

Burma's Tatmadaw: A force to be reckoned with

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

Despite its dominance of Burma's national affairs for decades, the Tatmadaw remains in many respects [a closed book](#). Even the most basic data is beyond the reach of analysts and other observers. For example, the Tatmadaw's current size is a mystery, although most estimates range between 300,000 and 350,000. Official statistics put Burma's defence expenditure this year at 3.7 % of GDP, but the actual level [is unknown](#).

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

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

Under a 2009 agreement with Russia, the air force is acquiring 50 Mi-35 Hind E attack helicopters. In 2010, Burma reportedly bought 50 more Chinese K-8 Karakorum jet trainers. The following year a contract was signed for an additional 20 MiG-29 Fulcrum fighters, and in 2014 an unspecified number of CAC/PAC JF-17 Thunder multi-role combat aircraft [was ordered](#). It has also received [new transport aircraft](#) and air-to-air missiles.

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

At the same time, Burma's naval diplomacy has increased and Naypyidaw has signed defence agreements with several foreign countries. Some arrangements, like those with China, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, seem to relate mainly to local defence production, but others are more broadly based, such as [that with India](#). Burma claims it has severed military ties with North Korea, but some, including the US, dispute this (as discussed in '[Burma and North Korea again? Still?](#)').

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

missiles are harder to dismiss, but reliable data is scarce.

Together, all these developments invite a number of observations.

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

Secondly, the military leadership still sees a need to guard against both internal and external threats. Before the recent ceasefires, the Tatmadaw [faced over 72,000 armed insurgents](#). Also, the security environment has changed. A US invasion is no longer considered likely but Burma's neighbours are improving their own armed forces and the Bay of Bengal is [fast becoming](#) an arena for economic and strategic competition.

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

Fourthly, the proportion of Burma's budget allocated to defence is likely to remain high, not only to pay for these new weapon systems but also to keep them operational. Of the US\$1.15 billion [allocated to defence](#) in 2013, for example, more than US\$600 million was earmarked for the procurement of military hardware. About \$200 million was reserved for aircraft, \$93 million for ships, and \$30 million for military vehicles.

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

If this is so, it remains to be seen whether such an arrangement can survive a new administration. Should the opposition win a majority of seats in the national parliament next month, as many predict, then the Tatmadaw's relationship with the central government will change. The National League for Democracy has [long been critical](#) of the fact that the defence sector receives more in the annual budget than education and health combined.

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