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Myanmar's Armed Forces: The Case for Engagement

Bernt Berger

Over three years since the inauguration of the civilian government, the Tatmadaw finds itself increasingly isolated politically and under scrutiny like never before from Myanmar's burgeoning mass media and civil society. Ill-prepared, it faces key challenges in adapting to evolving democratic needs. Failure to build trust and confidence in civil-military relations will only serve to hinder the democratization and peace processes underway. A concerted engagement strategy involving all politically relevant actors is therefore needed as well as measures to assist in the reform of Myanmar's armed forces.

Over the past three years, the role of the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF), commonly referred to as the Tatmadaw, has significantly changed. It has been engaged in an unprecedented experiment of simultaneously transforming the political system as well as largely left the newly established *de jure* civilian government to handle the internal peace process. For now, in the context of Myanmar's ongoing political transformation, the issue is not so much the military wanting to prolong its grip on power or its inclination for stability at any price. Rather, the role of the Tatmadaw and the environment in which it is operating has changed, so confronting it with a whole new set of challenges and constraints.

While the Tatmadaw's original intention was to tightly control the transformation through incremental changes, the generals are now themselves reacting to a new situation, thereby entering into uncharted territory, and which in many cases they have struggled to adapt to. A lack of trust and communication is, furthermore, serving to undermine the MAF's credibility and isolate it. Notwithstanding, a successful continuation of Myanmar's multiple transformations and peace process is only possible by involving the military. Little progress can be made during the transformation without the MAF's consent on decisions and its confidence that the civilian government can lastingly guarantee the stability of the country. This is a fact that neither the civilian government, nor ethnic leaders, nor the international community can ignore.

An engagement process that eventually involves all politically relevant actors inside the country will help to overcome the key obstacles of a lack of confidence among actors and so help to bring political dialogue forward. The role of international actors should be to

Bernt Berger is head of the Asia Program at ISDP.

complement this engagement with dialogue-exchanges, capacity building, and even assisting the MAF in tackling the challenges of its own reform.

The Tatmadaw's Changing Role

During its time in leadership, the Tatmadaw developed a self-conception about its competences, its pervasive influence in all sectors, while individual military elites took their privileges for granted. With the handover of governmental responsibilities to the civilian government under President Thein Sein, the military has given up part of its influence on the general direction of Myanmar's development; similar to the Indonesian *dwifungsi* transition model, the military has retained 25 percent of the legislative seats in the Assembly of the Union.

Notably, the Tatmadaw has shifted its focus from administrative toward security affairs having secured itself exclusive executive powers, particularly through its control of the National Defense and Security Council. Importantly, however, it has had to accept the emergence of informal political undercurrents during Myanmar's gradual democratization process and evolving civil society. Greater checks and balances and public scrutiny have imposed certain limitations to its own operational decision-making powers, including its dealings with ongoing armed conflicts inside the country. This arrangement has led to a range of contradictions in the current division of responsibilities with the civilian government. During peace negotiations particularly, the civilian government has had to make forays and concessions in accommodating peace process negotiations, which, in some cases, have gone beyond what the military would have prioritized as in national interest or viewed as tactical advantages. A case in point was President Thein Sein's issuance of a ceasefire order in Kachin in January 2013. The order brought to a halt 20 months of armed confrontation with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Furthermore, government decisions have on some occasions collided with the vested business interests of established military elites.

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Myanmar's central government is presently engaged in peace talks with around 16 armed groups; since 1989 over 30 ceasefire agreements (or military truces) have been under negotiation with the government having been able to sign a number of ceasefire agreements with armed groups. The military has participated in talks organized by the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC)—a government-appointed center to coordinate the peace process. However, charges of a lack of constructive conduct and input by military participants has led to mixed results. Ethnic groups for their part have repeatedly rejected any process that would involve their integration under existing laws and democratic reforms in line with the 2008 constitution. Furthermore, the National Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), an association of 17 Ethnic Armed Organizations, has repeatedly demanded substantial political dialogue about future power sharing to precede any new nationwide ceasefire pact.

Despite the slow progress, the military has at least publically acknowledged the positive impact of the peace process on internal conflicts and finally an-

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For editorial correspondence please contact Alec Forss at: aforss@isdp.eu

nounced its support. Its participation, for instance, in the newly formed committee between the NCCT and the Union Peacemaking Work Committee (UPWC) has been welcomed.

Notwithstanding, its role has remained largely ambiguous. Lacking coordination with the government as well as its involvement in ongoing armed skirmishes with ethnic groups has on occasions left the military leadership politically isolated. A lack of trust and public perception has led to the military's "pariah" status being perpetuated. As a result, civil society, a number of government institutions, and part of the international community have continued to avoid contacts or any forms of engagement with it. Furthermore, its exemption from civilian control and its outdated post-1988 doctrine on defending domestic stability have further raised question marks. Any critical event deemed to undermine national stability, so the widespread argument goes, might serve as a justification for its alleged return to power.

Yet, the real challenge is a different one. A myopic vision among military elites—a vision divorced from evolving political realities in Myanmar's democratization—has led to new challenges that were not envisaged in the military's original roadmap.

The Military's Key Challenges

Today, the MAF are confronted with four key interrelated challenges outlined below that all demand close attention. Issues arising from the MAF's military-strategic demeanor, its poor ability or willingness to communicate, and a lack of trust are mutually reinforcing. As a result, the issue of confidence has become the underlying theme in civil-military relations.

Military-strategic demeanor at odds with evolving democratic needs

The Tatmadaw is still engaged in active armed conflicts with ethnic armies or their militias. At the same time its actions are subject to greater transparency in the local and international media. As a result the military is under increasing public scrutiny. The MAF has repeatedly failed to publicly explain the purpose or cause of armed conflict situations. Leaving the prerogative of interpretation to others has additionally harmed its public image and increased its political isolation. Because of the ignorance of new necessities in an increasingly open society, the military has become susceptible to suspicion as to its motives.

Under the 2008 constitution it was stipulated that all armed ethnic groups that entered a ceasefire agreement integrate in border guard force schemes that would be under the partial control of the MAF. But solving problems through legalistic means, such as (constitutional) laws and predefined agreements, while ignoring the political needs of the groups paired with ongoing clashes in Kachin and Shan States, has created a sense of mistrust in the military among armed groups. This has had an impact on currently ongoing negotiations.

After ongoing clashes, particularly agreements with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)/ Kachin Independence Army (KIA) can only be renegotiated with difficulty. The military suffered symbolic setbacks in remaining hotspots in Kachin State and to some extent Shan State in 2013. The events exposed a range of challenges to the military's standing. For example, the Tatmadaw's lethal attack in 2012/2013 in Kachin State still raises question marks as to what the purpose of the operation might have been. Since heavy artillery was used including air support against strategically important KIA positions near the border town of Laiza, the operation overstepped the existing presidential guideline of self-defense.

As in any conflict, the fault lay neither exclusively with the military nor were tactical considerations the only trigger for the confrontations. At the time the ceasefire negotiations had come to a halt and the KIA itself had repeatedly attacked the armed forces. Indeed, the delicate composition of actors and interests among many groups in the Northern States, including illicit trafficking of drugs, arms or gemstones, often make it difficult to analyze the reasons for clashes.

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Regardless, if the Tatmadaw wants to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the transformation of the country's political system and resolving conflicts, it will have to give up old patterns of conduct and stop taking accustomed privileges for granted. It must respect evolving democratic needs which involves adapt-

ing to certain constraints and adopting new attitudes. Any such changes in the attitude of military leaders will only happen upon closer interaction in civil-military relations, which are in turn crucial for the overall democratic process.

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Lack of communication and public relations skills and strategy

So far, the MAF has neither been used to nor has it felt the need to communicate nor justify its actions to the public; least of all to groups it had previously condemned or foreign actors that it forbade from interfering in Myanmar's internal affairs. Lacking capacity and a communications strategy means that it is disadvantaged in a media environment characterized by greater transparency. Civilian actors as well ethnic armed groups have gained greater skills in using the democratic means of civil society to raise awareness. Its conduct has therefore been under intense and often negative scrutiny. Additionally, the military is confronted with a disadvantage when dealing with public perceptions. Ironically, the increasing number of democratic rules and restrictions neither binds the armed groups in particular themselves nor are they subject to the same checks and balances. This trend has in turn added to its overall image problem.

As it starts tackling its own institutional reform, the Tatmadaw encounters a range of hold ups. The fact that the military has been cut off from international communication channels, networks, and contacts is additionally exacerbating the situation. Inside its own structures, even, lacking cohesiveness among factions of hardliners and reformers has also led to miscommunication. Uncoordinated public statements have done more harm to the MAF's image and put into question its role in the peace process.

Thus, a communications strategy would not only help to explain its decisions, but an information strategy informing about the changes underway in the military's modernization, including moves toward sector reforms and in its strategic outlook, would also help to build trust. According to sources, a new military doctrine is already in the making.

Lack of confidence in the military makes coordination between government agencies difficult

The military is confronted with a high level of suspicion about its intentions and actions—not only among ethnic armed groups. Although no future solutions for the peace process can be found without involving the military, some civilian government agencies are running into a dilemma when they are perceived as being associated with the military. Institutions such as the Myanmar Peace Center (MPC) need to appear as neutral as possible under given circumstances. Although MAF representatives have in fact, according to some sources, constructively participated in peace negotiations, trust remains a problem. As long as trust issues prevail, the danger lies in the peace process becoming stuck in a vicious circle.

Ongoing violations of norms still have an impact on trust

On the whole, long-standing violations still bear on the domestic and international image of the Tatmadaw. At the top of the list of issues are items such as child soldiers, forced labor, past and present human rights violations, corruption, and land grabbing. The latter has been a sensitive issue since it feeds into existing conflicts. Particularly international investment in mining involving lucrative contracts associated with former and current military leaders has fueled discontent among ethnic nationalities. Sites such as in the states of Kachin (Myitsone dam) and Karen (Letpadaung copper mine) involving investment from Chinese companies have triggered charges over inadequate compensation, negative environmental implications, and a lack of resource revenue sharing.

Why Engage the Military?

The military's key challenges involving a lack of confidence in it, difficulties in coming to grips with the dictates of the democratic process, and increasing political isolation are sufficient to make the case for the necessity of a concerted engagement policy in Myanmar. Why? The Tatmadaw originally set the legal pa-

rameters and procedures for both parliamentary democratization and national peace building. In order to keep its leadership on board, the military needs to be part and parcel of ongoing adaptations to the needs of the process and make compromises. Without such involvement any outcomes would not be comprehensive and uncertainties about each side's intentions will prevail. Besides, the eventual reconfiguration of society-military relations also involves the MAF's formal and practical integration under democratic civilian rule.

Yet, it is not on the part of the military alone to take the initiative. By the same token, civil society actors both inside and outside Myanmar as well as ethnic groups need to engage in trust building with the MAF and, thereby, make progress possible. A number of civil society groups have refused to participate in the democratic process on account of the insincerity of military leaders, thus alluding to a "double game" on the part of the latter. Similarly ethno-national armies have officially remained cautious about the military's intentions, stemming from ongoing clashes and rigidly set conditions for armistice agreements. At the same time, however, the NCCT has acknowledged the need for the MAF's participation in peace talks and political dialogue.

Engagement serves a great number of purposes—most importantly the resolution of the country's armed conflicts. In order to bring the peace process beyond the national armistice agreement, on the side of the military any political dialogue and attempts at conflict transformation need to be supported by greater capacities and know how in communication, conflict management, and lessons learned in conflict transformation elsewhere. The same holds true for armed and civilian ethnic representatives. The need for greater capacities for negotiation and public policy need to go hand in hand with an increased willingness among the ethnic elites to go beyond their own interests in maintaining the status quo of conflict. Only then is it possible to reach agreements on common parameters for conflict transformation.

Who Needs to Engage Whom and How?

Thus, the need for engagement primarily exists for domestic purposes. Civilian, ethnic, and military actors need to engage in trust building, develop common ideas on how conflicts can be transformed, and attain the skills in order to do so. Although foreign actors have not directly been involved in the peace process, the domestic trust-building process cannot proceed without external assistance in the form of exposure to other practical examples of civil-military relations elsewhere, international norms, training, and the facilitation of dialogue.

External contributions become vital critical if and when Myanmar's transformation process stalls. This, at the latest, might be the case when all armed actors including the military will have to fully integrate under civilian rule. A full reform of the security sector can only be based on full awareness of the necessities and trust on side of all actors including political parties, ethnic armed groups, civil society, the legal system, and the military.

A lack of trust has so far led to a catch-22 situation, wherein the military's involvement in the peace process might cause problems with reservations and trust issues remaining prevalent. The military still sticks to old formulas when it comes to dealing with ethnic groups or political representatives. For instance, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has recently reinforced the argument that a national ceasefire needs to precede any political dialogue with ethnic armed groups. At the same time, the non-involvement of the military might lead to problems in the follow up of any agreements between conflicting parties and result in an increasing lack of coordination between civilian institutions and the military. In sum, domestic trust building is a two-way street and greater engagement with the military is needed.

The issue of trust also holds true for engagement on the side of international actors. Despite the commonly held view that the military is desperately seeking international recognition after years of international isolation, any international relationships with the military demand for confidence building first. The starting question for any international engagement is what purpose and format it should have. The most workable format so far is civilian engagement of the military with the participation of foreign military staff. Exchanges and training (where demanded) lay the bases for relationships. Particularly building non-strategic capacities and civil-military relations according to international standards, introducing norms for international operations, as well as a gradual strengthening of mil-to-mil relations, can help to build up trust on

all sides, and, in so doing, benefit Myanmar's internal situation.

In order to build trust, engagement based on soft issues that suit Myanmar's needs serves as a starting point. Although the ultimate goal is to facilitate the MAF's transition into a defense force, fostering know-how about much needed international capabilities, such as participation in international peacekeeping/building operations, but also lessons learned in Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Southeast Asia, democratization of the armed forces and their civilian deployment such as in disaster relief or management operations, would be highly beneficial.

Toward Security Sector Reform

In Myanmar, as anywhere else, SSR is a cross-sector exercise involving all kinds of social actors, the legal system, and civilian security organizations. Myanmar's particular situation of simultaneous democratic and conflict transformation makes SSR a crucial component for success. At the same time, Myanmar's dilemma is that confidence building goes both ways. On the one hand, SSR is an indivisible part of trust building in order to ensure the credibility of the democratic transformation and to convince conflict groups of the Tatmadaw's intentions. On the other hand, the military will not engage in any moves towards greater civilian control without progress in resolving the country's armed conflicts.

So far the transformation of the military sector under the MAF has not been high on its priority list. It was common sense among officials that any moves in that direction needed to be preceded by the military's confidence in the civilian government's ability to resolve the country's internal security issues. So far the military has made sure that the civilian government could for the most part not encroach on its powers and thereby threaten its core interests.

Nevertheless, the gradual integration of the security sector as a whole is critical for resolving most of the abovementioned issues concerning its image and trust. Even tactically, deeper integration under civilian control might lead to a point whereby armed groups will find it difficult to justify resistance on their side, increasing the pressure for them to relinquish their own kinds of status quo. This would involve all kinds of issues—first and foremost refraining from violent action and giving up illicit financing practices.

Overall, there is no blueprint for Security Sector Reform in Myanmar. So far there have been too many actors involved and too little trust on all sides. Thus, any SSR in the armed sector needs to undergo a process of negotiation and persuasion about mutual steps and sequencing. Even if the civilian government managed to take over full control of the armed forces and ethnic armed groups were ready to integrate in the security sector, some kind of power sharing in government would need to precede such steps. Thus a civilian solution in regard to bringing the security sector under common control will inevitably be part of any deal.

In any case, any moves forward need time. For now, the Tatmadaw's modernization, professionalization, and stricter division of labor among security service branches might improve operational behavior and prove beneficial in the SSR process as a whole. The soft issues involved in modernization provide scope for engagement. So far, the Myanmar Police Force has been exempted from the military's structures in order to fulfill a civilian role. This has left it without the requisite skills and capacity to fulfill its tasks. On a positive note, international engagement has already focused on capacity building and the development of policing methods such as community policing and crowd management.

Another key factor in SSR concerns financing. Illicit forms of financing, and close ties with extractive industries and the construction sector in particular, have fueled conflicts. The government according to optimistic estimates currently accounts for two-thirds of the military's budget. Remaining sources of income include levying direct taxes at the regional level or mining, which have served to exacerbate social tensions. Heads of military units often still have a dual role and act as provincial leaders, resulting in the military de facto acting as a private enterprise in many areas with little constraint on its actions. Thus, any changes to the military unit's economic independence need to be based on the state taking control of tax revenues and providing sufficient funds to substitute for illicit financing.

Pitfalls of Engagement: the International Dimension

Engaging in military–to-military relations with the Tatmadaw has been a matter of international consideration in recent years. Establishing more regularized inter-military relations, such as sending military attaches, can help to formalize contacts, maximize exposure and observation, and can be regarded as a mid-term goal. Thus, mil-to-mil engagement is undeniably beneficial in the transformation of the MAF.

However, engagement with the MAF also has a flip side, which may potentially do more harm than good: that is, geopolitical competition in the context of South Asia's unbalanced strategic situation. Indeed, Myanmar's geographic position and the race for influence are undeniably incentives for engagement. The country is strategically located between China and India, has a long coastline abutting the Indian Ocean, and might play an increasingly important role in regional stability. Accordingly, foreign governments, which previously treated the Tatmadaw as a pariah, have begun to resume informal and formal military relations.

Military ties exist within the ASEAN framework, and Myanmar for the first time hosted the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting on May 19-21, 2014, in Nay Pyi Daw. The U.S. has, furthermore, allowed the Tatmadaw to observe multinational military exercises in Thailand. Both the U.S. and UK have meanwhile organized seminars on military modernization and reform. Additionally, Australia has also exchanged military attachés.

The military's search for international partners and providers of equipment has already raised geopolitically motivated concerns. On his visits abroad, the Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, has established potential strategic ties with Russia and China. India and Japan have followed suit in order to counterbalance China's influence.

Any moves by foreign actors, however, that prioritize geopolitical influence above the internal development of Myanmar can prove harmful to the political transformation of the country. Having to choose or balance sides for economic and strategic reasons would not only exhaust financial and human resources that are needed in the country's transformation but also bear on the country's stability. External pressure and armed ethnic groups exploiting the situation might, after all, compel military leaders to return to their original position: fending off what they have perceived as overbearing foreign influence.

Conclusion

A legacy of decades of sanctions combined with deep-seated mistrust on the side of civil society and international observers regarding the military's role means that prevailing attitudes and lack of trust constitute a major obstacle for both democratization and conflict transformation. Instead a comprehensive approach for engagement needs to be implemented that helps to promote Myanmar's multiple transformations.

Key Points:

- As Myanmar's transformation of its political system and armed conflicts progresses, the military is facing an increasing number of challenges in an evolving democratic context, among which include a poor ability or willingness to communicate, an ongoing violation of norms, and a persisent lack of confidence in its credibility and role.
- Engagement is first and foremost a domestic issue between the military, the civilian government, and civil society. Foreign involvement should be limited to assisting domestic processes. International military engagement for strategic purposes might prove harmful for Myanmar's political transformation. Geostrategic competition in particular will force the country to balance its foreign relations and exhaust resources that are needed internally.
- Particularly international NGOs are useful in facilitating dialogue, capacity building, and eventually assisting in the transformation of the MAF.