



# THE SOLDIER, ABOVE ALL OTHERS, PRAYS FOR PEACE

An analysis of the Myanmar armed forces  
in an era of transition

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## Glossary

AA	Arakan Army
BGF	Border Guard Force
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CPC	Communist Party of China
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
GAD	General Administrative Department
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International non-governmental organization
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KNU	Karen National Union
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
NDSC	National Defence and Security Council
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NCCT	Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team
NDA-K	New Democratic Army – Kachin
NGO	Non-governmental organization
RCSS/SSA	Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSR	Security Sector Reform
PSLF/TNLA	Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army
Tatmadaw	Myanmar Armed Forces
UN	United Nations
UWSA	United Wa State Army

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# Introduction

## Myanmar in Transition

After decades of isolation and stasis, Myanmar has burst into the world stage as a fascinating case of transition and transformation. Amidst the turbulent change of the Arab Spring, and the downward spiral of violence surrounding efforts at “regime change” in Iraq and Syria, the optimism and hope surrounding recent developments in Myanmar are a stark contrast. Media headlines have featured the words “dawn” or “dawning” and “democratic era” in what is often portrayed as an historic change and a monumental transition.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Myanmar has also become a focal point for peacebuilding efforts. Donors have shifted from only limited or no funding under the previous regime to contributions of many millions in support of a peace process, a nascent political dialogue process, and new development assistance to communities that were previously inaccessible.

In this context of political transition, peacebuilding and renewed development efforts, much domestic and global attention is focused on the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its iconic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Indeed, following the November 2015 elections through mid-March 2016, the most scrutinized question by media outlets inside and outside the country was

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<sup>1</sup> For example see, *Burma's Parliament Opens in the Dawning of a New Democratic Era*, by Simon Lewis, Time, February 1, 2016.

the issue of who would become president and whether Aung San Suu Kyi, also known as “The Lady”, would find a way to play the role directly.

Beyond the focus surrounding the new leader, who came to assume the role of State Counsellor, one of the key protagonists on the Myanmar stage remains an actor about which we know the least: the Myanmar armed forces, or Tatmadaw. It is an institution that has maintained firm control over all politics in the country from 1962 onwards. Even now, the power and influence of the Tatmadaw is reflected at multiple levels:

- The new era in Myanmar politics has emerged in accordance with a plan carefully laid out and directed by the armed forces
- Their power and on-going role in legislative politics, as well as their control over key ministries, is protected by the constitution
- As a party to the armed conflict that has ravaged Myanmar’s border areas since independence, the Tatmadaw is a key actor in peace negotiations between the government and armed groups.

Indeed, as an institution that remains autonomous in its purview over security issues, and as an actor that has long played a major role in economic affairs, the Tatmadaw is not only central to peacemaking efforts, it also holds a unique position in relation to longer term peacebuilding endeavours.

Yet, as an institution, the Tatmadaw remains inaccessible and opaque. Many stakeholders in Myanmar’s current transition find themselves highly constrained in their access to, engagement with, and analysis of this central player. Ultimately, engagement at this time requires a deeper understanding of how the armed forces fits as a central part of the Myanmar puzzle.



## **Objective and Methodology of This Paper**

The aim of this paper is to provide an analysis of the Tatmadaw and, guided by this analysis, to consider a range of strategies and approaches available to both Myanmar actors and actors engaging in Myanmar from the regional and international levels. For engagement and policy approaches directed towards the Tatmadaw from either level to be successful, they must understand and navigate the interests and concerns that have, thus far, steered and justified the Tatmadaw's role in Myanmar politics. Furthermore, engagement from actors inside and outside the country must seek out and support opportunities that ensure that the country's current transition is a moment of transition and transformation for the Tatmadaw as well.

To undertake this project, we will start with what we know about the Myanmar armed forces – what is known about the Tatmadaw through the country's historical development since the Second World War, as well as what is known about the institution and its engagement in recent developments, particularly the peace process launched in 2011. While the first section of this paper is largely drawn from existing historical analysis, the analysis of the Tatmadaw engagement in the peace process and subsequent policy recommendations are drawn from a series of interviews that took place at the end of 2015 and during the first half of 2016.

Interviews included conversations with actors from Myanmar civil society, representatives of ethnic armed groups (EAGs), diplomats, officials working with multilateral organizations, academics, and those working with INGOs, all of whom had the opportunity to work directly with counterparts in the Myanmar armed forces. Myanmar's transition process has brought these actors into direct engagement with the military in ways that have not been possible in the past. As such, these actors offer

a new resource in terms of insights and opportunities that deepen our understanding of the Tatmadaw.

While significant change and transition has occurred in Myanmar, the comments and observations provided often touched on highly sensitive issues. As such, and in order for those interviewed to feel open and secure in sharing their perspectives, the sources in these interviews will remain anonymous.

Interviews and conversations served to bring to light a range of insights, all based on a common starting point: an analysis of the Myanmar armed forces must begin with an exploration of the institution's core interests and concerns. Opportunities for engagement and change depend first on understanding those interests and then identifying opportunities to shift the underpinning forces that have raised those interests to a place of primacy.

This analysis seeks to explore the avenues available for actors based inside and outside the country to engage the Myanmar armed forces. Ultimately, the aim of this report is not simply to promote working with the Tatmadaw as an institution focused on maintaining security, unity, and sovereignty; it is also to expose how the Tatmadaw holds these national causes up as a shield to obscure and protect its core interests. Finally, let us consider what opportunities exist to work with the armed forces as a partner in long-term change: what openings exist for the institution's interests to shift so that the Tatmadaw itself is able to transition from a focus that maintains its status as the *triumphant elite*, to a stakeholder that longs for peace most of all.

# 1

## **Understanding the Tatmadaw – a historical overview**

Understanding Myanmar's present context requires understanding the country's past. This is no less true in looking at the Tatmadaw and its role in politics – in striving for an informed view of the Tatmadaw in this current moment and looking forward, we must see where it has come from and the roots of issues facing the country today.

A number of excellent resources provide insight into Myanmar's complex modern history. This paper will only provide a brief and superficial look at historical events. Readers should consult authors such as Mary Callahan, Maung Aung Myoe, and Andrew Selth for more detailed views, particularly regarding the evolution of Myanmar's armed forces.

### **From Post Independence to Military Rule**

Following the turbulent period of WWII, Myanmar (then known as the Republic of the Union of Burma) was granted independence from Britain. Indeed, many look at the Panglong Agreement, signed between leaders from the Chin and Kachin Hills, the Federated Shan States and the newly emerging and fragile Burmese government, led by General Aung San, as the country's founding document.

Though vague in its articulation, the agreement outlined a commitment to equality between Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic groups in the establishment of the new nation that came into being on 4 January 1948. It also made reference to accepting the principle of autonomy in internal administration for ethnic states (then described as Frontier Areas). Later these concepts would evolve into calls for federalism from ethnic groups.

However, following the signing of the agreement, ethnic states were given very little power to manage or control their own affairs. As Harn Yawngwe has written *“Everything was centralized and the Burmese state effectively replaced the British as the new colonial power.”*<sup>2</sup>

The years following independence were extremely turbulent. Civilian politics came to be seen as corrupt and dysfunctional. On the security side, numerous militias, or “tats”, had been formed and they competed to shape the emerging armed forces. At the same time, ethnic separatist groups launched armed rebellions in Karen and Shan states. The country also experienced security threats emerging as a result of Cold War competition: while the US-backed Kuomintang forces established bases in much of the country’s northeast, two rival factions of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) were supported by China and the Soviet Union.

The instability of the 1950s, with internal divisions and rivalry, in addition to the experience of interference from powerful outside actors and the need to maintain balance constantly in the face of opposing external pressures, would leave its mark on military and public perceptions for decades to come.

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<sup>2</sup> *National dialogue: armed groups, contested legitimacy and political transition*, by Harn Yawngwe, in *Accord*, an international review of peace initiatives, Issue 25, London: Conciliation Resources, 2014, p.44.

Amidst the volatility, the country came under a period of military rule from 1958 to 1960. Finally, the Tatmadaw staged a definitive coup in March 1962 with General Ne Win seizing power from Prime Minister U Nu. The action came at a time when U Nu had agreed to meet with ethnic groups to discuss possible amendments to the constitution, raising the prospect of greater autonomy for ethnic states. This development, along with the threat of armed insurgency and Cold War pressures emanating from Chinese and US competition in the country's northeast, were all depicted by the armed forces as potentially leading to disintegration of the nation.

With a unified and strengthened armed forces at his disposal, General Ne Win took power setting the country on the “Burmese Road to Socialism”, promising a gradual move to democratization in the future. This would also allow the Tatmadaw to return the nation to the stature of its glorious past as a mighty empire.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of turbulence and perceived threats to national unity fostered deep scepticism and distrust towards civilian politics within the armed forces. Civilians were seen as weak and, to the Tatmadaw, the experience of the 1950s demonstrated that they were not able to deal with existential threats – threats emanating from both internal and outside forces – facing the nation. In response, the Tatmadaw developed its role and its *raison d'être* in terms of defending the nation. Ultimately, the Tatmadaw's role and *raison d'être* was captured in the articulation of three National Causes:

- Non-disintegration of the Union
- Non-disintegration of national solidarity
- Perpetuation of national sovereignty<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Building the Tatmadaw, Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948*, by Maung Aung Myoe, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, p.3.

## **The Emergence of a Democracy Movement**

Following the 1962 coup, electoral politics in Myanmar did not exist. Ne Win's Burma Socialism Programme Party (BSPP) was the only political party and the 1974 Charter established Burma as a one-party state.

Under BSPP rule, the country experienced severe economic decline. Sporadic civilian demonstrations, usually student-led, against military rule over the decades were quickly suppressed. By 1987, extreme poverty and hardship gave rise to a large student-led demonstration movement and widespread unrest. Significant protests emerged in March of 1988. Subsequent months saw the emergence of a democracy movement, mass protests and calls for a nationwide strike provoking a harsh response as the BSPP struggled to maintain control of the situation. On 8 August 1988, demonstrators were met with brutal violence by security forces, resulting in thousands of deaths and thousands more added to the already-long roster of political prisoners. In September, the military, led by General Saw Maung, responded to this situation of instability and upheaval, taking power from the BSPP, and establishing the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which revoked the 1974 constitution, decreed rule by martial law and pledged that multiparty elections would take place.

In the lead up to the 1990 elections, a new political party, the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero and founder of the armed forces, General Aung San, emerged. The party galvanized significant support despite the highly repressive political environment. It was a rise that captured the hearts and minds of many voters, as well as onlookers from the international community. It was also a rise that instilled anxiety in the ruling military junta as they recognized the prospect that, despite a variety of repressive measures, such as jailing political candidates (including Aung

San Suu Kyi, placed under house arrest), the outcome of the election might not be one that they could live with.

Less than two months prior to the vote, Major-General Khin Nyunt announced that power would only be transferred from the military to the winning political party “*if a firm constitution could be drawn up*” and only if the ensuing “*government be a strong one*”. Khin Nyunt’s announcement emphasized that, without meeting this requirement, SLORC would continue to rule while a new constitution was drafted and a strong government was capable of taking power.<sup>5</sup>

The election took place on 27 May 1990 with the NLD winning almost 60 per cent of the vote, and taking over 80 per cent of seats in parliament. However, Khin Nyunt’s pre-election pronouncement provided the justification for the military’s refusal to transfer power and many senior NLD leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, remained under arrest.

### **Parallel Realities: decades of war in Myanmar’s border areas**

Myanmar’s decades of military rule and the emergence of a democracy movement, led by the charismatic daughter of a national hero, have been favourite stories in the western media for many years. By contrast, up until recently, the story of ethnic communities and their experience in post independence Myanmar and under military rule, including decades of armed conflict, widespread human rights abuses and chronic poverty, has remained further from centre-stage.

Myanmar shares borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Lao PDR, and Thailand. These periphery areas are substantial in terms of area. They are isolated and remote due to mountainous

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<sup>5</sup> *Myanmar’s Electoral Landscape, Asia Report No 266*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 28 April 2015, p.3.

geography and limited transportation infrastructure, but are also where many of Myanmar's natural resources are found.

Myanmar's border areas are also home to a great diversity of ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultural practices, religions, and histories. Beyond forming a rich mosaic of traditions, ethnicity in Myanmar has also been an organizing unit that has bestowed privilege on some and discrimination on others. The experience of ethnicity-based discrimination is illustrated in the development of the Tatmadaw itself: under colonial rule, the Bamar ethnic population was excluded as troops and civil servants were imported from India, and small fighting units were developed among ethnic groups on the border such as the Karen.<sup>6</sup> This allocation of preference and privilege to some, and discrimination against others, was subsequently reversed in the post-independence period. The Tatmadaw is now almost exclusively Bamar, especially at top levels, and perceived by ethnic communities as an entity that promotes Bamar culture, language and values by force.

This experience of benefits and prejudice allocated on the basis of ethnicity, coupled with competition over natural resources, has produced decades of conflict between Myanmar's various ethnic communities and the state. Emerging from the unrealized promise of equality under the Panglong Agreement and the desire for self-determination, ethnic political movements initially focused on the achievement of independence. Over time, ethnic leaders have increasingly moved away from secession as a goal towards aspirations for greater levels of autonomy within the context of a unified state.<sup>7</sup> This shift has emerged after years of continuous fighting, severe economic underdevelopment and isolation, including a counterinsurgency campaign by the

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<sup>6</sup> See *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, by Mary Callahan, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> *National dialogue: armed groups, contested legitimacy and political transition*, by Harn Yawngwe, in *Accord*, and international review of peace initiatives, Issue 25, London: Conciliation Resources, 2014, p.45.



Tatmadaw known as the “Four Cuts”, which sought to undermine armed groups by targeting the ability of civilian communities to provide them with food, funds, intelligence and recruits.<sup>8</sup> These human rights abuses were consistently raised by tenacious human rights groups, based both inside the country and on the Thai border. Their efforts, along with many ILO reports on forced labour and recruitment, were reflected in successive UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions, and kept the issue in the international consciousness over many years.

Though sporadic efforts were made over the years by the ethnic armed groups to form one united front, a variety of factors have, at different times, ensured that divisions remained between Myanmar’s ethnic groups. During the 1990s and into the 2000s a dividing line emerged as some EAGs signed ceasefire agreements with the ruling SLORC while others continued their armed struggle and the Tatmadaw continued to pursue them in active combat. This deliberate divide-and-rule strategy by the Tatmadaw has engendered deep distrust in peace efforts by the EAGs that persists today.

The result was a perception of some groups being co-opted and their elites benefiting from lucrative business opportunities, especially related to extractive resources, while other groups continued to fight. Their soldiers experienced military losses and their civilian communities suffered terrible human rights abuses. However, it is clear that the civilian communities in many ethnic areas – ceasefire or non-ceasefire – derived little benefit from the earlier phase of ceasefires, as they all suffered a variety of abuses and punishing underdevelopment. The shortfalls of the ceasefire experience during the 1990s and 2000s would come to inform the approach of EAGs around ceasefire overtures in the future.

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent and detailed overview of the complex experience of conflict between the Tatmadaw and ethnic groups from the period of independence up to the emergence of the democracy movement see *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, by Martin Smith, London: Zed Books, 1991.

## Roadmap to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy

*They know they have to pull out of politics. This led them to develop a plan and they are following it, systematically. Everything is done according to the plan. Yes, their engagement is genuine – because even engagement is part of the plan!*

*Senior armed group official*

Twenty years after the 1990 elections, Myanmar would undergo a subsequent election under the auspices of a constitution adopted in 2008. The interim period saw the removal of Senior General Saw Maung who was replaced by Senior General Than Shwe in 1992. Likewise, the SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. In August 2003, SPDC announced its initiation of the *Roadmap Process to Discipline-Flourishing Democracy*.<sup>9</sup> First on a list of seven phases outlined in the roadmap process was to reassemble the National Convention with the aim of drafting a new national constitution. The 2008 Constitution was drafted and endorsed through a highly controversial national referendum held in May 2008, immediately after Cyclone Nargis. Following the steps laid out in the roadmap and in accordance with the new constitution, elections were held in November 2010.

Observers point to a variety of factors that explain why the military willingly initiated and undertook this transformation process. Domestically, the economy was in shambles and Myanmar fell further and further behind other countries in the region in terms of its economic development. Also, Myanmar found itself isolated and increasingly reliant on its neighbour, China, for economic support, investment and political support in international forums such as the UN. Military leaders found

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<sup>9</sup> *Myanmar Roadmap to Democracy: The Way Forward*, presentation by H-E. U Khin Maung Win, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Myanmar, Yangon: Burma Today News, January 2004.

they had lost the strategic balance they had long sought to maintain between outside actors.

This dire situation was seen to have one remedy: increased engagement with the West. Western countries, particularly the US, could balance the weight of China on Myanmar's northern border, plus stronger western ties would bring financial and technological investment opportunities. However, Tatmadaw leadership was well aware that building a strategic relationship with the West would require significant reforms.<sup>10</sup>

The ensuing transition process, that began in the mid-2000s and that continues today, needs to be understood as a cautious reaction both to historical experience and to real world events in the new millennium. Looking internally, the post-independence experience of democracy led the Tatmadaw to adopt a deep distrust and disdain for civilian politics; also, the experience of wide-spread protests in 1988 provided military rulers with a first-hand experience of the power that mass mobilization is able to exert.

At the same time, the military's proud view of itself as the strong and capable defender of a glorious Myanmar was increasingly challenged as senior officers came to see how Myanmar – and the Tatmadaw itself – had fallen behind other countries in the region. This realisation, on top of international pressure from lobby and activist groups, was difficult to ignore.

More recent events of the Arab Spring have reinforced the military's view that rapid political transition brings both instability and the prospect that rapid change will likely spin out of control, even to the extent of threatening personal security of those from the old regime.<sup>11</sup> This perspective was advocated

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<sup>10</sup> *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks? Asia Briefing No 143*, Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 22 April 2014, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, UN Official, New York, February 2016.

with voters just prior to the 2015 elections when President Thein Sein's office released a video emphasizing the way that his administration had steered the country away from the type of chaos and violence seen in the Middle East. These historical and recent experiences and events reinforced the Tatmadaw's carefully planned approach to transition.

## **The New Peace Process – from ceasefire negotiation to national political dialogue**

Amidst a high level of scepticism following the 2010 elections, Myanmar's new President, U Thein Sein, surprised many inside and outside the country by launching a peace process during the first year of his presidency. He announced this within the context of a historic speech in August 2011. The speech was followed by an official invitation to ethnic armed groups to join peace talks in order to put "*an end to armed insurrection to make internal peace in order to build a peaceful, developed nation*".<sup>12</sup>

Sadly, just prior to this renewed focus on efforts towards peace, the ceasefire between the government and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which had held since 1994, broke down. In June 2011, the Myanmar armed forces attacked KIA positions. Despite instructions from President Thein Sein that the Tatmadaw suspend its offensive against the KIA, fighting continued. It would continue through the Thein Sein presidency, posing an on-going challenge to the peace process and raising questions about the sincerity of Tatmadaw participation in the peace process.

The peace process began with a series of bilateral negotiations to establish agreements between the government and individual EAGs. The aim was both to consolidate peace with groups that already had ceasefire agreements in place, and to arrive

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<sup>12</sup> *Union Government offers olive branch to national race armed groups*, Yangon: New Light of Myanmar, 19 August 2011.

at negotiated ceasefires with groups that did not.<sup>13</sup> As Harn Yawngwe has pointed out, there was an initial assumption on the part of the Myanmar government that EAGs would be willing to sign ceasefire agreements in exchange for economic privileges, as in the earlier ceasefires. It was assumed that this would pave the way for armed groups to then lay down arms and transform into political parties. However, after the experience of the 1990s and 2000s when economic privileges only benefited a small number of elites, EAGs were not willing to go down the same path. Instead, they saw an opportunity to push for and insist on a larger ultimate goal: political dialogue that would enable genuine resolution of the long-standing conflicts.<sup>14</sup>

From working on a bilateral basis, the peace process shifted its focus in mid-2013 to an approach that – for the first time – would span agreement between the government and multiple ethnic groups. The aim was to build on elements shared among bilateral agreements in order to build a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) that would establish the foundation for political dialogue to follow. As such, the NCA would not only lead to the end of fighting, but it would lead to a framework for discussion of long-standing political grievances such as power and revenue sharing; security sector reform; judiciary and land reform; as well as community, ethnic and minority rights.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, following many rounds of negotiations, appointment of a Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team in October 2013 and further rounds of talks, a draft text was agreed in March 2015. This emerged against a backdrop of on-going fighting between the Tatmadaw and EAGs in both Kachin and Shan states.

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<sup>13</sup> *Myanmar's Peace Process: A Nationwide Ceasefire Remains Elusive, Asia Briefing No 146*, Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 16 September 2015, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> *National dialogue: armed groups, contested legitimacy and political transition*, by Harn Yawngwe, in *Accord*, and international review of peace initiatives, Issue 25, London: Conciliation Resources, 2014, p.3-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

The conflict between the Tatmadaw and the KIA escalated dramatically in April 2014 and reached a heightened crisis in November 2014 when a mortar launched by the Tatmadaw landed in a KIA training centre killing 23 cadets. Further south, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) mounted an attack in the Kokang Self-Administered Zone in February 2015. The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the newly formed Arakan Army (AA) supported the MNDAA in this newest conflict. These were significant clashes that gripped public attention as the Tatmadaw suffered serious losses. Also, the reactivation of the MNDAA provoked speculation regarding interference by Chinese actors, triggering the long-standing suspicion of meddling from the outside.

With these events in the background, there were multiple instances when talks came perilously close to collapse. During this final stage the major sticking point was inclusivity: ethnic armed group leaders asserted that any EAG that agreed with the text of the NCA should be allowed to sign. But, in light of the most recent conflicts with the MNDAA, TNLA, and AA, the government insisted that these groups could not be included in the agreement until they had surrendered. With the November 2015 elections fast approaching, a series of final negotiations took place. The ultimate result was that the Government of Myanmar, including the President, the Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw, and parliamentarians endorsed the NCA on 15 October 2015, but only 8 of the ethnic armed groups signed it.

The signing of the NCA was welcomed by many inside and outside the country as a major achievement on the road to peace, and criticised by others as divisive and incomplete. It emerged after four years of hard work by actors on both the government and armed group sides. While critics and many in the media have derided the use of the term “nationwide” to describe a ceasefire that has only been signed by eight EAGs, others have

acknowledged the significant progress and concerted effort required to achieve the agreement.

Observers have noted that the NCA text contains significant compromises on both sides. The commitment by armed groups to a unified state and non-disintegration of the Union was a key win for the Tatmadaw, long wary of national fragmentation. Likewise, inclusion of references to a *federal* Union represented a significant victory for the EAGs, who have advocated over many years for a federal model to achieve their goal of autonomy. In the past this approach had been quickly rejected and its inclusion in the final draft was seen as a major shift that allowed dialogue to progress. It is also worth noting that, while only eight EAGs signed the final agreement, 16 groups had agreed to the final text of the NCA in August 2015, making the text itself significant even without all the signatures. Many have emphasized that, like any ceasefire agreement, the NCA is not an end in itself but simply a consolidation moment on the path to further work as part of a larger peace process.

Ironically, while the NCA has led to agreement between the government and some EAGs, it has also created new divisions among EAGs – between signatories and non-signatories. In geographical terms, a scenario has emerged in which the largest armed groups in the southeast are covered by the agreement: the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), and the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army – South (RCSS/SSA-S). However, the largest armed groups in the north and northeast remain non-signatories, particularly the KIA, and the United Wa State Army (UWSA),<sup>16</sup> in addition to the MNDAA, TNLA, and AA.

Sensitivities around these new divisions were felt acutely within only a few weeks of the NCA being signed. In November 2015 clashes broke out between the RCSS/SSA-S and the TNLA

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<sup>16</sup> While a ceasefire agreed between the SLORC and the UWSA in 1989 continues to hold, the UWSA has, thus far, remained on the sidelines of discussions on the NCA.

in northern Shan state. Observers provided a wide range of explanations for this new violence from competition over production of narcotics, struggle for control of territory and opportunities for taxation, to political opportunism, geopolitical rivalry, and economic interests of competing super powers.<sup>17</sup> But pundits also quickly noted that the TNLA was a non-signatory to the NCA, while RCSS/SSA-S had signed. Furthermore, stories quickly emerged about the Tatmadaw providing assistance to the RCSS/SSA-S, leading observers to conclude that the fighting represented a classic instance of divide and rule: while the NCA enabled a cessation of hostilities between the Myanmar armed forces and the RCSS/SSA-S, an open conflict emerged between the two EAGs with the Tatmadaw supporting one side.

In some ways parallels exist between the current situation and the ceasefire/non-ceasefire experience of the 1990s and 2000s, though in reverse: while most of the earlier ceasefires took the form of gentlemen's agreements, the only formally signed ceasefire was between the government and the KIA; during this period a military offensive continued against the KNU and RCSS/SSA-S. In the current scenario, the KNU and RCSS/SSA-S represent the largest armed groups to have signed the NCA, while a military offensive continues against the KIA.

More recently, focus has expanded from efforts around the NCA towards laying the necessary groundwork for the national political dialogue. This was officially launched under the auspices of the Union Peace Conference – 21st Century Panglong, convened at the end of August 2016. The meeting, which included representatives of the Government of Myanmar, the Myanmar armed forces, EAGs, and observers, provided an opportunity for stakeholders to make presentations on their visions of federalism. These presentations varied widely – representatives of the Tatmadaw emphasized the importance

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<sup>17</sup> See *Myanmar's military and its proxy armies*, by Anthony Davis, Bangkok: Bangkok Post, 2 February 2016.



of upholding the 2008 constitution, while many EAGs made proposals that would necessitate significant revisions to the constitution.

Following the conference and at the time of writing, views of the armed forces and EAGs on the establishment of a federal democratic Union diverge widely. Important questions remain around inclusivity and participation in next steps. Also renewed concern and scepticism regarding the peace process swelled as tensions between the Tatmadaw and a number of armed groups increased following the conference.

However, the meeting served to launch a process to create a framework for dialogue. It was significant that the conference was broadcast via television, creating a new level of accessibility while raising public awareness and provoking public debate in a way that was unthinkable only five short years ago. The Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee, established under the NCA (with government, Tatmadaw, and EAGs as members), is charged with next steps in the dialogue moving forward.

The preceding historical overview offers an extremely curtailed account of modern Myanmar history. It provides a look back at the historical forces that have shaped the role of the contemporary Myanmar armed forces: the instability and perception of internal and outside threats used to justify the military takeover by General Ne Win in 1962; the rise and brutal suppression of a democracy movement and a subsequent planned and carefully controlled transition; the decades of insurgency and prolonged military campaigns against ethnic armed groups and communities in the border areas; and multiple eras of ceasefire negotiations, descent into new waves of violent military offensives and, more recently, new attempts at establishing nationwide peace. These historical experiences from the post-independence period through to the present day, have all moulded the Tatmadaw into the national institution

it is today – one that has initiated a planned transition from military rule to democracy and a defence force that remains as focused on threats posed by those living inside its borders as any security threat originating from outside the country.

With this overview in hand, we can now move from a general understanding to analysis – given where the Myanmar armed forces has come from, where is it now in terms of its outlook and role in the current transition process? What motivates and guides decisions within the Tatmadaw? Here we turn to views and insights of those interviewed. What emerge are two opposing narratives: one adopts a generally optimistic outlook; the other is more pessimistic and cynical in its view. The task at hand is to take in those opposing perspectives and consider how each informs potential approaches by Myanmar actors and those from the regional and international levels, as they seek to engage with the Tatmadaw.

# 2

## **From Understanding to Analysis - opposing narratives**

Beyond a historical overview, we have the opportunity to learn about the Tatmadaw from individuals who have worked directly with the institution. As a result of the Tatmadaw's engagement with the outside world, a new, wider variety of sources exist who can offer insights and perspectives based on their first-hand experience. These actors include:

- Military attachés, serving in Yangon embassies, who have engaged directly with the Myanmar armed forces as part of their official capacity
- Representatives of EAGs who have had the experience of direct negotiation with Tatmadaw counterparts as part of the peace process
- Myanmar and international civil society actors who have provided support to the peace process
- Academics who have built relationships with members the Myanmar military through their research
- Staff from International NGOs (INGOs) that have worked with members of the Tatmadaw to provide training and workshop opportunities

The author had conversations with representatives from each of the categories above. While often cautious in what they shared, those interviewed emphasized the need for actors from inside and outside the country to develop a deeper understanding of

the institution – a lesson drawn from their own direct experience working with senior military officials.

Interestingly, interviews consistently pointed to two opposing narratives. The first, a glass-half-full view, saw the Tatmadaw as a partner in efforts to achieve peace. The second narrative acknowledged ways in which the Tatmadaw has been a willing participant in change, reform, peace efforts, and has even played a leadership role in these efforts; however, this second narrative also adopted a more pessimistic, glass-half-empty view, identifying Tatmadaw behaviours and priorities as limited by the primacy of certain core interests.

### **The Glass-Half-Full Narrative- soldiers are the ones who want peace the most**

Recent years have seen a marked increase in interest by the Tatmadaw in undertaking military-to-military exchanges. A number of embassy staff in Yangon have worked with Tatmadaw leadership to support visits outside the country. Likewise, a variety of INGOs have provided opportunities for senior military officers to undertake exposure visits to countries in the region and beyond in order to learn from other peace process experiences and federal structures. Those involved in coordinating and facilitating visits outside the country note that their Myanmar military counterparts have welcomed these opportunities with enthusiasm.

One military attaché pointed out that a primary result of these visits has been increased trust between senior Tatmadaw officers and foreign military officials allowing foreign diplomats and military personnel greater ability to visit bases inside Myanmar. Those who have worked directly on military-to-military exchanges and visits noted that these activities have also been associated with substantive changes within the Myanmar armed forces. These have included the re-introduction

of female officers for the first time since 1961,<sup>18</sup> as well as a newly articulated desire within the Tatmadaw to become a troop-contributing country to United Nations peacekeeping operations.<sup>19</sup>

Beyond this new willingness, even eagerness, to engage with the outside world, actors from inside the country, particularly leaders of armed groups, have had the experience of working together with Tatmadaw officials in the context of the peace process. In conversations, EAG leaders reflected on the experience of sitting across the negotiating table from their military counterparts and discovering a shared desire for peace and their common experiences of loss. From seeing friends killed, or from living with the long-term effects of injuries, EAG leaders have reflected on the pivotal moments when they recognized the existence of a mutual longing to ensure that their sons and grandsons do not suffer on the battlefield as they have. The book, *Making Peace in Their Own Words* provides wonderful illustrations of this transformative experience including the following quote from Dr Lian Hmung Sakhong:

*But after one, two, three meetings you see them changing. They have realised that there is a need for dialogue. And also, they have realised that talking is not as dangerous as they thought; that, after all, we both are human beings; we come from the same country; although we have been fighting against each other in the battlefield, those on the other side also have families, they also like to go to the movies, listen to good music; we are the same.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> See *First women graduate from officer training*, by Tim McLaughlin, Yangon: Myanmar Times, 30 August 2014.

<sup>19</sup> See statement by H.E. U Kyaw Tin, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations in New York at the General Debate of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, New York, 16 February 2016, as well as recent media coverage of a small number of Tatmadaw troops serving as part of peacekeeping missions in Liberia and South Sudan (*Burma Army Troops Serving as UN Peacekeepers in Liberia and South Sudan*, by Seamus Martov, Yangon: The Irrawaddy, 1 October 2016).

<sup>20</sup> *Making Peace in Their Own Words*, coordinated by Narea Bilbatúa, Siem Reap: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2015, p.58.

This quote also illustrates what one interviewee described as the need for a broader process of “de-demonization”. With respect to senior members of the Tatmadaw, we can imagine that, after so many years, there is a desire to shed the international image of notorious villain, for something more sympathetic and in line with their own self-perceptions of vigilant forces making tremendous sacrifices to protect their country from insurgency and instability.

Furthermore, while acknowledging the primacy of strict military discipline among Tatmadaw counterparts, one representative of an armed group noted that a diversity of attitudes exist among Tatmadaw leadership vis-a-vis the peace process. In his experience, some military officials came to negotiations with a higher level of commitment and desire to seek out agreement. This led them to problem solve and actively seek out solutions when peace talks hit bumps or stalled. He noted that identifying and working with these types of individuals – officers who are willing to consider a range of alternative approaches – would be key to progress in the future.

These developments point to a transformation in our understanding of the Tatmadaw from a closed institution with little desire to interact with the outside world to one that is in the process of opening and eager to learn from sources outside the country. It also highlights the commitment felt by many within the Tatmadaw to seek out peaceful solutions.

In a similar vein, official statements by the Tatmadaw itself have highlighted peace as a priority. In the context of the peace process the expression “*soldiers are the ones who want peace the most*” has been a common refrain.<sup>21</sup> The expression brings to mind the famous words of General Douglas MacArthur “*the soldier, above all other people, prays for peace, for he must suffer*

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<sup>21</sup> See *Proposal by Myanmar’s Rebel Groups to Discuss Federal Army Rejected*, Radio Free Asia 23 September 2014, in which Lieutenant General Myint Soe, head of the armed forces negotiating team, is quoted as saying “We soldiers are the one who want peace the most”.

*and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war*". Tatmadaw leadership has adopted the Myanmar version of the expression to convey the institution's commitment towards, and interest in, the peace process. On a more personal level, people who have had the experience of working directly with members of the Tatmadaw point to ways in which individual military officers also embody this expression in their attitudes and engagement with the peace process.

Taken together, this overview of the Tatmadaw provides a view of an institution in transition – opening and seeking out new opportunities for engagement within the context of protections and guarantees under the constitution.

### **The Glass-Half-Empty Narrative– yes to compromise, but never give up core interests**

While some of those interviewed were able to point to important shifts within the Myanmar armed forces, others emphasized ways in which opportunities to work collaboratively with the Tatmadaw for change and entry points for engagement remain limited. To explain this more pessimistic view of the Tatmadaw's role in, and approach to the present transition, those interviewed repeatedly emphasized the need to understand the institution's *core interests* – the factors that determine what concessions the Tatmadaw is willing or unwilling to make. As one staff member of a Myanmar civil society organization emphasized, the change and transition that has happened so far has been significant; however, a closer look quickly reveals that, despite these changes, the Tatmadaw's core interests remain firmly intact:

*They have compromised just enough to make it look like things are being given up. But, the concessions they've made, the things they've given up, these never threaten or undermine those things they have identified as core interests.*

Thus, in our effort to move from understanding to analysis, we need to explore the Myanmar armed forces in terms of its underlying interests and motivations – the factors that have and continue to shape its behaviour in relation to the country’s transition process.

### *Understanding the Tatmadaw’s Core Interests*

Those interviewed consistently emphasized three areas for deeper consideration: the Tatmadaw’s interest in maintaining national unity, ensuring military autonomy, and protecting economic assets.

#### ***a) National Unity – implications for the country’s peace process.***

The maintenance of national unity was identified repeatedly as a core interest for the Tatmadaw with particular implications to the country’s peace process. Indeed, the earlier historical overview in this paper highlights how an emphasis on national unity dates back to the turbulent experience of the 1950s when divisions and outside interference caused great instability. Maintenance of national unity lies at the heart of the three national causes. Young rank and file soldiers and the public more broadly were persuaded that protection of the nation required a vigilant military response. Those interviewed repeatedly mentioned that upholding the unity and integrity of the nation remains as much a priority for the armed forces today as it did when the military assumed control under General Ne Win in 1962. Furthermore, this focus provides a primary rationale for the Tatmadaw’s historical and on-going role in national politics –without a strong military institution engaged in national affairs the country would risk disintegration in the face of internal insurgency backed by outside actors.

Given the Tatmadaw’s preoccupation with national unity, the peace process takes on an added layer of significance: the



primary threat to national unity has always been the desire of ethnic groups for greater autonomy, self-determination, or secession. With the ultimate aim of facilitating national political dialogue, the peace process offers a potential route to address the root causes that have, for so long, fuelled separatist desires and raised the prospect of national dissolution. Indeed, as Harn Yawngwhe writes:

*...the opportunity is there for Burma to resolve its outstanding problem of the last 60 years. A lot of preparatory work has already begun on fundamental issues such as power- and revenue-sharing; reform of the security sector, the judiciary and land; and community, ethnic and minority rights.*<sup>22</sup>

But those engaged most closely in the peace process quickly highlight that many challenges lie ahead. These challenges go far beyond including additional signatures to the NCA. Indeed, the challenges extend to core conceptual definitions, the issue of who will be included in the political dialogue, and the vision and scope of the ultimate peace that the process is working towards.

Community leaders and peacebuilders in Myanmar have long emphasized that achieving genuine peace will require a process that truly engages and addresses root causes and long-standing grievances. It will require working towards a multi-layered concept of peace that includes equitable sharing of resources; legal frameworks that protect minority groups; and a concept of ethnicity in which diversity is seen as a resource to be celebrated, rather than a dividing line that separates. This definition of peace, often described by peacebuilding practitioners as *positive peace*, extends well beyond the signing of ceasefire agreements.

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<sup>22</sup> *National dialogue: armed groups, contested legitimacy and political transition*, by Harn Yawngwhe, in *Accord*, and international review of peace initiatives, Issue 25, London: Conciliation Resources, 2014, p.49.

It also requires the participation of stakeholders beyond those holding arms (the Tatmadaw and EAGs) and includes community leaders (both men and women), youth groups, women's associations, and religious leaders among others. This emphasis on inclusion recognizes that people at the community level often hold different views from their military and political leaders. The significance of this reality was highlighted in an interview with one civil society leader. He pointed out that in Myanmar people have been living in mixed communities for decades, making identity much more fluid at the community level where people trade, marry, have friends, and share celebrations across "divides". The interviewee noted that in Myanmar the elites engaged in peace negotiations often make compromise more difficult as they bring hard-line perspectives that do not reflect the views or the experience of their communities in terms of cooperation, understanding, and tolerance of diversity.

These reflections point to a vision of peace that goes far beyond the absence of armed conflict, and the achievement of stability and security agreed at formal meetings between armed actors and political elites. Daw Seng Raw has articulated this eloquently:

*...it is important that peace discussions continue in different forums with the objective of building durable relationships and maintaining the national focus on conflict resolution and political reform... All participants, however, in the different discussions taking place must be in no doubt that the only outcome of the transitional processes underway must be inclusion, political dialogue and genuine reforms.<sup>23</sup>*

While peace practitioners in Myanmar often return to these bold and ambitious goals, many are concerned that the Tatmadaw's preoccupation with national unity will inevitably lead it to adopt a narrow and limited vision of peace.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Need for Peace and Inclusion*, by Lahpai Seng Raw, Transnational Institute (TNI), 27 January 2016.

The inherent tension of working towards peace while emphasizing national unity has already come to the surface, as different conceptual definitions of federalism are made more explicit. While those interviewed emphasized the tremendous accomplishments and progress that were made possible when the concept of federalism was incorporated into ceasefire negotiations – both that armed groups were willing to commit to achievement of federalism in place of secession, and that Tatmadaw negotiators were willing to permit use of the term for the first time and acknowledge it as a stated outcome – they noted that a shared definition or vision of federalism has yet to be developed. Indeed, opening presentations at the Union Peace Conference – 21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong revealed the broad gap between ethnic definitions of federalism, as a mechanism to facilitate higher levels of autonomy and self-government, and the Tatmadaw’s definition of federalism that is bounded by a focus on maintaining national unity and the integrity of the 2008 Constitution.

Beyond different definitions around broad concepts such as peace and federalism, variation also exists around views on the next steps in the peace process. A number of individuals working closely on the peace process pointed out that the speech by the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, delivered at the Union Peace Conference on 12 January 2016, in which he invited soldiers from armed groups to join the Tatmadaw,<sup>24</sup> highlighted these divergent perspectives. The statement was consistent with Tatmadaw insistence that a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is the next step in the peace process. In contrast, EAGs have emphasized the need for security sector reform (SSR).<sup>25</sup> Beyond addressing issues of

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<sup>24</sup> See *Conflicting Calls Mark Peace Conference*, by Lun Min Mang and Pyae Thet Phy, Yangon: Myanmar Times, 13 January 2016.

<sup>25</sup> The UN Secretary-General’s Report, *Securing States and societies: strengthening the United Nations comprehensive support to security sector reform* (A/67/970-S/2013/480) describes security sector reform: “The objective of security sector reform is to help ensure that people are safer through the enhanced effectiveness and accountability of security institutions operating under civilian control within a framework of the rule of law and human rights.”

human rights violations, lack of accountability, and corruption, EAGS have advocated for SSR options that would see military affairs reorganized and restructured to promote greater autonomy and command at the level of ethnic states.

Those interviewed pointed out that the Tatmadaw's emphasis on DDR, as illustrated in the Commander-in-Chief's statement, emerges from the military's core interest in maintaining national unity as outlined in the constitution: cessation of hostilities and disarmament of EAGs with ethnic troops joining Myanmar's "sole patriotic defence force",<sup>26</sup> is seen as the first step. By contrast, the insistence by EAGs that SSR comes first emerges out of a desire to address long-held grievances by, in part, achieving increased autonomy. In the current zero-sum game formulation of the peace process these two positions – the Tatmadaw focus on DDR, maintenance of the 2008 Constitution, and protection of national unity, versus EAG focus on SSR, the need for constitutional reform, and the promotion of increased autonomy – lie in direct opposition.

Clearly, the peace process and the national political dialogue process remain key priorities in on-going efforts towards transition and change. They offer a pathway to develop shared definitions of broad concepts such as peace and federalism. Processes that address root causes and long-standing grievances offer the opportunity to build genuine, sustainable peace. No doubt, such processes will require support for intensive efforts outside the context of large formal meetings and conferences, and these undertakings must be inclusive, going beyond participation by elites or those holding arms.

This examination also reveals that the Tatmadaw's current definition of national unity, and its priority as a core Tatmadaw

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<sup>26</sup> Description of the Tatmadaw taken from the 2008 Myanmar Constitution. A version of the Myanmar 2008 Constitution in Burmese and English is available on the website of the Government of Myanmar Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: [http://www.mofa.gov.mm/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Constitution\\_of\\_Myanmar.pdf](http://www.mofa.gov.mm/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Constitution_of_Myanmar.pdf)

interest, may itself create a roadblock in the scope of what the peace process and national dialogue process are able to achieve. It remains to be seen the degree to which the peace process is able to move beyond the zero-sum game and build a new, shared definition of increased autonomy within the context of national unity.

### ***b) Military Autonomy – transition to discipline-flourishing democracy***

Beyond national unity, those interviewed also noted that the Tatmadaw remains firmly committed to maintaining autonomy over military affairs. A brief overview of the Tatmadaw in terms of statistics, structure, and provisions outlined in the 2008 Constitution, is helpful in understanding the mechanisms that protect this core interest.

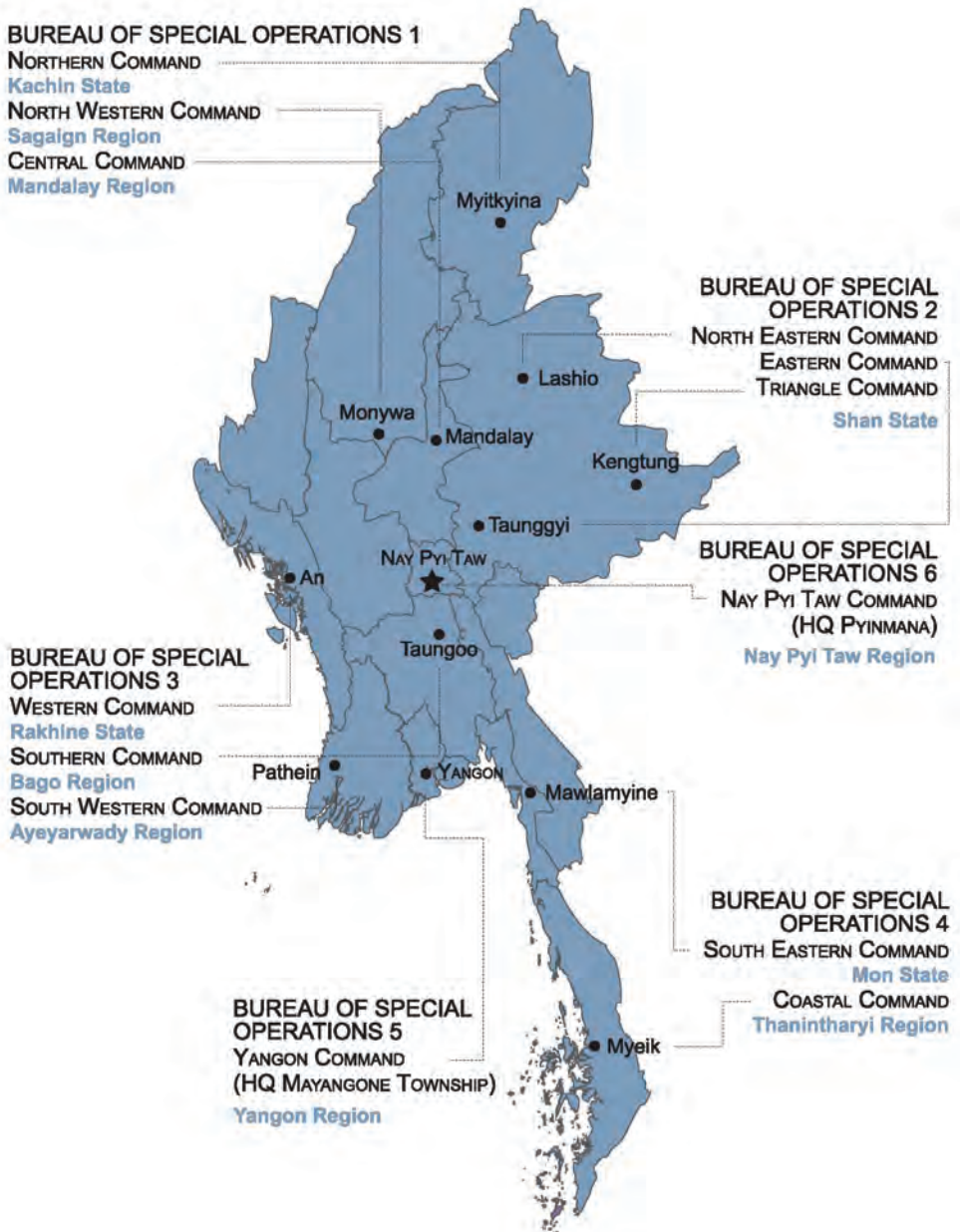
***Tatmadaw Statistics and Structure*** –Public data on Myanmar’s armed forces are difficult to access or verify. However, it is estimated that its current size lies in the area of 300,000 – 350,000 troops and the Tatmadaw’s budget is higher than Myanmar’s combined annual spending on health and education.<sup>27</sup>

Those familiar with the structure and workings of the Myanmar armed forces describe it as a highly centralized and hierarchical institution with decision-making tightly controlled at the centre. Observers also note that, unlike most standardized armies, the perception held by Myanmar armed forces that internal insurgency has been driven by interference and meddling by outside powers has led it to develop robust structures and a capacity focused on fighting threats inside its borders. This capacity is organized into 13 regional commands under the Bureau of Special Operations. Those interviewed noted that strict military discipline is maintained between the centre

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<sup>27</sup> See *Burma’s Tatmadaw: a force to be reckoned with*, by Andrew Selth, in *The Interpreter*, 22 Oct 2015.

## Army Regional Military Commands<sup>28</sup>



<sup>28</sup> This map is based on information drawn from a number of public sources and from interviews.

and regional commands; in instances where any one regional commander becomes too powerful or independent, positions are shuffled to prevent that regional commander from amassing power that could undermine central control.

***The Tatmadaw and the 2008 Constitution*** – The 2008 Myanmar Constitution is the key document emerging from the roadmap process, creating new institutions such as the upper and lower legislatures (the Amyotha Hluttaw, and the Pyithu Hluttaw) and the timeline for elections. In its preamble it confirms adherence to the three national causes and outlines the main responsibility of the Myanmar Defence Service (Tatmadaw) in terms of safeguarding the three national causes.

The 2008 Constitution also lays out provisions that protect the Tatmadaw. These guarantees preserve the institution's ongoing role in Myanmar politics and ensure that its ability to oversee a controlled transition from military dictatorship to democracy continues. As many have noted, these measures are seen as providing the Tatmadaw with the security needed for the transition to unfold.<sup>29</sup> Measures include:

- A prominent role in appointing members to the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), with the Tatmadaw appointing 5 out of 11 members. The NDSC, in turn, holds significant responsibilities with regards to security matters, including appointment of the Commander-in-Chief, and the ability to impose a state of emergency.
- A 25% bloc of military-appointed seats within the legislative branch of government. This presence in the upper and lower houses of parliament is of particular significance as it represents a defacto veto over proposed amendments to the constitution, which require a majority of over 75% votes in order to pass.

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<sup>29</sup> For example see, *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks? Asia Briefing No 143*, Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 22 April 2014, p. 9.

- Appointment and control over the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs and Border Affairs. The significance of controlling the Ministry of Home Affairs should not be underestimated as it includes both control of Myanmar's police force and oversight for the powerful General Administrative Department (GAD), which oversees government administration at the local level throughout the country.
- Ability to nominate one of the three presidential candidates which, in practice, means ability to name one of two vice presidents as the two presidential candidates that do not win the presidency automatically become vice-presidents.
- Autonomy in determining military matters as the Commander-in-Chief is not the head of state, but is appointed from among serving military officers. In practice, this represents a tremendous source of authority.

Beyond the measures that preserve the Tatmadaw's political role and ensure on-going regulation of the transition process, the 2008 Constitution also includes provisions that grant further security to current and former military actors: article 445 shields military personnel from prosecution for actions that were carried out in executing their responsibilities under the former SLORC or SPDC governments. In the transition to discipline-flourishing democracy, these aspects of the 2008 Constitution provide current and retired members of the armed forces safety and security in the face of risks associated with transitional justice.

This brief examination of the Tatmadaw – its size, in terms of troops and budget, its command structure, and its role and protections as outlined by the 2008 Constitution – provides a snapshot of the institution in the current moment. What we see is a highly centralized, hierarchical, and disciplined institution with a monopoly over the use of force in Myanmar society.



This is coupled with constitutional provisions that ensure the armed forces are able to safeguard their core interest around maintaining autonomy over military affairs.

That said, the road map process was a plan to transition the country from military to democratic rule and some level of civilian control over military matters is, generally, considered an essential aspect of accountability within the context of democratic politics. However, those interviewed emphasized that any assumptions regarding the Myanmar military ceding autonomy as a result of the roadmap process should be put in check. As a number of people pointed out, the key to understanding this reality can be found in considering the full translation of the “roadmap process” from Burmese: when fully translated, it is *the roadmap process to discipline-flourishing democracy*.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, one academic noted:

*Generals in the Tatmadaw will be the first to point out that they never promised a roadmap to liberal, western democracy – the vision of democracy at the end of their roadmap is quite different!*

Again, we can understand this vision of democracy and the emphasis on discipline arising out of Myanmar’s historical experience. The chaotic post-independence period instilled a deep cynicism and disdain towards civilian politics within the armed forces. In the present era, military leadership will continue to hold onto its autonomy and carefully watch the civilian-led government to assess its ability to preserve security and stability. The emphasis on *discipline* is significant as it makes it clear that the turmoil and volatility associated with previous periods of civilian rule is not acceptable – the bar has been set much higher. Maintenance of stability remains the key

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<sup>30</sup> *Myanmar Roadmap to Democracy: The Way Forward*, presentation by H-E. U Khin Maung Win, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Myanmar, Yangon: Burma Today News, January 2004.

quality of Myanmar's shift to democracy, and maintenance of military autonomy is seen as key to achieving this outcome. Until civilian-led politics is able to meet this objective, the armed forces will continue its role in politics and will maintain autonomous control over its own affairs.

Indeed, two separate civil society leaders concluded our conversations by emphasizing the need to understand that Myanmar is not currently a democracy in the western sense of the word, and the roadmap is not a transition to a western-style democracy. As one civil society leader commented "*There is a very long way to go before we see genuine civilian control in Myanmar politics. To become a democracy, so much more change will be needed and that will take time.*"

### ***c) Economic Assets – the war economy***

Whether speaking with Myanmar civil society actors, academics, or international observers, there was a shared focus on how, thus far, control over economic assets has guided the Tatmadaw's participation in the transition process.

While exceeding the combined budgets for health and education, the percentage of budget allocated to Myanmar's armed forces has actually declined over recent years. In the 2014-15 annual budget military spending stood at 12 per cent, down from 19 per cent in the 2011-12 budget.<sup>31</sup> However, it is anticipated that the absolute budgetary allocation towards the military is likely to rise as the result of economic growth and improved revenue collection.<sup>32</sup>

That said, it is well known that the Tatmadaw also has direct involvement in economic enterprises and diverse sources of

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<sup>31</sup> See *Military Spending Still Dwarfs Education and Health*, by EiEi Toe Lwin, Yangon: Myanmar Times, 30 March 2014.

<sup>32</sup> *Myanmar's Military: Back to the Barracks? Asia Briefing No 143*, Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 22 April 2014, p. 16.

income generation that fall outside the national budget. The existence of extra-budgetary sources of income generation for the Tatmadaw dates back to the 1950s with the establishment of the Defence Services Institute and its control over importation needs, exportation opportunities, and generation of resources and political leverage.<sup>33</sup> More recently, the economic assets of the armed forces have ranged from control over military conglomerates and holding companies that both generated profits and ensured strategic access to industrial materials, to income-generation schemes that were permitted and encouraged as a “self-reliance” approach to support military units deployed in the field.<sup>34</sup> While analysts note that economic and political reforms, particularly measures under President Thein Sein, have curbed or even eliminated Tatmadaw control over some economic assets, the Tatmadaw’s current economic interests, and the importance of maintaining control over those interests, were a constant theme running through all discussions and interviews.

There are important distinctions to keep in mind when considering the range of economic assets at stake. On the one hand, many economic assets are *legally* owned by the military or by individuals connected with the military (for instance, retired officers); on the other hand, there are many economic benefits that are derived through a variety of *illegal* activities. Plus, assets may be owned by the Tatmadaw as an institution or they may be owned by individual active duty or retired personnel. The scope of this study neither includes a detailed look at the range of legal or illegal assets, nor does it consider which assets are owned by the military itself or by individuals associated with the military. These are important questions that need to be more thoroughly explored and mapped out. That said, there

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<sup>33</sup> *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, by Mary Callahan, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005 p. 170

<sup>34</sup> *Myanmar: The Politics of Economic Reforms, Asia Briefing No 231*, Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 27 July 2012, p 11-12.

have been some notable efforts to research linkages between the Myanmar armed forces and control over certain economic assets. Also, those interviewed shared their own insights on this topic emerging from direct work with Tatmadaw personnel.

One actor closely involved in the peace process shared the view that, at the local level, illicit economic activities tend to emerge quite organically: while units under regional commands are deployed on the ground they are instructed to collaborate in peaceful, productive ways with local communities. In the absence of direct orders to not participate in illicit income generation activities, field units are easily drawn toward these opportunities, even to the extent of collaborating with local EAGs. As a result, Tatmadaw troops deployed in the states and regions may encounter opportunities for enrichment and are likely to take advantage of these opportunities unless, or until, they are directly ordered not to. A number of such cases have emerged around logging activities.

Beyond this particular account, media and research reports have uncovered Tatmadaw interests related to production and selling of narcotics, and mining and selling of jade. In the area of narcotics, there has long been an assumed linkage between the Tatmadaw, Tatmadaw-backed militias, and the production and cultivation of methamphetamine and heroin. Initially formed in the 1960s with the aim of combating ethnic insurgents and the Communist Party of Burma, militias have a long history of engaging in production and trafficking of narcotics.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the industry has provided an income base for these groups as well as a route to enrichment. With the attempt to transition EAGs into Border Guard Forces (BGF) in 2009, there has also been an increase of BGF involvement in the drug industry.<sup>36</sup> While some attempts at drug eradication have taken place, including

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<sup>35</sup> *The Current State of Counter narcotic Policy and Drug Reform Debates in Myanmar*, by Tom Kramer; Washington: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 1 May 2015, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Solving Myanmar's drug trade means involving militias in the peace process*, by Yola Verbruggen, Yangon: Myanmar Times, 18 May 2016.

a large-scale opium substitution program funded by China, the lack of alternative livelihood options, plus the immense profits available to a broad range of actors – militias that oversee production, syndicates from neighbouring countries that traffic the drugs in Asia, and Tatmadaw elements who collect taxes from producers – have allowed drug production in Myanmar’s northeast to flourish.<sup>37</sup> The scale of drug production in Myanmar has serious implications internationally and domestically: on the international stage, Myanmar is second only to Afghanistan in production of heroin;<sup>38</sup> at home, widespread availability of drugs has led to high rates of addiction with tragic consequences.

In a similar vein, research has also highlighted the connections between the Tatmadaw and jade mining. While focus on jade mining was sharpened in the wake of several deadly landslides at jade mines in Kachin state, a report by Global Witness on Myanmar’s jade trade, released in October 2015, resulted in heightened scrutiny. The report was notable for its analysis of the billions in untaxed revenue associated with the jade industry, plus its detailed exposé revealing the direct role played by retired military generals, including Senior General Than Shwe and his family members, senior officials within the USDP, and military holding companies.<sup>39</sup>

While observers inside and outside the country have long assumed a linkage between Myanmar’s armed forces and illicit economic activities (as well as many linkages between EAGs and illegal sources of income), loosening of media restrictions have created a new environment where these linkages are being researched and publicized. The report by Global Witness provides one example of this new development. Rule of law and judicial structures may not yet be robust enough to carry out

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<sup>37</sup> *The Current State of Counter narcotic Policy and Drug Reform Debates in Myanmar*, by Tom Kramer, Washington: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 1 May 2015.

<sup>38</sup> See *Southeast Asia Opium Survey 2015, Lao PDR, Myanmar*, Bangkok: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> The report is available at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/oil-gas-and-mining/myanmarjade/>

the needed follow-up; however, the research will help deepen our understanding of the significant assets involved.

A number of the individuals interviewed for this analysis emphasized how this dynamic has, thus far, played out in terms of the peace process. They pointed out that experiences in the southeast of the country (Karen and southern Shan states) have been quite different from peace process negotiation efforts in the country's northeast (northern Shan and Kachin states).<sup>40</sup> A number of observers to the peace process highlighted that it was possible to secure bi-lateral ceasefires in the southeast quickly because of the economic incentives involved. In Karen and southern Shan states, a ceasefire agreement with the KNU and RCSS was an attractive goal for military commanders because peace offered potential access to greater economic assets than did on-going conflict. Construction on the road connecting the Dawei deep seaport to Thailand, and the associated profits, would be best achieved if the guns went silent.

The experience in the northeast and north of the country has been quite different. Those interviewed were quick to point out that at the time of Thein Sein's Presidency the economic interests in this part of the country (illegal jade mining, narcotics, logging) were, in fact, more readily extracted— by both Tatmadaw and EAGs – in situations of on-going armed conflict. As one participant to the peace process commented,

*The challenge facing the peace process now is not coming to agreement on concepts. The issue is the war economy. As long as the war economy and the economic incentives exist, this will be the main challenge to moving forward.*

Certainly, it is important to acknowledge that in Myanmar there are multiple actors with an interest in maintaining the

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<sup>40</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the conflict in Kachin state see *Building Relationships Across Divides, Peace and Conflict Analysis of Kachin State*, Siem Reap: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2016.

war economy. Militia groups, EAGs, cross-border traders, business actors both inside and outside Myanmar, as well as actors from inside the Myanmar armed forces, all benefit from these activities. Also, the draw of the war economy can easily go beyond extractive resources such as timber, jade, and narcotics: competition over land and control of territory easily becomes a flash point, especially when profits associated with large-scale infrastructure projects such as hydroelectric dams or gas pipelines are involved. In Myanmar's border areas, the challenge remains that the draw of potential profits and enrichment offered by the war economy is often much stronger than the potential peace dividends derived from cessation of hostilities and long-term peacebuilding efforts.

***The Triumphant Elite*** - Those interviewed highlighted an additional lingering question that often hangs in the background of conversations in Myanmar. Indeed, the preceding discussion of economic interests and the billions in revenue that emanate from the war economy inevitably leads us to ponder an ambiguity that remains opaque: how does access to economic assets potentially shape decision-making in the Myanmar armed forces, and what is the role of powerful elites with military connections?

This ambiguity has been a constant source of speculation since before the retirement of Senior General Than Shwe in 2011. More recently, the visit of a senior official from the Communist Party of China (CPC) to Myanmar provoked curiosity and gossip. Social media noted that Song Tao, Director of the CPC's International Liaison Department, met not only with State Counsellor Suu Kyi, and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, but he also included a meeting with Than Shwe despite the General's retired status.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See *Than Shwe still a 'political force': Chinese official*, by Democratic Voice of Burma, 15 August 2016.

It is also a theme that came up repeatedly in conversations as those interviewed could point to instances when orders emanating from the central region appeared arbitrary or contradictory to strategies employed by regional commanders in the states and regions. For instance, individuals involved in the peace process shared their experience of negotiations stalling when news of an attack by military assets deployed from the central region took place in the midst of negotiations, without knowledge of the regional commander. The perception of those interviewed was that those instances where Tatmadaw actions appear contradictory were not the result of change in military tactic. Rather, they were the result of central command intervening in an abrupt fashion on behalf of elite economic interests that had inadvertently come under threat.

One diplomat recalled the motto of the Defence Services Academy, "*Triumphant Elite of the Future*" and shared his perspective:

*The Tatmadaw was previously used to enrich the country's top leaders. Now the top leaders have exited the Tatmadaw but continue to use the institution as a tool to enrich their small circle of remaining elite families.*

This comment resonated with an individual involved in the peace process: "*Yes, there may be one group at the negotiating table, but there's another group that does not value the efforts taking place at the table*".

### ***Closing the Circle – how core interests connect***

Beyond economic gain, those interviewed commonly identified another aspect of the war economy that connects Tatmadaw interests around economic assets with its emphasis on national unity and maintenance of military autonomy. This is perpetuation of *instability*.



The explanation goes like this: economic benefits associated with extractive industries and narcotics drive on-going conflict as a variety of actors vie for control of territory, resource production, extraction, and profits. At the same time conflict and instability provide a shield behind which the war economy – trade in illicit goods – can flourish. As long as conflict and instability continue in Myanmar’s border areas, the fundamental justification for the Tatmadaw’s role and its privileged status remain intact. Thus, the instability that emerges from the war economy obscures and safeguards that war economy, while the resulting threat to national unity requires that the military preserve its ability to intervene for the purpose of protecting national security and stability. Furthermore, safeguarding the military’s ability to intervene when and as needed requires the maintenance of its autonomy and the ability of the Commander-in-Chief to preserve independence in determining military matters.

Here we see how separate core interests– protection of economic interests, a focus on maintaining national unity, and preservation of military autonomy – are, in reality, deeply connected.

## **Reconciling Opposing Narratives**

### ***Soldiers Are the Ones Who Want Peace the Most Vs the Triumphant Elite Of the Future***

Returning to the initial departure point for this section, we remain faced with two opposing narratives and two starkly different versions of the Tatmadaw. One version sees an institution in the midst of a reform process – eager to engage with the outside world after years of isolation and committed to finding peaceful solutions that shield future generations from a life on the battlefield. The second version is a more cynical view in which an institution cedes just enough to give the illusion of reform while preserving core interests that ensure its on-going centrality in politics. Furthermore, preservation of core interests

provides the institution, and individuals associated with it, a mechanism to maintain tremendous wealth and power.

This second, more pessimistic view is a reminder that, beyond its perceived role as protector of the nation, an essential aspect of the Tatmadaw and its role in Myanmar society is as the key institution offering a route to power and success. It is notable that the Defence Services Academy's motto – *Triumphant Elite of the Future* – emphasises elite status without the reference to service, loyalty or protection found in many other military mottos. This stands in stark contrast to “*soldiers are the ones who want peace the most*”, the words used to describe the Tatmadaw's commitment to the peace process.

Which version of the Myanmar armed forces is the more accurate? Is the Tatmadaw an actor laying a path to peace, democratization and reform? Or is it an institution that continues to project its role as protector of the nation as a means to limit democratization and maintain its monopoly over power and access to economic rewards? Is the glass half-full or half-empty? Does it matter and could both versions be simultaneously true? For the purposes of this paper, the challenge is not to determine which version is more accurate. Instead, the task at hand is to learn from both narratives and consider what they reveal in terms of available avenues for internal and external actors to engage with the Myanmar armed forces.

# 3

## Conclusion & Recommendations

As with so many transitions and conflict situations, any analysis of the Tatmadaw in the current moment reveals a high level of complexity. Access to information is imperfect and multiple realities can exist simultaneously. At the same time we are required to carefully consider what we do know and determine what we, as actors from inside and outside Myanmar, can do to engage the Tatmadaw in ways so that the institution can increase the scope and depth of concessions that it is willing to make within the context of reform and transition.



*Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (left) and Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing (right) together in Nay Pyi Taw in 2016. - UN Photo*

Ultimately, the Tatmadaw must be able to offer a broad range of concessions if it is going to be a partner in building genuine, sustainable peace, extending and deepening the scope of democratization and strengthening economic development models that ensure equitable sharing and governance over resources. It will have to step away from its role as the route to wealth and power for a small elite, and instead dedicate itself to building peace for all. But what opportunities exist for actors inside and outside Myanmar to engage the institution in ways that shift the Tatmadaw's internal equation, making it willing to accelerate and enlarge its approach to partnership in Myanmar's transition?

Those interviewed offered a wide variety of suggestions. Some recommendations concentrated on the *approach* to be adopted. This included the need to moderate expectations, encourage and support change from inside, and provide opportunities for key actors in the Tatmadaw to deepen their engagement with counterparts outside Myanmar. Another area of recommendations emerged around particular *areas of focus* in the current transition: the peace process, the transition to democracy, and economic development. These recommendations are explored in more detail in the following section.

## **A. Approach**

*Realistic Expectations– Actors inside and outside the country must adopt realistic expectations for change:*

- *Develop change strategies with a long-term view – substantive change will require work that far exceeds the term of the current government.*
- *Strategies to pursue substantive change will require making substantive concessions. As a result, actors inside and outside the country must balance the change they want to see with the concessions they are willing to make.*

One theme echoed in many conversations was the need for actors, both inside and outside the country, to adopt realistic expectations, particularly in relation to the speed and depth of change. Diplomats to civil society leaders expressed appreciation of the tremendous progress made to date and a concern that, in the process of transition, expectations need to be moderated. As one civil society leader said:

*There are a number of things that we all need to realize. First, Myanmar is not a democracy – not yet. Change is happening but it will take time – the change that needs to happen takes place over generations, not during the term of one president. During the next five years, the NLD will be extremely constrained in its ability to pursue change. Also, we all need to remember that when people use the term ‘peace’ they can mean different things – sometimes ‘peace’ simply means an absence of fighting but that doesn’t mean that underlying root causes have been addressed and conflict will not come back. Finally, we know that the Tatmadaw is centralized and disciplined, but we also have to remember that it has more than one face. All of these factors mean that change takes time.*

This quote illustrates the way in which Myanmar’s current reality includes challenges at multiple levels and that expectations of rapid change are not realistic.

Furthermore, many observers have commented that Myanmar’s transition is the result of a plan initiated by the military and it will continue to unfold in accordance with that plan. The plan does not allow for rapid change. In fact, it specifically guards against rapid change as the architects of the roadmap associated rapid change with dangerous instability. Given the protections inherent in the plan, a number of those interviewed pointed out that pushing for substantive change to happen quickly was, at best, unrealistic; at worst, rapid change could actually result in

slowing or even reversing progress made thus far by provoking a backlash or a reassertion of military authority.

One specific area of change that came up repeatedly in conversations was the potential for an amendment of the 2008 Constitution to change the proportion of seats allocated to the armed forces. Those interviewed felt this was an unrealistic goal at this time. As one diplomat said:

*The Tatmadaw has initiated a transition plan and things must go according to that plan. There is no point in calling for a shift away from the 25 per cent of seats [that are appointed by the military] because we're not yet at that part of the plan.*

One civil society leader explained that, at this moment, the challenge lies in the fact that change is framed as if it is a zero-sum-game. Given this reality, any actor who attempts to negotiate with the Tatmadaw for substantive change will be required to make substantial sacrifices. Indeed, the common interpretation of the meetings held between Aung San Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in the months following the November 2015 elections is that those sessions represented a negotiation in which The Lady attempted to obtain agreement from the Tatmadaw on constitutional changes, including changes that would allow her to assume the role of President. Many have concluded that the sombre mood emerging by the third meeting was a reflection of Aung San Suu Kyi's realization that change could only be achieved at a price that was too high to bear.<sup>42</sup>

All these examples serve to emphasize the importance of adopting realistic expectations when it comes to change. It is essential for actors inside and outside the country to avoid the

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<sup>42</sup> *No more smiles: Myanmar's transition sours ahead of presidential vote*, by Hnin Yadana Zaw and Antoni Slodkoski, Reuters, 9 March 2015.

pitfalls associated with unrealistic expectations. This is not to argue that change should not happen. Rather, those interviewed emphasized the importance of recognizing the constrained path to change and to understand the consequence of pushing for change. Shifts that attempt to fast-track the current plan are likely to lead to disappointment, or even reverse the progress made so far. Additionally, pushing for change that lies outside the boundaries of the plan may exact a price that the change itself does not warrant.

***Support Change from Inside*** - *Actors outside the country must prioritize support to change led from inside*

- *Recognize that applying pressure for change from outside will likely have the unintended consequence of strengthening hard-line positions.*
- *Donors must prioritize funding to build leadership capacity at multiple levels (local, state and region, and national levels).*
- *International partners must ensure that they avoid undermining State Counsellor Suu Kyi's efforts to work for change, while the State Counsellor needs to remain open to receiving support and guidance.*

Those interviewed repeatedly emphasized the importance of supporting change from the inside. The insider-outsider dichotomy represents a long-standing tension around change strategies in the Myanmar context. It has long defined the division between civil society based on the Thai border, who adopted activist strategies highlighting human rights abuses and pushing for democratization, while other civil society leaders remained in Myanmar, working towards similar goals but adopting a pragmatic approach and working quietly for change from the inside. Likewise, the dichotomy and polarization between insiders and outsiders has defined the

often-antagonistic and xenophobic relations between Myanmar, its neighbours, and international actors outside the region.

Given this context, one respondent outlined the limitations of imposing solutions from outside:

*Applying external economic pressure or using diplomatic confrontation in order to bring about change overlooks two essential elements that we've seen time and time again: first, pressure from the outside always ends up being manipulated to create a sense of national vulnerability that, in turn, has been used to shore up support for hard-line leaders and their positions; second, it assumes a lack of actors inside the country who are capable of bringing about change and shaping their futures.*

In a similar vein, a second respondent emphasized the importance of supporting Myanmar actors to craft and lead strategies for change. This recommendation was based both on a recognition that outsiders will always fall short in grasping the complexity of the Myanmar context, and that change strategies will only be accepted and embraced if they are seen as home-grown and not imposed from outside.

Given this reality, outsiders need to seek out and support change makers from inside the country. For donors, this requires extending funding and capacity-building opportunities to a broad range of potential leaders – from those working at the community level through to those working on national change processes. For international peace workers, it requires a continued role on the margins of the peace process providing support and serving as observers.

Furthermore, international partners must prioritize efforts to support Myanmar's current chief change maker, Aung San Suu Kyi. Indeed, combining realistic expectations with support for



change from inside, means that international partners will need to carefully consider their words and actions to ensure that they bolster Myanmar's State Counsellor and avoid creating inadvertent flash points that undermine her leadership role in expanding the current transition process. For her part, Aung San Suu Kyi needs to remain open to receiving the support, feedback and wise council from Myanmar and international partners as the magnitude of the challenges she faces exceed the capacity of any one individual to navigate alone.

***Support External Engagement*** – *Outside actors must prioritize and support initiatives that expose members of the Tatmadaw to military practices outside Myanmar.*

- *Develop engagement opportunities to “share” in order to navigate sensitivities around outside influence and control.*
- *Focus on SSR experiences that have shifted away from targeting perceived threat of internal insurgency to defence against aggression from outside.*
- *Appreciate and seek to understand Tatmadaw protocols and communication channels.*
- *Target training institutions within the military where new ideas can be incorporated into curriculum.*
- *Target middle to senior-level officers with the capacity to serve as change makers when developing opportunities for engagement and military-to-military exchanges.*
- *Create opportunities where military-to-military exchanges share lessons learned from military engagement and support peaceful, non-militarized solutions for change.*
- *Analyse potential sensitivities – both sensitivities among internal stakeholders to the peace process, and geo-political sensitivities for outside actors – while promoting and supporting opportunities for external engagement.*

A third approach identified as crucial to supporting transition in Myanmar is to build on, and strengthen engagement by the

Myanmar armed forces with the outside world, particularly through military-to-military exchanges. Those interviewed pointed out that these opportunities are key in bringing about change within the institution.

Individuals who have worked to support the Tatmadaw in building connections outside the country offered specific recommendations aimed at deepening the impact that external engagement offers. First, outside engagement and military-to-military exchanges should be offered as an opportunity to “share” rather than instances where outsiders “teach” or “build capacity” within the Myanmar armed forces. Again, the significance of this approach emerges out of an appreciation for long-held sensitivities and perceptions of threat emanating from outside the country.

In terms of focus for potential exchange activities, those interviewed identified the need to highlight alternative roles for the Myanmar armed forces. In particular, sharing experiences of various SSR initiatives that have focused on shifting the role of armed forces away from targeting a perceived threat of internal insurgency towards defence from aggression from outside would be beneficial.

Second, while the Tatmadaw appears to have a genuine desire and interest to forge new connections, issues of protocol and restricted communication channels constrain these endeavours. The high level of centralization within the Tatmadaw, means that decision-making requires time and patience: communication must be done in writing and transmitted by post or fax; invitations or arrangements of logistics cannot be done verbally or through emails. Those who have had direct experience working with the institution point out that these highly formal requirements should not be misinterpreted as disinterest. Rather, they emphasize the need for outside partners to invest the time and effort to understand, respect,

and use proper channels and protocols when seeking to engage with the Tatmadaw.

Furthermore, those familiar with the Tatmadaw highlighted the importance of undertaking engagement that seeks out individuals who are most likely to serve as change makers within the military hierarchy. The key to this development goes beyond identifying senior leaders. Rather, the priority will be to use external military-to-military exchanges as an opportunity to build the capacity of senior military leadership that is able to move beyond the zero-sum game. Middle to senior level officers need to become familiar with change processes where compromise and concession are not automatically seen as a loss for one side or the other. Instead, external engagement needs to be used to build an awareness that change can lead to win-win solutions. These opportunities need to develop the ability of individuals within the Tatmadaw to identify, develop, and propose such solutions.

The above recommendations also raise a dilemma highlighted by a number of civil society groups. As recent statements and reports have pointed out, external engagement opportunities, particularly military-to-military exchanges, can be seen as a “reward for bad behaviour”, both in terms of past behaviour and in light of the fact that the Tatmadaw has persisted in military operations during the process of peace negotiations. The recommendations above outline a targeted and strategic approach that should not represent a “perk” for hard-line actors who oppose change. Instead it aims to prioritize selection of middle to senior-level officers who have already demonstrated their interest and commitment to national change, for instance by means of the peace process. Furthermore, such an approach would focus on the experience of other military forces that have engaged and even played a leadership role in seeking out peaceful solutions for change.

While supporting external engagement through military-to-military exchanges, external actors must incorporate keen awareness of sensitivities that such activities may provoke among internal stakeholders to the peace process. EAGs are particularly sensitive to opportunities for Tatmadaw troops and officers to receive training outside the country while military operations inside the country continue. Given this situation, a consultative and transparent approach with all stakeholders is crucial. Also, engagement opportunities that can be undertaken jointly between senior leadership of the Tatmadaw and senior EAG personnel have been highly successful in not only building greater understanding of international norms and practices, but in fostering trust and cooperation between members of the Myanmar military and armed groups.

At the same time it also matters *who* offers such opportunities and the potential geo-political sensitivities these provoke among outside actors. A number of those interviewed pointed out that the ultimate ambition for some within the Tatmadaw is to gain access to opportunities for engagement and training offered by the US military.<sup>43</sup> However, as a former US Military Attaché, has pointed out a variety of restrictions that currently exist on the US side have, thus far limited engagement between the Myanmar armed forces and the US military. It seems likely that these restrictions will recede over time. At an event held in Washington DC in May 2016, Patrick Murphy, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia stated that the US planned to re-engage with the Tatmadaw in a “limited and calibrated way”.<sup>44</sup> But a consideration of geo-political tensions quickly reveals that such engagement would be seen as highly provocative to Myanmar’s neighbour to the north, China.

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<sup>43</sup> See *The US should reach out to Myanmar’s military*, by William C. Dickey, Nikkei Asian Review, 3 August 2016.

<sup>44</sup> See *U.S. Eyes Military Ties With Myanmar, Officials Says*, by Fred Strasser, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 12 May 2016.

This case illustrates that, while opportunities for military-to-military engagement have the potential of bringing important benefits, these should not be undertaken without a wider consideration of geopolitical sensitivities and tensions currently plaguing the region.

## **B. Areas of Focus**

***Support to the Peace Process and National Political Dialogue Process*** - *Actors based inside and outside the country must support the peace process and the emerging national dialogue process. In light of Tatmadaw interests and concerns around maintaining national unity, this represents a key area of focus – engaging the Tatmadaw as a partner in building genuine, sustainable peace offers the most direct path to shifting the institution’s concerns around maintenance of national unity.*

- *Support from international and Myanmar actors must go beyond establishing ceasefires and hosting formal meetings, to promote a long-term peacebuilding approach that*
  - *Addresses root causes and longstanding grievances, with the ultimate aim of promoting equitable sharing of resources, reconciliation, and social justice.*
  - *Includes the needs and experiences of various stakeholders so that peacemaking and peacebuilding in Myanmar is fully owned by all stakeholders and benefits from their insights.*
  - *Fosters a national identity that takes pride in the country’s unique ethnic and religious diversity, creating the institutions needed to celebrate, support and protect diversity.*
- *The NLD leadership must*
  - *Seek out and make use of existing peace process expertise.*
  - *Foster full and meaningful participation for all stakeholders.*

- *Donor funding must look beyond present-day processes and peacemaking efforts to support long-term peacebuilding needs. These need to include efforts that*
  - *Promote deeper linkages and understanding between communities.*
  - *Address a culture of militarization and authoritarianism.*

It is crucial that Myanmar actors as well as those from the regional and international levels, support the peace process. As we have seen, the peace process and its role in establishing the foundation for a national political dialogue process, offers a path for the Tatmadaw's exit from politics: the opportunity for stakeholders to address root causes and come to shared agreement around long-standing issues offers the best hope to dissolve perceived threats to national unity; this, in turn, would remove one of the key justifications for the military's role in Myanmar politics.

Working towards this end goal raises a new sense of urgency around achieving a successful peace process – one that includes but also transcends a focus on ceasefires and agreements achieved through formal meetings, and one that embraces flexibility without strict timelines. Those working directly on the peace process, as well as those providing funding and technical assistance from outside, must ultimately adopt bold and ambitious objectives in their work. Indeed, the Myanmar peace process must go beyond the nuts and bolts of peacemaking to the broader necessities of peacebuilding by:

- Addressing root causes and longstanding grievances, particularly those relating to power sharing, natural resource profit sharing, socioeconomic underdevelopment, marginalisation and discrimination, with the ultimate aim of promoting reconciliation and social justice.

- Including the needs and experiences of various stakeholders, not only of the EAGs, Tatmadaw, and representatives of the Government of Myanmar, but also the different communities that have both lived with the consequences of conflict, and built successful linkages and connections across divisions. Indeed, peacemaking and peacebuilding in Myanmar must be fully owned by all stakeholders and it must recognise the roles and contributions that these stakeholders make to the process.
- Fostering a national identity that takes pride in the country's unique ethnic and religious diversity, creating the institutions needed to celebrate, support and protect diversity, and establishing the mechanisms necessary to air grievances and prevent the outbreak of future violence.

In terms of the peace process and the emerging national political dialogue, observers inside and outside the country have been working hard to understand and engage in next steps. To carry the process forward, NLD leadership must continue to prioritize the peace process and ensure that it strives towards the broad requirements outlined above. A wide variety of peace practitioners – both national and international – played supportive roles in the peace process under the Thein Sein Presidency offering facilitation, technical expertise and serving as observers. State Counsellor Suu Kyi needs to draw on this expertise as a resource while she shapes her own vision of peace.

Beyond engaging the support of peace practitioners, the NLD must carefully consider its approach to stakeholder inclusion in the peace process. As we have already seen, a successful peace process requires shared leadership and a sense of ownership by a broad range of actors. Even the largest of electoral mandates does not substitute for full and meaningful participation by all parties to the conflict. Tackling this challenge in a

genuine fashion will require a leadership style that prioritizes consultation, listening, flexibility, and patience. Balancing the need to maintain forward momentum with the imperative of inclusion is no small feat, but long term success in the peace process depends on it.

Finally, work needs to go further than the peace process and political dialogue process to encompass long-term peacebuilding needs. This needs to include the long term and difficult task of undoing the mutual demonization that has developed over decades. In other post-conflict settings “reconciliation” is often the term used to describe a broad range of activities and initiatives undertaken to undo years of fear, anger, and misperceptions between different communities. In the Myanmar context the term “reconciliation” has come to mean everything and nothing as it has been used in many official contexts without explicit clarity around what it means or how it will be achieved. Nonetheless, there remains an immense need to support initiatives and programs that will promote deeper linkages and understanding between communities as part of the work that must take place to dismantle stereotypes about the “other”. Those within the Bamar community, including the rank and file within the Tatmadaw, must be provided with opportunities to understand the grievances of ethnic communities and let go of out-dated assumptions that ethnic communities seek secession and dissolution of the Union. Likewise, members of ethnic communities need be offered opportunities to experience new relationships with members of Bamar communities as neighbours and partners in building a new Myanmar.

There is also a dire need in Myanmar to support community development efforts to address a culture of militarization and authoritarianism that has emerged out of decades of conflict and military rule. These include measures to build and strengthen the judicial system as a guardian of accountability. At the community level and in terms of change in everyday lives,



this could be seen in terms of support for education reform – not just in improving access to schools and teachers, but also in ensuring that classrooms foster inclusion, tolerance, and critical thinking without the threat of corporal punishment. Support for measures to prevent domestic violence is equally important to making change in everyday lives. The payoff would be ultimately to transform a culture of fear into a culture of dialogue.

These are only a few examples of areas that will need outside support over an extended period of time. Such a multifaceted approach is essential to build a durable peace that goes beyond the absence of fighting.

***Support Democratic Institutions and a Stable Transition–***  
*Actors based inside and outside the country must engage in long-term efforts to build a broad array of democratic institutions. Strengthening these foundations while also prioritizing a stable transition process represents a pragmatic approach that addresses Tatmadaw concerns and assumptions about instability in a transition setting, and scepticism regarding civilian politics, providing a strategy to dispel the justification for maintenance of military autonomy.*

- *Myanmar actors must build and strengthen a wide variety of democratic institutions including, but not limited to, the judiciary, the civil service, the development of political parties and the media.*
- *Actors from outside Myanmar, particularly donors, must support and fund these efforts over the long-term.*
- *All actors must proceed with pragmatic caution in order to avoid crisis situations that could be used to justify military intervention.*

As we have seen, the Tatmadaw's deeply rooted scepticism regarding civilian politics has had a major impact on the military-led roadmap process. It has also shaped the Tatmadaw's core

interest in maintaining autonomy over military affairs ensuring that the armed forces can intervene as it deems necessary.

But, in a democratic context, what are the ingredients that come together to form stable governments? What ensures that civilian-led governments are able to maintain stability and *discipline-flourishing* democracy?

Here, we are reminded, not for the first time, that elections and the ability of citizens to vote their leaders in and out of office are only one small aspect of democratic governance. Indeed, robust, stable democratic governance requires the development of an array of institutions beyond periodic elections. This includes a strong judicial system, functioning government civil service with the ability to implement policy in accordance with the law, political parties able to develop and advocate for policy options, accountability mechanisms, and the existence of a free and responsible media. Significant time and resources are required to build these institutions. As such, a priority for actors inside Myanmar during the coming years will be to focus on building and strengthening this array of institutions. Likewise, outsiders will need to identify opportunities to support this difficult and long-term work.

Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that insiders and outsiders alike will need to approach the coming period with pragmatic caution. As we have seen, Myanmar's military regards civilian democracy with a high level of scepticism and, in maintaining autonomy over military affairs it retains multiple avenues to intervene directly in politics in addition to, or in place of a civilian administration. Strengthening the array of institutions that underpin democratic politics serves as the best antidote to military intervention. By contrast, instability and flashpoints of conflict are exactly what the armed forces anticipate and will provide the justification for maintaining the status quo.

Indeed, democratization in Myanmar will entail steering away from potential crisis, while building and supporting the institutions and mechanisms that ultimately will underpin flourishing democracy regardless of its level of discipline.

The implications are significant. For actors inside Myanmar, including State Counsellor Suu Kyi, there will be a need to prioritize trust building with the military and to avoid direct conflict. As David Steinberg has written

*There has been a mutual lack of trust among and between all sectors in Myanmar – between military and civilians, between Suu Kyi and the military leadership, and among the mixture of majority and minority ethnic groups. To ensure that reforms continue and that the civilian administration plays a critical role in the future, trust must be built among all these groups, and more immediately between Suu Kyi and the military leaders.*<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, State Counsellor Suu Kyi must use the mandate bestowed upon her by the electorate to build the institutions that will form the foundation for Myanmar's long-term transition towards democracy. Her tremendous electoral win has provided her with deep wells of political capital. She needs to take a pragmatic approach and direct these resources towards long-term goals.

For their part, outsiders must find ways to support Myanmar actors, including State Counsellor Suu Kyi, to strengthen democratic institutions. The task for outsiders is not to push Aung San Suu Kyi and her party to challenge the Tatmadaw or its autonomous role. This is a battle that, in the current moment, will not be won – it would require the new leader to expend tremendous reserves in political capital with little or nothing to show. Rather, the task will be for Myanmar actors to

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<sup>45</sup> 'The Lady' tests the limits, by David I Steinberg, Nikkei Asian Review, 12 April 2016.

identify areas of need, and for outsiders – donors, INGOs, the UN – to respond by providing funding and technical assistance in a timely manner.

***Economic Development, Shutting Doors While Opening Windows*** – Actors based inside and outside the country must address the factors that currently drive the war economy, while supporting new avenues to economic prosperity and security, beyond military service and ensuring that these are available to all. Adopting a dual approach will shift Tatmadaw focus on this core interest area by both curbing the access of actors within the military or those with close associations to it, to benefit from illegal economic activity, while opening avenues for other sectors of society to access opportunities for economic advancement.

*Shutting the door:*

- *Donors and neighbouring countries must explore and support a broad range of policy options that address the root causes fuelling the war economy. These should focus on curbing the production of narcotics and bringing added transparency and state control over extractive industries.*

*Opening the window:*

- *Actors inside and outside Myanmar must prioritize economic development opportunities as part of Myanmar's current transition. This is an approach that should be led by the current administration with robust support by donors. Initiatives must include increasing civil service compensation so that it is seen as an attractive career path. Beyond civil service, a variety of sectors must be developed so that Myanmar's armed forces are no longer seen as the sole path to prosperity and economic security.*

Careful consideration must be devoted to the ways in which access to and control over economic assets shapes the behaviour of the Myanmar armed forces in the current transition process.

As we have seen above, economic incentives influence actions and strategies of Tatmadaw units deployed in the field – illegal income generation opportunities associated with extractive industries or narcotics create a situation where the war economy provides greater benefits than the peace dividends associated with cessation of hostilities.

Indeed, the war economy in northern Shan state and Kachin state provides a wide array of military actors, including Tatmadaw-backed militias, EAGs, and some of the most elite families of former military leaders access to significant income opportunities. Furthermore, on-going fighting not only provides the cover for illegal economic activities to flourish, but it offers an added benefit to the Tatmadaw by perpetuating the underlying instability that has justified the Tatmadaw's role in politics for decades.

A variety of sources exist that provide valuable analysis and recommendations on strategies to better control and regulate extractive industries in Myanmar. In terms of controlling production of narcotics, organizations such as TNI provide detailed recommendations regarding the need to move away from a focus on punishing poor farmers and drug users while prioritizing alternative livelihoods programs and development approaches coupled with improved services for drug users.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, organizations such as Global Witness provide concrete recommendations on measures to strengthen the regulatory regime surrounding the jade industry. Frameworks such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which Myanmar signed on to in 2014, offer the opportunity for added transparency and accountability. Putting measures in place

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<sup>46</sup> For example

1. *Bouncing Back, relapse in the Golden Triangle*, by Tom Kramer, Ernestien Jensema, Martin Jelsma, and Tom Blickman, Amsterdam: Transnational Institute (TNI), June 2014.

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2. *The Current State of Counter narcotic Policy and Drug Reform Debates in Myanmar*, by Tom Kramer, Washington: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 1 May 2015.

requires monetary support. As such, funding to such initiatives represents a priority area for donors and international agencies.

At the same time, actors from outside Myanmar, particularly neighbouring countries, need to address root causes that fuel the war economy on their borders. Again, a number of advocacy organizations and think tanks offer recommendations and insights in this area. For instance, TNI has thoroughly documented how China's opium substitution program, focused on shifting to large-scale monoculture supported by Chinese companies, has led to further impoverishment of small farmers, leaving them vulnerable to the demands of militias and pushing them to grow poppy in more remote mountain areas. By contrast, Thailand has supported alternative development programs for farmers across the border in Shan State. For neighbouring countries, pursuing the right strategies offers an avenue to reign in one of the most significant drivers of on-going conflict and instability on their borders while also meeting the needs and vulnerabilities of their own communities.

Beyond shutting the door on factors that fuel the war economy, broader economic development in Myanmar must open new windows in terms of opportunities for social and economic mobility. The process of moving from isolation to increased engagement with the outside world has begun, greatly accelerated with the economic reforms passed under President Thein Sein. New avenues to success, including the burgeoning tourism industry, careers within academia, or with international organizations and NGOs, have begun to open for the first time. Investments in rural development, particularly government support to modernize agricultural techniques and increase farm production, as well as increasing the country's capacity to engage in the processing and manufacturing of finished products for export could provide additional prospects for economic advancement.

One area of focus will need to be civil service compensation. Civil servants play an essential role, yet in Myanmar, as in so many countries, they are poorly compensated. The result is that the civil service becomes a sector that is essential and in need of highly qualified individuals, yet it remains unattractive as a career path. This reality must change.

Economic growth offers the prospect that the Tatmadaw and its connection to the war economy will no longer be seen as the only available avenue to power, wealth and security. Indeed, sustainable economic development offers the prospect of a much wider variety of paths to success, as well as greater variation in the types of successful, secure and fulfilling futures available.

We have looked at the institutionalized safeguards that continue to protect the key interests of the Myanmar armed forces. This protection has, in turn, provided the security needed by the Tatmadaw for the transition to proceed. For some, it may be tempting to adopt strategies that target these safeguards – some will advocate for constitutional change that reduces or eliminates military representation in the parliament, or that brings the armed forces and key ministries under direct control of the President so that the Tatmadaw itself will transform into a military force focused on outside threats and firmly under the command of democratically elected leaders. The preceding analysis reveals the dangers in adopting such a strategy at this time – the costs of a head-on confrontation would be high with little to show in terms of an end result.

Instead, this analysis urges a pragmatic approach that begins at a different departure point: rather than advocating to dismantle constitutional provisions that shield the armed forces and preserve their core interests, this analysis focuses on strategies aimed at changing the institution's core interests. Remoulding these interests opens the opportunity for the Myanmar armed

forces to reconsider its public role and engagement in Myanmar's transition. Ultimately, the current formulation of the Tatmadaw as the triumphant elite must transform into a public institution whose members are the ones who, above all others, want, pray, and work for peace.







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