problems (MAF pilots described them as 'flying coffins').⁷¹ Others were lost on operations or through accidents, as occurred when Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, reportedly sinking as many as 25 naval vessels.⁷² More modern weapon systems are now available and, thanks to Myanmar's abundant natural resources, affordable. The MAF's new helicopters and light attack aircraft are aimed at countering insurgencies, and its fighters are to help 'close the technological and air power gap with neighbouring and regional countries'.⁷³ The MA's main battle tanks and SAMs are to protect Myanmar against conventional attacks, while the MN's new vessels are to police its territorial waters and guard against maritime threats.⁷⁴

Thirdly, the proportion of Myanmar's budget allocated to defence is likely to remain high, not only to pay for all these new weapon systems but also to keep them operational. Of the US\$1.15 billion allocated to defence in 2013, for example, more than US\$600 million was earmarked for the procurement of military hardware. About \$200 million was reserved for aircraft, \$93 million for ships, and \$30 million for military vehicles.⁷⁵ In 2015, it was envisaged that 29% of the annual defence budget would be used to purchase new warships, fighter jets, armoured and other vehicles, heavy weapons and ammunition.⁷⁶ There will also be a need to set aside funds for maintenance, operating costs, wages and other recurring expenses. As a proportion of the national accounts, defence's allocation is expected to decline. However, as Myanmar's economy continues to expand (GDP growth in 2014 was 8.7%) its value in real terms is unlikely to diminish. Some analysts have suggested that Myanmar's defence expenditure will reach US\$2.8 billion by 2019.⁷⁷

Fourthly, several of the new acquisition and construction programs listed above were initiated before the SPDC's handover of power to the civilian–military government in 2011. This suggests that the then ruling military council wanted to ensure that the Tatmadaw had the revenue and hardware necessary to handle any challenges – both political and military – that arose after that time. The programs launched after 2011 illustrate the Tatmadaw's abiding threat perceptions and continued political influence. Some observers, however, have seen the latest surge in defence expenditure in different terms. The political, economic and social reforms announced since 2011 have developed a life of their own, and probably exceed what was envisaged by the former military regime when it launched the transition to a 'genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system'.⁷⁸ Arguably, these reforms have occurred only because the military leadership has permitted them to do so. The continuing flow of funds and hardware to the Tatmadaw can be seen 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.

The fact that the opposition parties appear to have won a majority of seats in the national parliament on 8 November means that the Tatmadaw's relationship with the central government will change. The National League for Democracy (NLD), for example, has long been critical of the fact that the defence sector has routinely received more in the annual budget than education and health combined.⁷⁹ The Tatmadaw is still Myanmar's most powerful political institution, however, and major cutbacks to defence spending will be difficult to implement. 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, Myanmar's internal stability, sovereignty and independence will be important factors in any consideration of the country's military capabilities, and its annual defence expenditure. There is also the risk that, denied funds in the annual budget, the Tatmadaw will seek them from other sources. A Special Funds Law enacted in March 2011 already permits the Tatmadaw to access additional funds without parliamentary oversight.⁸⁰ This is something that the new government will need to avoid, if it is to retain any control over military spending.

3. The Tatmadaw's Political Role

At the time of writing, it is still too early to make any firm judgements about the outcome of the national elections held in Myanmar on 8 November 2015. However, some preliminary observations about the Tatmadaw's current political role, and the potentially far-reaching implications of an opposition electoral victory, seem appropriate.

One question often asked since 2011 has been: when will the Tatmadaw 'return to the barracks'?⁸¹ This reflects a widespread wish for a genuinely democratic and civilian government in Myanmar, but it misses a vital point. The Tatmadaw has never seen itself as having separate military and political roles, with the first naturally having primacy over the second. Rather, it is deeply imbued with the idea that since 1948 it alone has been responsible for holding the Union together, defeating its enemies – both internal and external – and saving the country from chaos. This has given rise to an abiding belief, strengthened by training and indoctrination programs, of the importance of 'national politics', as opposed to 'party politics'. It has also led to the conviction that the Tatmadaw has both a right and duty to supersede other state institutions if circumstances demand. It was on this basis, for example, that the armed forces took power in 1962, and crushed the 1988 uprising. As Robert Taylor has written, after the latter upheaval the Tatmadaw 'set out on its own to reunify or, as later termed "reconsolidate", the country in order to create the conditions for passing authority to a constitutional government'.⁸²

In the 2008 constitution, the Tatmadaw was recognised as an autonomous institution free from any civilian control or oversight. It was given the right independently to administer and adjudicate its own affairs, including the management of its personnel. It also has an exclusive right to set its own agenda, particularly with regard to military strategy and operations.⁸³ In some areas authority is shared, occasionally leading to a debate over the power of the CinC, relative to the president.⁸⁴ However, the constitution specifies that the portfolios of defence, home affairs and border affairs are filled by serving military officers recommended by the CinC. If the Vice CinC is included, the Commander in Chief exercises effective control over at least five of the 11 members of the powerful National Defence and Security Council. More to the point, as supreme commander of all 'Defence Services' in Myanmar, the CinC has ultimate control over the MPF (including its 30-plus armed security battalions), Border Guard Forces, other paramilitary organisations and civil defence forces.⁸⁵

During Thein Sein's presidency, Myanmar's executive and armed forces seem to have been in broad agreement about the way forward. The Tatmadaw as an institution no longer ran day-to-day politics. It was prepared to let the government formulate policy in most areas and proceed with a wide-ranging program of economic and social reforms. It went from being a 'hegemonic player' to a 'veto player'.⁸⁶ As Renaud Egretteau has pointed out, the military appointees in parliament 'do not pursue active law-making, but rather a detailed scrutiny of legislations and motions prepared either by the executive branch or the executive bloc of the legislature'.⁸⁷ The 14 Regional Commanders, formerly the holders of both military and administrative powers, tended to exercise their authority only on military matters, deferring on other issues to the local civil authorities. For its part, the government seemed content to let the armed forces manage their own affairs. Complications could arise when military and political factors coincide, as may have occurred over peace talks with the KIA, and possibly over the armed forces' continuing links to North Korea, but these issues appeared to have been manageable.⁸⁸

The armed forces' attitude to reform, and the extent to which it feels obliged to control the transition process, will be tested by a number of key issues over the next few years. These include the final outcome of the national elections held on 8 November, the

choice of a new president in 2016, any future attempts to amend the constitution, and further negotiations with non-state armed groups over a comprehensive peace agreement.

At the 2015 Armed Forces Day celebrations, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing called the national elections in November 'an important landmark for democracy implementation' in Myanmar.⁸⁹ He gave assurances that, while the Tatmadaw would not tolerate any instability or armed threats, it would permit the elections to be 'free and fair'.⁹⁰ He has repeatedly assured the Myanmar people that the results would be respected by the armed forces, and that there would be no coup if the outcome did not favour the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).⁹¹ However, such a policy position, if genuinely held, poses risks for the Tatmadaw. The USDP appears to have lost its dominance of the parliament, and the NLD looks like winning a majority of seats in both houses. While this will not directly affect the Tatmadaw's position under the constitution, the parliament has developed a surprisingly independent stance since 2011. If controlled by opposition parties, and influenced by Aung San Suu Kyi, it is not likely to be as docile or manageable as the framers of the charter probably anticipated. It could introduce legislation that goes beyond the limits tolerated by the armed forces.⁹²

The 2008 constitution is seen as 'the main or mother law' of Myanmar, protecting the Tatmadaw's core interests and guaranteeing it a central role in national affairs.⁹³ Any proposals aimed at reducing the status of the armed forces would be resisted. They have already rejected moves to reduce their guaranteed 25% representation in all national and regional assemblies.⁹⁴ The generals have also opposed moves to amend the constitution so that Aung San Suu Kyi can stand for the presidency. They do not seem prepared to entrust the country to the civilian leader of a fractious party whose attitudes towards the armed forces and broader security issues are in their view questionable. Tatmadaw spokesmen have not ruled out future amendments to the constitution, including a reduction in the military bloc, but they have opposed such changes in the near future on the grounds that Myanmar is still a 'young democracy'.⁹⁵ Concerns have also been expressed that 'Myanmar is still in a democratic transition ... stability and reconciliation are very important in this period and democratic practices are not mature enough yet'.⁹⁶ Indeed, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has suggested that the country may need another five or 10 years before it can be entrusted to a civilian government.⁹⁷

In this regard, it needs to be kept in mind that the paradigm shift from a military dictatorship to a more open and liberal government is only taking place because the Tatmadaw has permitted it to do so. Contrary to the claims of some foreign politicians and activist groups, Myanmar's military leadership was not persuaded to relinquish its tight grip on national affairs by external factors such as political pressure or economic sanctions. Nor was its hand forced by internal strife or military defeat. The decision to launch a controlled transition to a more democratic system of government was made on the basis of careful calculations as to the political state of the country, its needs in terms of social and economic development, and how best to manage its complex security problems, including foreign relations. The 2008 constitution ensures that the armed forces retain their institutional independence and overall control of a top-down reform process that meets those broad requirements. The pace and degree with which the Tatmadaw steps back further will depend on the formation of an acceptable government after 2015 and the way that it manages those issues the Tatmadaw deems important.

One message given consistently by the armed forces hierarchy is that the Tatmadaw will always act according to the law, in particular the constitution. Given that there is a plethora of restrictive laws already on the books, some dating back to the colonial era, and the 2008 charter was written specifically to safeguard the Tatmadaw's independence, operations and national role, this is rather disingenuous. The generals will always be able to find some formal legal basis for their actions. Under the provisions of the constitution, for example, the Tatmadaw can return the country to full military

control, if such a step is deemed necessary by the president. Given certain triggers, the CinC could simply mount another coup. Some observers have put the odds of that happening over the next five years at 20%.⁹⁸ A few have rated the prospect of a coup as high as 50%.⁹⁹ These estimates, however, are highly speculative. A more realistic notion of the Tatmadaw's future behaviour can be gauged by examining factors involved at the national, institutional and personal levels.

At the national level, the Tatmadaw is committed to Myanmar's sovereignty, unity and internal stability, as they judge such matters. These goals were encapsulated in the former government's three 'national causes' and have been enshrined in the 2008 constitution. If they are challenged, military intervention of some kind becomes more likely. Since 2011, perceived external threats have greatly diminished. However, any attempt by the international community to exercise its 'responsibility to protect', for example on behalf of the Muslim Rohingyas, would be strongly resisted.¹⁰⁰ Also, as already noted, there is the potential for civil unrest to erupt over contentious political, economic or social issues. Racial and religious tensions are particularly high. In addition, there are 23 Border Guard Force battalions and about a dozen People's Militia Force units, the reliability of which are suspect. There are also about 100,000 armed personnel in Myanmar, divided among nearly 40 non-state groups.¹⁰¹ Some have resisted efforts to place them under government control, including the estimated 30,000-strong United Wa State Army and the 20,000-strong KIA. Discussion of federalism makes the Tatmadaw nervous and while a partial ceasefire has been possible a comprehensive peace agreement will be very difficult.

At the institutional level, the armed forces would be concerned at any attempts to deny them their special place in national affairs. This is not only spelt out in the constitution, but has been reaffirmed on several occasions by both the president and the CinC.¹⁰² Most military officers are intensely nationalistic and take seriously their role as guardians of the country, with its responsibility to step in and 'save' Myanmar, if believed necessary. The military leadership is also likely to act if the Tatmadaw itself was believed to be under threat. Since 2011, the two military-controlled conglomerates known as the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited and the Myanmar Economic Corporation have lost profitable monopolies and certain tax-exemptions, but the Tatmadaw's leadership seems to have accepted that this will not deny them the men and materiel necessary to fulfil its duty to 'safeguard the constitution'.¹⁰³ Should a future president or parliament try drastically to reduce the defence budget, however, or seriously restrict the armed forces' sources of off-budget income, there is likely to be trouble.

At the personal level, many officers and other ranks would be unhappy about an attempt to remove the clause in the constitution that effectively grants them immunity from prosecution for human rights violations committed under the former government.¹⁰⁴ If any local politicians, or members of the international community, revived efforts to put Myanmar military personnel on trial for such offences, that would cause considerable concern within the armed forces. One senior official has reportedly stated that the SLORC did not hand over power to the NLD in 1990 because the Tatmadaw feared a Nuremberg-style trial.¹⁰⁵ In 2014, Harvard Law School researchers accused three senior army officers, including the then Home Affairs Minister, of war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹⁰⁶ The US has also cited individual officers for their links to North Korea.¹⁰⁷ Another possible scenario that deserves brief mention is an attempt by a faction within the Tatmadaw to slow down the reform process or to preserve perks and privileges that seem to be slipping away. It has been suggested, for example, that some younger officers resent the fact that current and proposed changes to Myanmar society will deny them opportunities for personal enrichment enjoyed by their predecessors.

It is difficult to see the generals ignoring a direct challenge to the constitution, as would occur if Aung San Suu Kyi rejected Article 58, granting the president 'precedence over all other persons' in Myanmar.¹⁰⁸ However, the Tatmadaw is no longer the institution it once was and there are significant constraints on action of the kind seen in the past. If a

coup was mounted, there would be a strong reaction, both within the country and outside it. Even Myanmar's traditional friends are unlikely to welcome such a retrograde step. Indeed, it could lead to precisely the kind of external pressure and internal 'chaos' that the military leadership has long tried to avoid. The generals would also need to weigh the benefits of such a move against the possibility that it might spark a breakdown in military discipline.¹⁰⁹ That has always been one of their greatest fears, and a reason for some of the measures taken by Myanmar's coercive apparatus over the past 50 years. In any case, the armed forces need not resort to anything as crude as a coup. Thanks to the 2008 constitution, and the Tatmadaw's historical legacy, the CinC can exercise considerable influence on developments in Myanmar without actually assuming power.

To take one example, Thein Sein's government is dominated by ex-military and military personnel. Out of 46 ministers at the national level, 37 are from the Tatmadaw, including five on active duty. Of the 14 Chief Ministers of Myanmar's states and regions, all but one are retired military officers.¹¹⁰ The UN has estimated that nearly 90% of the current national parliament has some affiliation to the former military regime.¹¹¹ These numbers will change as a result of the latest elections, but at least 170 retired senior officers stood for parliament on 8 November and many had a good chance of securing a seat.¹¹² Bear in mind too that, in all national, state and regional assemblies, 25% of the seats are reserved for serving military personnel. In addition, 80% of senior civil service positions are filled by ex-servicemen, whose influence will be felt for years to come.¹¹³ 'Over the decades, Myanmar's senior officer corps have been socialised into believing that the Tatmadaw shall remain the sole and uncontested embodiment of the state'.¹¹⁴ Even under a NLD government, many positions of authority in Myanmar will be under the influence of former military officers with a strong institutional loyalty to their former employer.

If Myanmar's democratic transition proceeds as planned, the Tatmadaw's grip on public life will gradually erode, but this will take time, even if there are no major setbacks. In the meantime, as Aung San Suu Kyi once conceded, the armed forces will remain the ultimate arbiter of power in Myanmar and a more democratic system of government cannot be introduced without its agreement and cooperation. Similarly, as regards the vexed question of armed non-state groups in Myanmar, no president can deliver a lasting peace agreement without the active support of the Tatmadaw.¹¹⁵ This too is known to the opposition parties. There will doubtless continue to be strong disagreements on some issues, and both the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi herself will look for ways around the various obstacles they face. Some solutions may pose a direct challenge to the Tatmadaw. However, whatever its complexion, the new administration will eventually have to come to some kind of arrangement with the armed forces. For, unless it does so, it will not be able to govern Myanmar effectively, and will squander the opportunity it has to achieve real and lasting change. It could even set the transition process back years.

4. International Contacts

While Myanmar continues to attract criticism from foreign governments, organisations and activist groups, one striking aspect of its re-emergence as an international actor has been the readiness of many countries, including the Western democracies, to renew or strengthen ties with the country's armed forces and national police. Before the advent of Thein Sein's reformist government, any relationship with the security forces was politically difficult, if not (in the case of some Western governments) impossible. Yet, since 2011 several governments, international institutions and private foundations have offered Myanmar help in this sector. These approaches have been enthusiastically welcomed by Naypyidaw and, albeit more cautiously, by Aung San Suu Kyi and other opposition figures. They have been condemned as premature and ill-advised by most activists and human rights organisations, but the rationale offered in reply has usually been that foreign assistance can ameliorate the very problems about which Myanmar's critics are most concerned.¹¹⁶

Most of these initiatives have been expressed in principled terms, including by Thein Sein, but broadly speaking they make up two separate, if related, sets of proposals.¹¹⁷ One is aimed at increasing the professionalism of the armed forces, reducing its direct political role and encouraging it to observe internationally accepted norms of behaviour (as endorsed by the Western democracies, at least).¹¹⁸ The other relates to the expansion and modernisation of the MPF. While the latter set is usually couched in vague terms, refers to the 'rule of law' in Myanmar, and alludes to the reform of the country's judicial system, most seem to envisage direct aid to the MPF as a way of 'civilianising' Myanmar's coercive apparatus. The thinking seems to be that, the more capable the national police force is, and the more it accepts primary responsibility for the maintenance of law and order, the less the army will need to be involved. Such programs also help develop bilateral relationships and exert a positive influence on the government, by encouraging the reform process.

The US has been interested in restoring defence ties with Myanmar since Barak Obama came to office, something he hinted at during his visit there in 2012. Not long afterwards, a group of MN officers inspected the US Navy amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard in the Andaman Sea.¹¹⁹ In 2013, the Tatmadaw sent two observers to Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand. Later the same year, the State Department announced that the US was looking at ways to support 'nascent military engagement' with Myanmar as a way of encouraging further political reforms.¹²⁰ Pentagon officials have since referred to a 'carefully calibrated' plan of engagement that includes Myanmar's cooperation in the search for the remains of 730 US military personnel missing since 1945.¹²¹ Tatmadaw officers have participated in events sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Hawaii, and the US Defence Institute for International Legal Studies has also become involved. Training places in the US for Tatmadaw personnel and a formal military-military dialogue or 'partnership' with Myanmar have not been ruled out.¹²²

Other Western countries have followed the US lead. During Thein Sein's 2013 visit to Canberra, for example, Australia's government announced that it was restoring the resident Defence Attache's position in Yangon, which was abolished in 1979. Then Prime Minister Gillard said that this would permit engagement with the Tatmadaw in areas like peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as enhancing other forms of dialogue.¹²³ When Thein Sein visited the UK in 2013, the British government announced that it too was posting a Defence Attache to Yangon. Myanmar was also offered training in human rights, the laws of armed conflict and the accountability of democratic armed forces. In 2014, 30 Tatmadaw officers attended a staff course conducted by the British Army in Naypyidaw.¹²⁴ Other courses aimed at

'professionalising' the Tatmadaw have been discussed and consideration given to offering Myanmar military training places in the UK. A European Union (EU) arms embargo remains in place but Germany and France appear to be thinking about posting resident Defence Attaches to Myanmar. The EU already provides training to the MPF.

This heightened level of international interest has been reflected in an upsurge of naval diplomacy.¹²⁵ In 2013, for example, three Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force ships visited Thilawa, downriver from Yangon.¹²⁶ The same year, Russia marked the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Myanmar by sending three ships from its Pacific Fleet. In January 2014, a Royal Australian Navy patrol boat made a port visit to Yangon, the first Australian warship to visit Myanmar since 1959. In March that year, a Pakistan Navy frigate visited Yangon and in May the PLAN sent two vessels to Myanmar on a five-day 'goodwill visit'.¹²⁷ An Indian Navy hydrographic ship called into Thilawa in 2015. There had been a few naval port visits before 2011, but these and other calls sent strong public signals about the importance the sending countries attached to strengthening defence relations with Myanmar, and its strategic significance. The traffic has not all been one way. Every year since 2003, the MN has participated in combined naval exercises sponsored by India and involving up to 16 other navies.¹²⁸ In 2013, the MN CinC discussed maritime cooperation and interoperability with ASEAN naval chiefs.¹²⁹ MN vessels have also made port visits to India, Thailand and Vietnam.

All these initiatives have aroused the ire of the activist community, which has reminded everyone that the Tatmadaw still manages politics in Myanmar, is waging counter-insurgency campaigns against armed ethnic groups and has been guilty of human rights violations against Rohingyas, among others.¹³⁰ The MPF too has been accused by governments and NGOs of systemic corruption and other abuses. Another criticism heard has been that international assistance to the security forces gives them a legitimacy they do not deserve and helps them maintain their dominance of Myanmar society. Some activists have even claimed that foreign training directly helps the army and police to attack the ethnic minorities, Muslims and pro-democracy movement. While Congress has been broadly supportive of assistance to the armed forces and police, after opposing contacts for many years, the US Senate has warned of the potential for 'well-intended engagement [to be] misdirected towards a negative result'.¹³¹ Depending on the outcome of the 2015 elections and 2016 presidential race, the attitude of the US and other countries towards defence cooperation with Myanmar may harden.

Some observers sceptical of Thein Sein's reform agenda, and closer international engagement, are convinced that the real aim of enhanced Western ties to Myanmar's security forces is to help 'contain' China.¹³² No-one could deny that such links have strategic implications, but these should not be overstated. The aid programs proposed to date have been modest and prompted mostly by concerns about Myanmar's domestic problems. In any case, it would take considerable time and effort for the West to match China's current relationship with the Tatmadaw, which was formalised in 2011 through a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.¹³³ Also, Naypyidaw will always balance the country's foreign relations, to protect its independence. For example, the Thein Sein government has asked Beijing's advice on various public security issues and sought the assistance of fellow ASEAN members on a range of military, policing and intelligence matters. In 2015, Myanmar signed an agreement with India to assist in the Tatmadaw's modernisation and increase security along its shared border.¹³⁴ Such contacts can be expected to continue.

5. Conclusions

As always, Myanmar's future is unclear, but the Tatmadaw seems to have two main goals over the next decade.

The first is the development of a 'world-class Tatmadaw'. Since 2011, a concerted effort has been made to make the armed forces more professional, more capable and more respected, both within Myanmar and abroad. As it has acquired new arms and technology, so defence relations with China, Russia and several other foreign countries have strengthened. The Tatmadaw hopes also to develop closer contacts with Western and ASEAN forces. To a large extent the current military reform program has been successful, but it is a work in progress. Many difficult problems are still to be dealt with, a process that is likely to be complicated by the apparent success of the opposition parties at the 8 November 2015 national elections. The Tatmadaw's relationship with the parliament is bound to change. However, due in large part to the military-drafted 2008 constitution, the Tatmadaw will remain the most powerful institution in Myanmar. As such, it is likely to be able to continue its modernisation and rearmament programs.

The Tatmadaw's other main goal seems to be a controlled withdrawal from Myanmar's government, while retaining its institutional independence and a central national role. A spokesman for the armed forces has stated, for example, that 'as the political parties mature in their political norms and practice, the role of the military gradually changes'.¹³⁵ The possibility of constitutional change has not been ruled out. It is the generals' firm intention, however, that they will decide the time frame for a democratic transition. There have been signs that they would like at least one more term under a military-endorsed president before any real handover of power, and then only if certain conditions are met. Any perceived challenges to Myanmar's unity, internal stability and sovereignty – and there are bound to be some – will inevitably delay the process. They could even halt it. As the International Crisis group has written, 'Tatmadaw backing for the transition is indispensable, but by no means unproblematic'.¹³⁶

It remains to be seen whether the current level of accommodation between the government and armed forces continues after the opposition parties take office in Naypyidaw and more far-reaching reforms are proposed. Aung San Suu Kyi's blunt dismissal of the constitutionally guaranteed primacy of the president, and its implied challenge to the Tatmadaw leadership, does not augur well for Myanmar's future political order. Also, the generals are likely to be slow to accept the constraints on the Tatmadaw's power that will be required for Myanmar to become a genuine democracy. The veteran Myanmar-watcher Robert Taylor summed up the situation in March 2015 when he wrote that 'Only the army can end its own role in Myanmar's politics, and that decision is dependent on its perception of the civilian political elite's ability to manage the future'.¹³⁷ He might have added, 'and protect the Tatmadaw as a national institution'.

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