Burma’s Armed Forces Under Civilian Rule: A Return to the Past?

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Burma's Armed Forced Under Civilian Rule: A Return to the Past?

Andrew Selth

It is important that in the building up of the Defence Forces of Burma, Burmese opinion should be fully consulted in order that these Forces may be established and expanded on lines acceptable to the Burmese people.

Aung San
Memorandum on the Proposed Reorganisation of Burma Patriotic Forces (1945)

Introduction

Ever since the creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988, the Burmese armed forces (or Tatmadaw) have been engaged in an ambitious expansion and modernisation program. Despite the country's chronic economic and social problems, reduced internal security concerns and lack of external threats, this program is continuing under the SLORC's successor, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which was created in November 1997.

The program is unprecedented in its size and scope, and includes a wide range of measures to improve almost all aspects of Burma's military capabilities. If it continues on its present course without change, then within the next few years Burma will have one of the largest and best equipped armed forces in Southeast Asia, with a greatly improved capacity to conduct both conventional and unconventional military operations. The Tatmadaw will thus be in an even stronger position to control the country's political development, command its economy and exercise influence over all other aspects of Burmese society. Its increased military strength and higher international profile, particularly through its close relationship with China, would also give Burma considerable potential to influence the region's wider strategic environment.

The final outcome of Burma's military expansion and upgrading program will depend on a number of factors, not the least of which is the future of military rule in Burma. Should a democratically elected civilian government come to power, as might have occurred after the National League for Democracy's (NLD) landslide election victory in May 1990, then the Burmese armed forces could become a completely different kind of national institution. Given Burma's important geostrategic position and enduring security concerns, the NLD's vision for the Tatmadaw is bound to have a number of characteristics in common with that favoured by the current regime.¹ Yet, given the profound differences between the two sides...
in their approach to governing and defending Burma, there is also likely to be a considerable divergence of views. The future of the Burmese armed forces will be critically dependent, therefore, on the outcome of the power struggle currently being conducted between the country's military leadership and the pro-democracy forces symbolised by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Because it deals mainly with the future, any examination of this subject must necessarily be speculative. No-one can confidently predict what Burma might look like in five years time, let alone by the end of the next decade. The problems that will need to be resolved before a democratic government of some kind can come to power, and after it does so, are enormously difficult and complex. Political, economic, social, strategic and other factors are all inextricably intertwined, and cannot easily be separated - either by the Rangoon government for policy implementation, or by foreign researchers for academic analysis. In addition, the security environment, both within Burma and in the wider region, is not static, and the way in which the Burmese armed forces might evolve is subject to many diverse influences. These range from changes in China's external policies, to the attitudes of the ethnic minorities, to the fortunes of individual army officers in Rangoon. As for the ideal size and shape of the Tatmadaw, that too is subject to considerable debate. Different observers of the Burmese scene, including those with specialised military qualifications, reach different conclusions. Added to all these problems is the fact that very little has been written about this subject before now.

There are several reasons for the dearth of material, at least in the English language. Despite some recent indications that the Burmese government might consider the production of a White Paper, the SLORC and SPDC have published almost nothing on their formal Defence policy. Over the past 11 years there have been countless speeches and statements about the perceived role of the Tatmadaw and its strategic goals, but these tend to be highly politicised pronouncements designed in large part to justify continuing military rule. The armed forces now see themselves as embodying the state, and what is good for them is considered ipso facto to be good for Burma. Also, citing 'national security', the Rangoon regime has consistently refused to reveal any detailed or accurate information about the Tatmadaw's threat perceptions, organisation, force structure, order of battle or combat capabilities. Burma's real annual defence expenditure and arms acquisitions since 1988 have also been considered too sensitive for disclosure. Occasional public references to the future development of the armed forces have tended to be broad statements of principle rather than serious attempts to describe policies or programs.

Until late 1999, Burma's main opposition parties had said and published little about the country's defence, including their vision for the future of the armed forces. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, in Burma the idea of detailed and formally endorsed policy platforms has traditionally carried much less weight than in Western democratic countries. Secondly, since its formation in 1989, the NLD has been engaged in a desperate struggle to survive in the face of persistent efforts by the military regime to destroy it. It has been difficult even to arrange party meetings to discuss specific policies. Thirdly, the NLD has focussed its attention on issues which have more immediate relevance to, and impact upon, its constituents, in particular those matters relating to democratic freedoms and human rights. Fourthly, the extreme sensitivity of defence issues in...
Burma, and the harsh reaction of the regime to any perceived challenges to the current role of the armed forces, has made it difficult for anyone in Burma to formulate or articulate their views on this subject without incurring the wrath of the authorities. The regime has long claimed the right to exercise a monopoly over all aspects of Burma's national security debate.

Indeed, the development and publication of a detailed policy on defence matters by the NLD could have simply provided the regime with an easy target for attack, and another excuse for punitive action against Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters. One reason for this is the extreme sensitivity of the current military hierarchy to any suggestion that the Tatmadaw has abandoned the ideals and vision of its founder (and Aung San Suu Kyi's father), independence hero Aung San, who is still revered on all sides of Burmese politics. For example, Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest in 1989 (and subsequent incarceration without trial for six years) seems to have been triggered not just by her direct appeals for support from more moderate elements of the armed forces, but also by her public criticisms of Ne Win's leadership of the Tatmadaw since her father's assassination in 1947. The regime was particularly incensed by the suggestion that the modern Tatmadaw was the Tatmadaw of Ne Win, not Aung San. Speaking with the authority of her father, Aung San Suu Kyi had directly attacked one of the most important myths nurtured by the regime since Ne Win's coup d'etat in 1962.

Despite these problems, however, it is possible to reach some broad conclusions about the likely future shape, size and role of the country's armed forces under a civilian democratic government. Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior NLD figures have made numerous public statements relating to, if not specifically about, this subject. More importantly, in late 1999 the party released a formal defence platform, which examined the issue in more detail. A number of other opposition groups have briefly commented on the expected nature of the Tatmadaw under democratic rule. In addition, enough is known about Burma's geostrategic position, its enduring defence requirements and the security challenges it currently faces, to venture an opinion on the kind of armed forces which would be logical, if not necessary, under a democratic government. This framework can then be measured against what might be possible in the circumstances in which a new democratic government in Burma is likely to find itself.

In conducting such an exercise, however, a clear distinction needs to be drawn between the theory and the practice.

The Tatmadaw in a Democracy: The Theory

As General Secretary of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's personal views on Burma's defence and armed forces are informed by her deep commitment to a democratic government and improved human rights in Burma. Her guiding principles, however, clearly derive from Aung San.\(^5\) As might be expected, given this provenance, she has made it clear on numerous occasions since 1988 that she fully accepts the legitimacy of the armed forces as an institution of the state, and personally holds it in high regard. For example, only days after the massacre of unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators in August that year she said:

&ldquo;The army is held in high esteem by our National League for Democracy&rdquo;

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An effective army works and specialises in matters relating to defence of the country and its people.

The present armed forces of Burma were created and nurtured by my father.... Let me speak frankly. I feel strong attachment for the armed forces. Not only were they built up by my father, as a child I was cared for by his soldiers.

Ten years later, her views remained the same;

The army is held in high esteem by our National League for Democracy. Because my father founded the army I have a special attachment and regard for it.

Aung San Suu Kyi envisages an important role for the armed forces in the future, provided that they fully respect the rights of the Burmese people, and are subject to their direction - as exercised through a democratically elected civilian Parliament. In this respect, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party are unequivocal. For example, at the first of her massed rallies in August 1988, she quoted her father;

The armed forces are meant for this nation and this people, and it should be such a force having the honour and respect of the people. If instead the armed forces should come to be hated by the people, then the aims with which this army has been built up would have been in vain.

Again in 1989 she stated;

My father didn’t build up the Burmese Army in order to oppress the people … He made many speeches where he specifically said, don’t start oppressing the people just because you have weapons. You are to serve the country. You are for the country, the country is not for you.

In numerous other speeches by Aung San Suu Kyi the same theme has emerged;

An effective army works and specialises in matters relating to defence of the country and its people. Then only will they earn the love and respect of the people. The National League for Democracy cannot accept interference in political affairs by the army.

The distinction being made between the Tatmadaw of Aung San and the Tatmadaw of Ne Win is not as explicit as it was made in 1989, just before Aung San Suu Kyi’s arrest, but it is still clear.

On numerous occasions over the past 12 years, Aung San Suu Kyi has directly appealed for the sympathy and support of the members of the armed forces. For example, in her speech at the Shwedagon Pagoda on 26 August 1988, she said;

May I also from this platform ask the personnel of the armed forces to reciprocate this kind of understanding and sympathy? May I appeal to the armed forces to become a force in which the people can place their trust and reliance. May the armed forces become one which will uphold the honour and dignity of our
Aung San Suu Kyi has consistently called upon the armed forces to abjure politics. Yet, at the same time, she has asked them to support the opposition’s continuing demands for the military regime to convene the parliament promised before the NLD’s landslide victory. After the 1990 general elections, for example, she said;

When my father founded the army, it was not for the purpose of interfering in politics. Rather, it was for the purpose of supporting the people in their political struggle. I address all the people in the Army and say that because of your love of your country it is your duty and responsibility to provide back up support to fulfil the wishes and desires of the people. This theme has continued to feature in Aung San Suu Kyi’s public speeches. In August 1999, for example, she called upon the armed forces ‘to work hand in hand to achieve democracy, where the people govern the country’. She added;

There is no question that the people’s government will honour the role of the Tatmadaw ... We also want the Tatmadaw to know what we are trying to do for our country. To achieve this understanding we need to have the freedom to communicate and discuss.

In the same statement, Aung San Suu Kyi declared that the armed forces need not fear retribution from a civilian government.

Despite these explicit calls for support, Aung San Suu Kyi has consistently stated that, despite the repeated accusations of the regime, neither she nor the NLD have any desire to split the armed forces or to ‘incite discord and disintegration’, of the kind which crippled Burma after the country regained its independence. As early as August 1988 she stated that;

What I wish to say is that at this time there is a certain amount of dissension between the people and the army. This rift can lead to future dangers. ... I would therefore not wish to see any splits and struggles between the army which my father built up and the people who love my father so much.

Again in 1990 she said;

I know a split army is against the interests of the nation ... We just want what my father wanted; a professional army that understands that a really honourable army doesn’t engage in politics.

Time after time, she has repeated that it was not the NLD’s intention to divide the Tatmadaw, as ‘dissension within the army means trouble for the country’. In 1995, for example, she said that;

The people and the military personnel cannot be separated. We have been accused of working to split the army, to drive a wedge

"I know a split army is against the interests of the nation ... a professional army that understands that a really honourable army doesn't engage in politics."
between them and the people. This is absolutely false. We have no desire for the army to split. That is why we always claim that the people include the army. ... It is necessary that the people love and trust the defence forces. The people and the defence forces must work together to form a modern and effective army.  

Given the implacable opposition of many senior members of the Tatmadaw to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, however, it is not clear how the armed forces can support the cause of democracy in Burma without there being in some way ‘discord and dissension’ in the ranks.

Over the past 12 years statements by other senior members of the NLD also refer back to Aung San, whose broad vision for the armed forces of Burma is still seen as a viable model for the modern Tatmadaw. His statements about the armed forces are also seen as directly relevant to the more immediate problems faced by the democratic movement. For example, on 27 March 1999 NLD Deputy Chairman Tin Oo gave a speech on defence issues in which he quoted extensively from the speeches of Aung San.  

The excerpts chosen by the former Defence Minister and Army Chief highlighted a number of key principles which clearly illustrate the NLD’s current policy position;

This armed forces should be something that the people of this country will revere, adore and depend on. But, if in the hearts of the people there is resentment against this armed forces then the establishment of this armed forces will be futile.

This armed forces has not been established for any one individual. It has been established for the entire country - for all the people. This army has not been established for one group, one party, or one set of people. It has been established for the entire country - for all its citizens.

The armed forces has not been created for the purpose of persecuting the people, nor for the purpose of exercising power with weapons. The army is the servant of the country. The country is never the servant of the army.

The NLD statement emphasised that these precepts should still be followed. Again drawing a clear distinction between the Tatmadaw envisaged by Aung San and that developed by Ne Win and his proteges, the statement concluded;

When such a genuine democratic government is born it will be possible to revive and establish an armed forces envisaged by our martyred leader General Aung San, father of the army and architect of our independence; an armed forces that appreciates his spirit and will abide by his instructions; an armed forces that will be loved and revered as in the days when resistance was launched against the colonial and fascist systems.

In a personal statement to the members of the armed forces, former General Tin Oo joined Aung San Suu Kyi in calling for the armed forces to work towards a democratic government in Burma, as envisaged by Aung
San. After outlining his own long career in the Burma Army, Tin Oo stated that 'Achieving democracy will not hurt the Defence Services personnel, it will benefit them instead'. On the nature of the Tatmadaw under a democratic government, he was not specific, but said that:

It is also not true that the military should be made up of many personnel. We need to strive for quality and excellence, individually and as a group. I want the Defence Services to be modernised and developed; the Defence Services that will safeguard democracy; and the Defence Services which respects the people as their mothers and fathers and is loved by the people in return.

This statement directly challenges the comment made by former SLORC Chairman Senior General Saw Maung, who told the armed forces in 1990 that 'only the Tatmadaw is our mother and father'.

Since 1989, the views of Aung San Suu Kyi, Tin Oo and other senior NLD figures like Kyi Maung have all stemmed from, and contributed to, a number of formal NLD statements which broadly touched on this subject. For example, in the NLD's manifesto, which was produced before the 1990 general elections, the party outlined a number of broad principles on defence, as follows:

11. A. The military is born out of the people, and it must be for the people, loved by the people, free from politics, and one that the people can rely upon.

B. It must be a modern military practising strategies in accordance with the geography and environment of the country.

C. There must be plans for looking after the welfare of the families of those who fell in battle, and also of veterans.

Understandably, given the extraordinary circumstances leading up to the elections, little thought seems to have been given at the time to how these broad statements of principle might later be translated into specific policies, or how they might be used to set guidelines for the future development of the armed forces.

Since its overwhelming victory in the 1990 elections, the NLD has progressively developed and refined its policy position. For example, at the party's celebration of the sixth anniversary of the elections, a 'firm guideline for action' was promulgated, as follows:

The Tatmadaw is an essential and necessary organization for the country. We have decided to endorse the NLD's position which says that the Tatmadaw should be a dignified force that protects and fulfills the democratic practices.

This was followed by a more elaborate policy statement in a document entitled 'Political Goals and Intent of the NLD', which read in part:

As in the practice of democracy the Power of State will lie in the three pillars such as the Judiciary, the Executive and the Legislature. The Tatmadaw and the whole mechanism for defence will fall under the Executive. It will have to abide by the Constitution, and be a Tatmadaw for the people and loved by the people. Only in
specific and necessary times will the military stand as a separate pillar owing to the importance of the task ... The country's defence will be undertaken according to Burma's geopolitics, the military will be equipped with a qualitative and effective strategy, and built to a modern and high standard.\textsuperscript{30}

The statement added that Burma's national defence would depend on the participation of all citizens, for example through people's militias and compulsory military service. This would transform the Tatmadaw into 'a People's Tatmadaw'.\textsuperscript{31} It would be separated from party politics. A law would be passed to provide benefits for the families of those who fell in battle.\textsuperscript{32}

This policy was taken further in 1998. In September that year the Committee Representing the Peoples' Parliament (CRPP) - the NLD's answer to the regime's consistent refusal to call the elected parliament - created 10 smaller committees, each charged with certain policy studies. As part of this effort, the Defence Affairs Committee of the CRPP was asked to prepare a report on 'the establishment of a modern army in a democracy'.\textsuperscript{33} This committee was placed under the leadership of NLD Deputy Chairman Tin Oo. By November 1999 the Defence Committee had produced a Report on the Formation of a Modern Tatmadaw in the Democratic Era.\textsuperscript{34} This document rehearsed earlier statements by the party on defence issues, and set out a number of key policy principles. The first stressed that the speeches, teachings and policies of Aung San were to be taken as a guide for the implementation of the party's defence policy. Other key findings included:

1. The Ministry of Defence should no longer be under military control, but be answerable to a Minister of Defence, who would report to the elected Parliament.

2. The Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces should be considered a political post and have a fixed term of appointment.

3. Military intelligence should be confined to operational issues. Broader defence and national security matters should be the responsibility of a body reporting directly to the head of state.

4. The Tatmadaw should be a modern force, emphasising quality before quantity. Its size should be reconsidered, 'taking into account the country's economic development, its scientific and technological development, its economic status and its human resources'.\textsuperscript{35}

5. Defence personnel should share the wealth and poverty of the people. Defence expenditure should be decided by the People's Parliament according to available resources.

6. There should only be one national Tatmadaw. All other armed groups in Burma, including those with official or semi-official status, should be disbanded.

7. The recruitment and training of military officers and other ranks needs to be reviewed. Greater attention needs to be given to the role of women in the armed forces. The current ideological indoc-
trination of military personnel would be replaced by teachings on
democracy and related issues.

8. The Tatmadaw should be armed with modern and standard equip­
ment and ammunition. Rather than obtain arms from 'any or every
country and with all sorts', advantage should be taken of Burma's
expected close ties with other democracies, when seeking new
equipment. Local factories should also provide arms and ammuni­
tion.

9. Burma's defence policies should reflect its delicate geostrategic
position, and be fashioned accordingly, emphasising cordial and
peaceful relations with all its neighbours.

10. Burma's strategy should be 'defence in depth', which requires
the full commitment of the entire country. A national service law
should be passed to facilitate this.

11. Military personnel will be confined to military functions and,
except in emergencies, should not be used to fill civil service posi­
tions. Their conditions of service and benefits would be regularly
reviewed in light of the dangers of their profession.

The CRPP Defence Affairs Committee's statement finished by saying that
a more comprehensive report on 'the formation of a democratic and mod­
ern Tatmadaw' would be presented after the People's Parliament had been
convened. In the meantime, the committee encouraged discussion and
debate on the key issues which it had raised.

No other Burmese opposition groups have formulated a position on
defence in this sort of detail. However, the NLD's broad vision of the armed
forces under a democratic government is shared by the exiled National
Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). Since its forma­
tion in 1990 the NCGUB has consistently agitated for fundamental political
change in Burma, based on a Principles and Policy Statement which was
published in 1991. The section on Defence reads;

1. We will reorganise an army; that identifies itself with the people,
is loyal to the people, is subservient to and respects the constitu­
tion of the country, and one that the people love.
2. As a defence service of the country, the military personnel must
conduct their duties in accordance with the law of the country.
3. Based on the actual needs of the country, a modern army will be
established.
4. The army shall under no circumstances, be influenced by a single
individual, or a single party.

Like the NLD, the NCGUB appears to draw heavily on Aung San's speeches,
and wider democratic practices, for their own guiding principles on the
future of the Burmese armed forces.

Extrapolating from these and other statements of opposition policy,
wider reference to Aung San's writings, and interviews with key NLD fig­
ures, some picture can be gleaned of the ideal Tatmadaw, as envisaged by
the members of Burma's democratic movement. Firstly, the Tatmadaw

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would not only survive a change of government in Rangoon but would remain an important institution of the state. Secondly, it would be responsible (through a Defence Minister and Cabinet) to an elected civilian parliament. It would be a single, unified force under a prescribed organisational structure. Thirdly, the Tatmadaw would be a smaller and much more professional organisation than at present. It would also be more representative in terms of its ethnic composition, gender balance and, if possible, the socio-economic background of its members. Fourthly, the Tatmadaw's political, economic and social roles would be severely curtailed, although it would retain a heavy responsibility to assist the new government with the tasks of reconstruction and nation building. In particular, the Tatmadaw's intelligence arm would be required to eschew the dominant political role it has come since 1962, and concentrate on purely strategic and operational matters. Finally, while involuntary recruitment would be abolished, a form of selective national service would be introduced.

In purely military terms, the Tatmadaw under a democratic government would be organised primarily for the defence of the country against external threats. It would also have the capability to respond to serious internal security challenges, such as those posed by the narcotics-based armies in Burma's northeast, but it would not normally be used to quell domestic political dissent. If such measures were considered necessary, they would be left to a better led and better trained Police Force. The Tatmadaw would most likely be organised along conventional lines, with a Ministry of Defence, three discrete Services and subordinate commands and bases around the country, much as occurs at present. The army would remain the largest Service, but greater attention would be given to the navy and air force. There would be no pressing reasons to change the current two tier structure, with the army divided into mobile formations and garrison troops, but there would be fewer of the latter and a greater distribution of 'strategic' assets like armoured and artillery battalions. Individual units of all three Services would be composed of members of all ethnic groups. Despite the NLD's proposed introduction of a federal political structure giving greater autonomy to the ethnic minorities, there would not be a return to the ethnically-based regiments which were created by the British colonial regime. Members of the ethnic minorities, including non-Buddhists, would be free to rise through the ranks to the highest levels.

To be truly 'modern and effective', the Tatmadaw would be well armed with contemporary weapons and equipment, drawn from a wide range of countries, as appropriate. These countries would include Burma's traditional arms suppliers, like the Western democracies. Burma's military training programs would also reflect a wider range of international contacts.

In some respects, it would not be too difficult for an elected democratic government in Rangoon to give form to this vision of a new Tatmadaw. Many elements would remain much the same as before. In other ways, there would probably be strong support for change from within the armed forces themselves. In a number of key areas, however, it would prove much more difficult to translate this theory into practice.
The Tatmadaw in a Democracy; The Practice

Should a civilian government be elected in Burma, the expected adoption of broad democratic principles and practices would inevitably dictate that the way in which military force was officially viewed and used would be quite different than it is now. There would also be some obvious adjustments made to government priorities for policy attention and funding. Yet, initially, and on the surface at least, it is unlikely that there would be many immediate or dramatic changes in the Tatmadaw itself.

Under current circumstances, the installation of a genuinely democratic government in Rangoon could not occur without at least the passive support of the armed forces. The Tatmadaw constitutes such a powerful and all-pervasive influence in the country at present that some compromise or agreement would have had to be reached with the democratic movement simply for another relatively free and fair election to have been held, and for a new government to be permitted to take office. Any such deal would almost certainly include, as one of its core conditions, an undertaking by the democratic movement not to attack the institution of the armed forces nor to deprive it of its historically important place in Burmese society. The new Defence Minister would have to be someone trusted by the military hierarchy, and the armed forces would probably demand to be included in discussions on certain key issues, including those relating to external relations and internal security. Nor could a democratic government expect to engage in a campaign of reprisals against serving and retired members of the Tatmadaw for their past actions, or to indulge in wholesale dismissals of the officer corps. The armed forces would also insist on retaining control over all senior Tatmadaw appointments. While some key figures would doubtless be asked to resign or retire, this would have to be with the agreement of the military leadership.

In return for such concessions, the armed forces would presumably undertake to return to their barracks. This would take time, however, as it would clearly be unwise for the Tatmadaw simply to walk away from all its old administrative positions until a new government structure and expanded civilian bureaucracy was in place. To do so could risk even greater economic and social problems than occur at present. Indeed, with its enormous resources, modern equipment, technical expertise, tested command structure and internal communications networks, the Tatmadaw’s role in national reconstruction and development would be crucial. The armed forces would also have to permit the new government sufficient freedom to exercise its popular mandate. For these new arrangements to work, the military leadership would have to be prepared to give up certain critical areas of decision making, including economic and social policy. Some issues would probably be quarantined, however, and even if it was never explicitly stated, the armed forces would always retain an effective power of veto. For example, any suggestion that the Union would be seriously weakened or even dismembered by the new government under its proposed power-sharing arrangements with the ethnic minorities, would see severe pressure brought to bear. As a last resort, the Tatmadaw could even stage another coup, a threat which would be well understood by the democratic leadership.

There would be other reasons why a new democratic government would not want seriously to weaken the armed forces or precipitously over-

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turn current policies. For example, the new government would still be a very fragile body, highly vulnerable to pressures from both outside and inside the country. Knowing this, it would almost certainly share the Tatmadaw's current wish to have a strong, capable defence force able to preserve Burma's sovereignty, defend its territorial integrity, and protect its natural resources from unauthorised exploitation. It would take a while to replace military men in the administration with trained civil servants. A new democratic government would probably also support, in principle at least, the regime's arguments in favour of achieving greater balance in the Tatmadaw, improving its supporting infrastructure and modernising its weapons inventory. The idea of raising the level of Burma's research and industrial base, and being more self-sufficient in arms production, has appeal on both sides of the political divide. Similarly, a new democratic government, anxious to win the support of the armed forces rank and file, and to prevent a continuation of the abuses which are now commonplace, would recognise the need to improve the lot of the average serviceman and woman, and would support any programs aimed at doing so.

Perhaps the most obvious changes to the armed forces, should a democratically elected civilian government of some kind come to power in Rangoon, would be a reduction in the Tatmadaw's overall size, a decline in defence expenditure, and a change in the focus and activities of the country's military intelligence apparatus.

As early as the 1990 election campaign there was a number of indications that, under a NLD government, the Tatmadaw would be drastically reduced in size. Much greater emphasis would be placed on peaceful negotiations with ethnic insurgent groups and the development of a realistic and enduring federal style of political system which gave the ethnic minorities much greater autonomy. It was suggested at the time that, by abandoning the military regime's policy of crushing the ethnic insurgencies and imposing a highly centralised, Burman-dominated political system on the country, the then 200,000-strong armed forces could be reduced to a border protection force as small as 20,000-30,000 men. Since then, the regime has itself negotiated cease-fire agreements with most ethnic insurgent groups and narcotics-based armies. The Karens are holding out but have suffered a disastrous internal rupture and several major defeats in the field. The military challenges posed by other small insurgent groups are relatively slight. However, this much improved (albeit still very fragile) internal security situation has not prompted any reduction in the size of the Tatmadaw. To the contrary, it has helped fuel its growth to 400,000 men and women, and permitted an even greater diversion of resources to the control of the country's government and administration.

Should the NLD achieve government in the near future, it is most unlikely that any serious attempt would be made to reduce the size of the Tatmadaw to the very low levels mooted before the 1990 elections. For the reasons given above, large and immediate reductions would be strongly resisted by the armed forces hierarchy. Once in power, a democratic government would probably recognise that Burma would still need a strong, well-equipped and balanced defence force for both external defence and internal security. As a result of negotiations between the new government and the military leadership, however, the size of the armed forces could probably be halved to around 200,000 without weakening Burma's security. Such a reduction would need to be carried out gradually. A weak and...
vulnerable new administration would not want to be faced with the sudden problem of large numbers of resentful and military-trained ex-servicemen wandering around the countryside making trouble, as occurred after the Second World War and again just after Independence. In any case, the abolition of forced recruitment, voluntary resignations, retirements and other natural wastage would help the numbers drop markedly. The expected growth of the domestic economy under a democratic government would offer a major attraction for military personnel with technical and entrepreneurial skills. The more efficient administration of the three Services, stronger measures against corruption and reduced opportunities for abuses of power would further reduce the numbers in the ranks, without recourse to large scale dismissals.

Cuts to manpower would help reduce the financial burden currently imposed by the Tatmadaw, but in Burma personnel costs have always been low. Other measures would be required to help fund the comprehensive economic rehabilitation of the country and greatly improved social services which have long been demanded by the civilian population. Fortunately for a new democratic government, efforts to renew the country's infrastructure and improve living conditions would inevitably attract significant support from the Western democracies and other aid donors, like Japan. International financial flows to Burma would quickly be restored. With such help, and under more professional management, it could be expected that the domestic economy would improve. Still, Defence would be bound to suffer a major reduction in its share of the national budget. Sectors like health and education, starved of funds since 1988, would get a much higher priority, and development projects ignored or bypassed by the military regime would have a greater chance to win state funding.

In any case, not all the aid provided by other countries needs to be in the form of loans, capital and technical expertise. If the Tatmadaw genuinely stepped back from domestic politics, became more professional and stopped its human rights abuses, significant defence assistance would soon be forthcoming. Some countries, like the United States (US) and United Kingdom, both of which have championed the cause of democracy in Burma since 1988, would be prepared to assist with the reform of the armed forces, through training courses, equipment and possibly even arms. Anti-narcotics campaigns would almost certainly attract generous US assistance, as occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Other countries, like Australia, would be prepared to re-open military training courses to Burmese officers, and regional countries like Singapore would feel able publicly to acknowledge and further develop their close security ties. In these circumstances, it might be expected that the current close military relationship between Burma and China would suffer. No Burmese government could afford to ignore China's overwhelming strategic weight, and for some years the Tatmadaw would still be heavily dependent on China for spare parts for all its arms and equipment. However, a new and democratically elected government in Rangoon would be much more willing and able to cultivate strategic relationships with a wider range of countries, adding to Burma's security through both military and non-military means. This would be welcomed and supported by most of Burma's regional neighbours, as well as many other countries further afield.

Perhaps one of the most difficult challenges which would face a
democratic government seeking to change the Tatmadaw, would be the reform of Burma's powerful military intelligence apparatus. The immediate aim would be to redefine its role, and turn its focus away from surveillance of the civil population to more legitimate military duties. As was the case before Ne Win's coup, responsibility for this aspect of internal security would probably be given to the Police Force and the country's other (ostensibly civilian) specialised security services and intelligence agencies. Yet, ever since 1962, the Military Intelligence Service and Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence have become so much a part of the military regime's power base, and such a strong arm of government, that this reform process would be bound to prove very difficult. Still, the reform of the country's intelligence services must be given a high priority. For, if such a system remained in place, a democratic government would not be able to function freely or effectively. In addition, the new government's credibility with the civilian population would be undermined by its inability to dismantle the repressive machinery of the old regime, as exemplified by the military intelligence apparatus.

Looking ahead, the kind of Tatmadaw which might emerge from all these changes would be smaller and leaner. It would also be better suited to both the country's unique geography and the kinds of threats which a new democratic government was likely to face. Given the harsh nature of the terrain around Burma's borders, and the need to conserve resources, there may even be a trend back to the Tatmadaw of earlier years. For example, assuming a greatly reduced threat from ethnic insurgents as a result of agreed power sharing arrangements, there could be less emphasis on maintaining static garrisons. Instead, there could be much more reliance on well-armed rapid reaction forces which could be moved around the country quickly to meet specific contingencies. In contrast to the regime's approach to warfare since 1988, which has been characterised by long campaigns of attrition relying on sheer weight of numbers, massive firepower and frontal assaults, the army could in future rely much more on mobility, versatility and a concentrated application of force. Modern, light, and man-portable weapons could be given a higher priority than main battle tanks and heavy artillery, neither of which are well suited to campaigns in difficult terrain and tropical climates. A much greater reliance could be placed on the air force, not just for air defence, but for surveillance, ground and sea strike, transport, resupply, and medical evacuation. In this regard, many of the military regime's aircraft acquisitions since 1988 (in particular the purchase of about 45 helicopters) have been quite useful. The navy too could remain much the same shape as it is now, but there would probably be an increased priority given in future to anti-ship and air defence missile systems. Steps would have to be taken by all three Services to resolve deep-rooted logistical problems.

Questions relating to the Tatmadaw's size, structure, weapons inventory and war-fighting methods, however, are not the only issues that a new government would need to consider. There are other changes that would be critical if the proper groundwork was to be laid for the Tatmadaw of the future. For example, there would need to be a considerable improvement in the standards of personnel management and conditions of service, to attract and retain the best recruits. Even more importantly, a major effort would need to be put into the recruitment, education and training of a new kind of Burmese officer, one that was prepared to give his or her allegiance to a national ideal much closer to Aung San's original vision for Burma's Armed Forces Under Civilian Rule
the government and the armed forces, than to the kind of philosophical underpinnings for military rule which have been put forward by the regime since it first seized power. Many of the broad principles expounded by the armed forces hierarchy since 1962 may have been valid in themselves, but they have been corrupted and distorted through years of propaganda to serve much narrower and far less legitimate ends. An effort to restore and revive the original ideals of Burma's officer corps would be necessary not only to ensure the immediate survival of a new democratic government in Rangoon, but also the long term development and consolidation of a more professional and apolitical Tatmadaw. For, unless this fundamental shift occurred, and initial grudging acceptance of an elected government became genuine support, then democracy in Burma would always be under threat.

Such changes will also be needed to sustain these young officers and their men when they were called upon to protect Burma from external pressures and to carry the government's anti-narcotic campaigns. For eventually a new democratic regime in Burma will need to confront large, well-armed and independent organisations like the United Wa State Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and halt their narcotics production. If political solutions for realizing the original goals of these ethnic resistance movements fail, then ultimately, the tasks may involve physically wresting back control of their territory and disarming them. Such campaigns will not be easy, and casualties could be high, but ironically conflicts of this kind need effective and efficient Burmese armed forces. Conducted professionally, and for clearly defined reasons against an easily identifiable and well recognised threat, they would help nourish a sense of national purpose, a greater degree of personal commitment, and the development of an esprit de corps among Burma's next generation of fighting men. Wider nation-building efforts, such as infrastructure development, aid to the civil population and disaster relief, may also be important in helping to restore the Tatmadaw's pride and self-respect. Its standing in the community, eroded by Ne Win's 1962 coup d'etat, and irreparably harmed by the army's massacre of thousands of unarmed demonstrators in 1988, would be greatly improved. Should that occur, then the armed forces would come much closer to Aung San's ideal of being revered, adored and depended upon by the people of Burma.

Conclusion

For all their criticisms of the military regime and the role of the armed forces in the past, Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior pro-democracy leaders realised at an early stage of their campaign to win office that they needed to overcome the Tatmadaw's fears if they were ever to loosen its grip on power and form a viable civilian government. Hence Aung San Suu Kyi's appeals to the more moderate and professional elements of the armed forces before she was placed under house arrest in July 1989. Since her release in July 1995, she and her colleagues have continued to seek a dialogue with the military regime, recognising that under current circumstances a peaceful transition to democratic rule can only occur with its concurrence, if not active support. Although Aung San Suu Kyi's position hardened as the SLORC and later the SPDC continued to ignore her, and attack her party, she continued to state her wish to work with the armed forces, not against them. While actively seeking the Tatmadaw's...
support, she has specifically ruled out encouraging a mutiny. To make any real progress, other assurances may need to be given, as has already occurred for example in places like the South Korea, South Africa and Chile. An accommodation with the armed forces, including an amnesty for its past actions, may not be popular with some of the more radical elements in the democracy movement, both within Burma and abroad. Without it, however, little progress can be made towards the kind of society that the majority of the Burmese population so clearly wants.

Such a compromise would not only be to the manifest benefit of the Burmese people, but it would also be in the long term interests of the armed forces themselves. For unless they are prepared to retreat from their current hard line position, and allow a much greater measure of popular participation in government, they will always be weakened by their alienation from the civil population and face the potential threat of armed opposition. The Tatmadaw’s historical reputation as the guardian of the Burmese people and protector of the Union has now been severely damaged. It is finding it difficult to attract the kind of recruits that it will increasingly need to serve in a more complex and technically demanding strategic environment. Also, the Tatmadaw’s rigid centralist policies and the predominance of ethnic Burmans in its higher ranks will further encourage the country’s minority peoples to see the armed forces simply as an instrument of ‘big race’ domination and oppression. The Tatmadaw may continue to increase in size and acquire more modern weapons systems but, as long as these critical issues are left unresolved, then its real military capabilities will remain limited and its professionalism suspect.
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ENDNOTES


2 See, for example, M.P. Callahan, 'Democracy in Burma: The Lessons of History', National Bureau of Asian Research, Analysis, Vol.9, No.3, May 1998, pp.5-26. Of course, concepts of democracy differ greatly between countries, and groups within countries, even among those peoples which support and have already adopted 'democratic' systems of government.

3 There is apparently a lively debate on the optimum size and structure of Burma's armed forces in specialised Burmese language journals published by the Ministry of Defence in Rangoon. These journals, however, are not made available to the wider public.

4 The regime has announced 'Three Main National Causes', namely the non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity and perpetuation of sovereignty. Consciously drawing on the numerical style of Theravada Buddhist doctrine, it also has 'Four Political Objectives', 'Four Economic Objectives' and 'Four Social Objectives'. See, for example, the New Light of Myanmar, 9 May 1999.

5 Power in Burma has traditionally been highly personalised and, even during the 'democratic era', political parties played a secondary role to their leaders. Similarly, policy platforms have tended to be more the reflection of the leaders' views, rather than the result of widespread debate and compromise. Some have argued that the NLD under Aung San Suu Kyi also fits this pattern. See, for example, Roger Mitton, 'How Things Look Inside the NLD', Asiaweek, 16 July 1999, pp.28-9.

6 Interview, Rangoon, November 1996.


8 'The General Secretary's, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Request', (undated) statement by Aung San Suu Kyi provided to the author by the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), 20 April 1999.

9 Cited in Freedom from Fear, p. 195.


11 'The General Secretary's, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Request'. Freedom from Fear, p.195.

12 'The General Secretary's, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Request'.

13 Dan Eaton, 'Army has nothing to fear from civilian rule', Australian Associated Press, 7 August 1999.

14 Ibid

15 'The General Secretary's, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Request'. Freedom from Fear, pp. 194-5.


19 The date of 27 March 1945 (when Aung San and the Burma National Army switched their allegiance from the Japanese to the Allies) was commemorated as 'Resistance Day', until changed by Ne Win to 'Armed Forces Day'. The NLD
is now arguing that the original name should be restored.

22 This speech was later issued by the NLD’s Central Executive Committee as ‘A Discourse on the Fifty Fourth Anniversary of Resistance Day’, Statement No.50 (3/99), Rangoon, 27 March 1999.

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid

26 Address delivered by Senior General Saw Maung, Commander-in-Chief of The Defence Services at the 45th Anniversary of the Armed Forces Day (Resistance Day), 27 March 1990, p.36.

27 NLD Party Chairman Kyi Maung also made at least one major speech on defence issues before his retirement. No English translation of his comments is available. According to Aung San Suu Kyi, however, he too drew heavily on her father’s speeches for inspiration. Interview, Rangoon, November 1996.

28 Translated typescript of mimeographed original in the author’s possession.


30 Ibid

31 It is not clear what form the proposed national service scheme would take. One senior NLD figure has suggested that it would be similar to that which operated before 1988, under which people with specialist skills (like doctors and engineers) could be called up. Other NLD officials, however, envisage the conscription of all healthy Burmese men and women of a certain age for set periods. Interviews, Rangoon, November 1999.


33 ‘Resolutions Taken on the 27th May 1999 by the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament’, BurmaNet News, 30 May 1999.

34 Report of the Defence Committee of the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.


39 Interviews, Rangoon, November 1996.

40 For Aung San’s views on Burma’s government and social organisation see Josef Silverstein (ed), The Political Legacy of Aung San (revised edition), Southeast Asia Program Series No. 11 (Cornell University, Ithaca, 1993).

41 Suggestions by some members of the SLORC that, under the NLD, the leadership of the armed forces would be rotated among the military leaders of Burma’s main ethnic groups, is a distortion of comments made some time ago, and seem designed largely to undermine public confidence in the NLD’s ability to manage the country’s vital security interests. Interview, Rangoon, November 1996.


43 Interview, Rangoon, November 1996.

44 This begs the question, of course, of what the constitution might be, under which such steps could take place.


For details of the Tatmadaw's current size, see Andrew Selth, *Burma's Order of Battle: An Interim Assessment*, Working Paper No.351 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000).

A World Bank report on Burma prepared in 1999 estimated that military spending accounted for 32% of the 1998 budget. On a per capita basis, this was nine times that spent on health and two times that spent on education. See also 'Burma's debt is pushing economy to the brink', *International Herald Tribune*, 15 November 1999.

The other specialised security and intelligence agencies in Burma would need to be included in these reforms. While theoretically civilian, they have long been led by former or serving military personnel, and been effectively subordinate to DDSI. See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Intelligence Apparatus*, Working Paper No.308 (Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1997).

Louise Williams, 'Revenge is not our priority, says Opposition', *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 July 1990.

Burma's Armed Forced Under Civilian Rule: Return to the Past?

Neither the National League for Democracy, nor the Burmese democratic movement as a whole, have yet announced any detailed policies on defense issues. Yet it is clear that their vision for the country's armed forces, derived largely from the writings of independence hero Aung San, is different in several key respects from that of the current regime. Should a democratically elected civilian government of some kind come to power in Rangoon, there is not likely to be many immediate or dramatic changes in the armed forces. Over time, however, a democratic government will need to consider major adjustments to the size of the Tatmadaw, its share of the national budget, the role of the military intelligence apparatus and the way in which the armed forces were employed as an institution of the state.