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The International Community Needs to Prepare for a Post-Tatmadaw Myanmar

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Myanmar junta military soldiers parade during a ceremony to mark the 75th anniversary of the country's Union Day in Naypyidaw on 12 February 2022. Picture: STRINGER/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Myanmar's Tatmadaw is facing its largest challenge in over six decades, and there is a small but increasing likelihood that they will lose their grip on power.
- The Tatmadaw's combat forces of around 100,000 are stretched thin, facing a vast array of armed resistance groups and engaging in unfamiliar cellularized warfare. Although the Tatmadaw maintains control of key urban centres, it has been unable to consolidate power in smaller towns and rural areas.
- The current balance of power could be upended by a variety of factors, including the opening of a new major front against Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), improved tactical capabilities of newly-formed armed resistance groups, and high-level defections. The ongoing National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) process may lead to the formation of a formidable political and military alliance against the Tatmadaw.
- To avoid a spiralling humanitarian crisis or a failed-state scenario, the international community should begin proactively to plan for a "post-Tatmadaw" scenario where the military, at least in its current configuration, is no longer a dominant political force. This could include deeper engagement with and capacity support of various democratic opposition forces in Myanmar, building a stronger diplomatic coalition that supports a new federal charter, and increased humanitarian aid.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, overthrew the country's democratically elected government in February 2021, its brutal crackdown against what began as a non-violent uprising against the coup has pushed the country into a complex, multifaceted civil war. In addition to traditional adversaries such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Tatmadaw now faces hundreds of Local Defense Forces (LDFs) and urban guerrilla cells that have since emerged across the country. Some of the fiercest fighting has been in the traditionally calm Bamar heartlands of Sagaing and Magwe Regions,¹ as well as Chin State to their west. In contrast to how it likes to present itself—as a strong and coherent 21st century military force, the Tatmadaw is facing its largest challenge in at least six decades, and is suffering heavy losses. There is therefore a small but increasing likelihood that the State Administration Council (SAC) – the regime put into place the day after the 2021 coup² – will lose its grip on power in one way or another. To avoid a power vacuum, the international community must take serious note of this possibility and start planning accordingly. Even ignoring the calls from some quarters to extend military aid to Myanmar's democratic opposition government, the National Unity Government (NUG),³ there is wide scope for engaging with it and other democratic forces. Economic aid and capacity building⁴ are two forms of possible engagement, both of which would drastically reduce the chance of a failed-state scenario, should the military regime collapse.

It is difficult to overstate the socioeconomic impact of the ongoing civil conflict in Myanmar. The SAC junta has used scorched-earth tactics⁵ and air strikes against civilian populations in an attempt to terrorize the population into submission. Meanwhile, an economic and financial crisis triggered by the coup⁶ has compounded the impacts of Covid-19, pushing a quarter of the country's population into poverty,⁷ and rural communities are facing a multitude of compounding vulnerabilities.⁸ Furthermore, the number of internally displaced people has more than doubled, to 800,000, since the coup in 2021.⁹ Veteran Myanmar-watchers, such as Bertil Lintner, however, expect that the regime's tactics will only harden the resolve of resistance groups.¹⁰

From an outside perspective, the conflict in Myanmar looks like a war of attrition that the SAC is unlikely to lose. The Tatmadaw has been the pre-eminent political force in Myanmar since the 1950s, with up to 350,000 personnel¹¹ and a massive institutional footprint geared towards its sustenance. It also enjoys access to government coffers and foreign currency revenues from the sale of natural resources, as well as control over a wide assortment of economic holdings¹² and crony-linked private businesses.¹³ Given such resources at the Tatmadaw's disposal, it might seem hard to imagine how a ragtag coalition of armed revolutionaries can take down a military establishment that has survived more than 70 years of civil war.

However, these superficial facts belie the complex reality on the ground. The Tatmadaw probably has somewhat fewer than 100,000 combat-ready troops,¹⁴ with varying levels of provisioning. These troops are already stretched thin, as they battle a vast array of armed resistance groups across the entire country, particularly on large fronts in the north,

northwest and east of the country. Among those adversaries are around 20 different ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), including the KIA and TNLAA. EAOs are increasingly coordinating with LDFs¹⁵ and with “People’s Defense Force” (PDF) groups.¹⁶ This coordination represents a form of “cellularised” warfare¹⁷ that the beleaguered Tatmadaw has never faced before: according to figures from the NUG, thousands of junta soldiers have been killed and more than 2,000 have defected.¹⁸ Further, anecdotal evidence tells of local battalion commanders negotiating informal ceasefires with LDFs to re-supply their weary troops, and frenzied measures to replenish its ranks¹⁹ (and the frequent reshuffling of frontline commanders)²⁰ indicate that the Tatmadaw is worried about its ability to thwart its adversaries.

The Tatmadaw’s grasp on power is therefore increasingly fragile.²¹ Sanctions imposed by the West have not significantly stemmed the flow of money or arms to the regime and they largely maintain control over urban centres. However, the Tatmadaw has been unable to consolidate power in smaller towns and rural areas where LDFs and PDFs are actively contesting junta-aligned local administrations.²² According to an unpublished policy brief, 200 townships – more than half of the country’s 330 – have begun experimenting with alternative governance structures of varying capabilities.²³ EAOs have similarly used the turmoil to expand the territory that they control, all of which contradicts the image of strength and control that the Tatmadaw is trying to project. Meanwhile, armed resistance groups across the country “continue to expand in size, capability, and coordination, inflicting significant damage to military forces”, according to a report from the United States Institute of Peace.²⁴ It is also significant that no major foreign power has yet to formally recognize the SAC as the government of Myanmar under the international community’s approach of diplomatic ambivalence.²⁵ If this is a war of attrition, it is one that the Tatmadaw is losing by virtue of not winning.

KNOWN UNKNOWNNS

The conflict in Myanmar is complicated, not least because of the long history of ethnic grievances that pre-date the creation of the modern-day Tatmadaw during the Second World War. Amongst the more than 20 or so EAOs fighting the Tatmadaw, at least five of them have over 10,000 active combat troops.²⁶ Other armed actors include the recently created *Pyu Saw Htee* militia and dozens of pre-existing Border Guard Forces, all of which are backed by or under the influence of the Tatmadaw. Add to this an enormous assortment of unarmed actors, including political parties, civil society organizations and religious umbrella organizations, all defined by complex and overlapping political fault lines, as well as the interests of foreign powers, and an opaque mosaic of the conflict emerges.

A few obvious “known unknown” factors could destabilize the current balance of power. The first are the two major EAOs that have maintained their bilateral ceasefires with the Tatmadaw, namely the Arakan Army (AA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Either of these groups could change the balance of power if it confronted the Tatmadaw militarily. The UWSA is the single-largest EAO in the country and widely considered the best armed,

but the political concessions granted to it under the military-drafted 2008 constitution mean that it has little incentive to engage in direct confrontation with the Tatmadaw. The AA is a less known quantity; it was founded only in 2009, but has quickly become a formidable force to reckon with, both for its military capacity and for its institutional footprint in northern Rakhine State.²⁷ Although the AA has publicly committed itself to abiding by its 2020 ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw, that agreement is fragile: it has been pierced by several skirmishes in recent months,²⁸ and the AA has explicitly warned of full-blown warfare if the Tatmadaw does not respect its territorial boundaries.²⁹ The post-coup power vacuum has enabled the AA to expand the territory that it controls and to build up its administrative functions, and there are reports that the group is in negotiations with the NUG. With most of the Tatmadaw's troops tied down in Chin State and Sagaing Region in the Northwest, in Shan State in the Northeast, and in a third front in the east, the emergence of another major front in Rakhine State would likely prove devastating to the SAC's forces.

A second major factor is the newly-formed armed resistance groups. Tens of thousands of urban and rural youths have undergone training offered by various EAOs, and are now hardened by nearly a year's worth of combat experience. The PDFs' and LDFs' equipment varies from homemade muskets and surface-to-air missiles to imported light arms and even 3D printed guns.³⁰ However, resistance fighters have been gradually improving both their tactical capabilities and general coordination between different LDF and PDF groups, as well as with larger EAOs. The NUG has also trained an unknown number of uniformed PDF troops that resemble a more conventional army. Exact figures are kept under tight wraps, but insider sources claim that the total number of PDF troops (including those trained by the NUG) is around 50,000 while an NUG-aligned coalition of LDF groups has 60,000-70,000 troops. If these figures are correct, this means that there are at least 110,000 PDF-LDF resistance fighters spread throughout the country. The lack of equipment remains the resistance forces' biggest weakness, and the Tatmadaw maintains air superiority. Although unlikely, financial and logistical support by a third party could rapidly tilt the conflict in favour of the resistance.

Other potential factors that could change the current dynamic in Myanmar include defection by a high-ranking Tatmadaw officer (of at least brigadier general rank), which would cause already-sagging morale to plummet and potentially trigger mass desertions. Although this currently seems unlikely, given Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's grip on power in the upper echelons of the Tatmadaw, local and third-country incentives for potential defectors are increasing.³¹ Moreover, history shows many examples of elites turning against a dictator once a regime is collapsing.³² There is also the possibility of an internal military faction³³ replacing Min Aung Hlaing, although that might not necessarily lead to a softening of the leadership.

Possibly the biggest weakness of the anti-junta forces is the lack of a unified vision. This problem has historical roots in the political disunity among ethnic minority groups, and is worsened by their innate scepticism towards the NUG which is dominated by politicians from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). Nonetheless, if Myanmar's fragmented opposition could agree on an inclusive political blueprint for the country's future, a formidable political (and military) force might well emerge that the

Tatmadaw would be unable to match. The NUG is already attempting to forge such an agreement through its National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC),³⁴ a consultative forum for democratic opposition groups which recently held a People's Assembly with over 400 representatives which ratified the NUGs draft 2021 Federal Democratic Charter (FDC). Key obstacles remain, such as how to sequence implementation and to implement appropriate checks and balances, and it will likely take time to overcome historical grievances among ethnic minority groups. However, according to Su Mon Thazin Aung, the NUCC process is generally considered too important to fail and "key stakeholders have demonstrated strong commitment to fight against the military through their incremental solutions".³⁵ If the NUCC successfully negotiates a new federal charter that fundamentally reconfigures centre-periphery relations,³⁶ it could "radically shift the trajectory of the current stalemate"³⁷ by creating a united front against the Tatmadaw which is more likely to gain international recognition.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the political forces shaping the conflict in Myanmar or an authoritative analysis of what could sway the balance of power. Myanmar's geopolitical terrain is incredibly complex.³⁸ Neither would any of the factors suggested here lead to an immediate defeat or dissolution of the Tatmadaw. Rather, each has the potential to create an opportunity for regime change. What this change entails is impossible to predict. The salient point, however, is that there is a non-zero – and increasing – chance that the Tatmadaw will lose its tenuous grip on power, which bears noting by international players if they want to avoid an even bigger humanitarian crisis or a failed-state scenario.

PLANNING FOR REGIME CHANGE

Without constructive intervention, Myanmar is likely to face protracted conflict. Even if a known unknown (or an unknown unknown) factor tips the scales against it, a gradually disintegrating Tatmadaw is almost guaranteed to escalate the conflict and continue, or even intensify, the use of violence against civilians. This would lead to a surge in refugees and contribute to a worsening humanitarian crisis. Moreover, if history is any indicator, a power vacuum in Myanmar could lead to opportunistic militias engaging in banditry and illegal activities, further increasing the risk of a failed-state scenario.³⁹ It is therefore in the international community's best interests to begin actively planning for potential regime change, and to enact this sooner rather than later.⁴⁰

There are at least three paths for such planning. The first would be for countries interested in stabilizing Myanmar to "embrace the reality" and genuinely engage with the democratic opposition in Myanmar,⁴¹ chiefly the NUG but also various civil society actors and even EAOs.^{42,43} This engagement should begin with a programme to shore up the institutional capacity of the NUG to enable effective governance in case it needs to assume power in a "post-Tatmadaw" scenario.⁴⁴ Second, the international community should build a diplomatic coalition consisting of ASEAN, Western powers and China⁴⁵ that agrees to recognize and support a new federal charter proposed by the NUCC, even if the Tatmadaw refuses to acknowledge it. Third, the West (as well as neighbouring countries) should

provide more humanitarian aid, which would not only bring respite to the victims of the Tatmadaw but also free up some of the NUG's energy and resources to focus on its military strategy.

A "Post-Tatmadaw" Myanmar does not mean one characterized by the dissolution of the Tatmadaw. It is exceedingly unlikely that the Tatmadaw as a whole can be defeated, at least in the traditional sense, with a resistance force conquering Naypyitaw. If the Tatmadaw's position continues to deteriorate, a new Tatmadaw leadership or an opportunistic faction may, however, be more amenable to negotiating meaningful reforms with the NUG. But, even if the combined anti-junta forces were able to deal a decisive blow to the Tatmadaw, the dissolution of that latter force would cause devastating ripple effects,⁴⁶ much as the dissolution of the Iraqi army in late 2003 led to the rise of ISIS.⁴⁷ Developing an early plan for reforming the Tatmadaw, including the integration of resistance forces into it, is therefore vital. It is a process that should begin sooner rather than later.⁴⁸

Two monitions bear mention. First, the NUG needs to pay closer heed to the difficult political and military terrain that it is contesting, and to be more open to compromise. Many LDF and PDF groups, along with large segments of the general population, are currently unwilling to accept anything short of the Tatmadaw's complete surrender. The NUG should manage expectations by clearly communicating practical constraints to the public at large, including the possibility of including rank-and-file Tatmadaw soldiers in a new federal army.

Second, the international community needs to recognize that negotiation with the current Tatmadaw leadership is both practically and morally impossible. Hardliners in the Tatmadaw have always negotiated in bad faith, and it is difficult to overstate the impacts of their atrocities since the 2021 coup, so thoroughly documented through social media channels and human rights defenders. The vast majority of people in Myanmar today view the Tatmadaw as the equivalent of a foreign occupying force,⁴⁹ and it would be prudent of the international community to re-write its diplomatic script accordingly. The crisis is likely to grow worse before it gets better, but it is about time that local and international stakeholders begin planning for a post-Tatmadaw Myanmar.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mary Callahan, "Myanmar's Dry Zone: The History of a Tinderbox", Fulcrum, 9 February 2022 [<https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-dry-zone-the-history-of-a-tinderbox/>], accessed 24 May 2022].

² The SAC was initially formed with 11 military members and five civilians added the following day on 3 February. In March 2021, it was expanded to a total of 19 members, and in August 2021 it was reformed as a so-called caretaker government with Min Aung Hlaing appointed as Prime Minister. While the SAC was initially composed of the Tatmadaw's top brass, frequent reshuffling has led to most of the SAC members losing their military positions while younger generals have been elevated within the Tatmadaw. Therefore, as pointed out by Htet Myet Min Tun in a Fulcrum

article from earlier this year, “the SAC has gradually become a shell entity” with all real power concentrated in the hands of Min Aung Hlaing. Although one cannot directly equivocate the junta with the Tatmadaw as a whole, the fact that Min Aung Hlaing and his hardliner faction firmly controls both bodies means that they are practically indistinguishable. In other words, overthrowing the SAC also entails overthrowing the Tatmadaw (or at least its current leadership). For more information about the composition of the SAC, see Htet Myet Min Tun, “Myanmar’s State Administration Council: A Shell Entity?”, Fulcrum, 6 January 2022

[<https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-state-administration-council-a-shell-entity/>, accessed 24 May 2022].

³ David Hutt, “Why Doesn’t the West Sell Weapons to Myanmar’s Anti-Junta Rebels?”, The Diplomat, 4 February 2022 [<https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/why-doesnt-the-west-sell-weapons-to-myanmars-anti-junta-rebels/>, accessed 24 May 2022].

⁴ Capacity building is taken in the broad sense of developing the skills, processes and human resources of any of the democratic groups opposing the military, ranging from armed actors to labour movements. If the Tatmadaw is forced to relinquish power, this could even extent to the creation of a new transitional authority that would oversee Myanmar’s return to democracy.

⁵ Min Ye Kyaw and Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Myanmar’s junta torching ‘village after village’ in bid to quell opposition”, The Guardian, 29 January 2022 [<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/29/myanmars-junta-torching-village-after-village-in-bid-to-quell-opposition>, accessed 24 May 2022].

⁶ There was widespread economic turmoil in the immediate aftermath of the coup, primarily as a result of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) which used popular strikes and demonstrations to attempt to paralyze the junta-controlled government. This included banking staff which kept bank branches closed for several months, thus reducing cash availability, although the financial crisis was further exacerbated by widespread loss of confidence in the Myanmar Kyat (MMK) and a general cash shortage. In an attempt to stave off a bank collapse, the junta introduced a strict cap on ATM cash withdrawals in March 2021 which further undermined the saliency of the kyat, and at the time of writing, the MMK had depreciated by around 40% since the coup. For more information, see for example Arul Kurian, “Myanmar’s Unfolding Banking Crisis”, The Diplomat, 20 May 2021 [<https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/myanmars-unfolding-banking-crisis/>, accessed 24 May 2022].

⁷ This would result in a total of half the country’s population living below the poverty line, which according to the UNDP represents “a level of impoverishment not seen in the country since 2005”; see UNDP, “Pandemic and political crisis could result in half of Myanmar’s population living in poverty by 2022, UNDP says”, UNDP, 30 April 2022 [<https://www.undp.org/press-releases/pandemic-and-political-crisis-could-result-half-myanmars-population-living-poverty>, accessed 10 May 2022].

⁸ ISEAS, Webinar on “Socio-Economic Impacts of the 2021 Coup in Myanmar”, 11 April 2022 [<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/event-highlights/webinar-on-socio-economic-impacts-of-the-2021-coup-in-myanmar/>, accessed 10 May 2022].

⁹ United Nations, “Number of internally displaced in Myanmar doubles, to 800,000”, 11 February 2022 [<https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1111812>, accessed 10 May 2022].

¹⁰ Bertil Lintner, “Tatmadaw fighting a losing war in Myanmar”, Asia Times, 24 February 2022 [<https://asiatimes.com/2022/02/tatmadaw-fighting-a-losing-war-in-myanmar/>, accessed 10 May 2022].

¹¹ According to Andrew Selth (2020: pg. 374), most analysts estimate a range of between 300,000 and 350,000 personnel. See Andrew Selth, “Interpreting Myanmar: A Decade of Analysis”, ANU Press.

¹² Gerard McGarthy, “Military Capitalism in Myanmar: Examining the Origins, Continuities and Evolution of ‘Khaki Capital’”, Trends in Southeast Asia, 2019 [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TRS6_19.pdf].

- ¹³ Reuters, “How family of a Myanmar junta leader are trying to cash in”, 7 September 2021 [reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-generals-families/, accessed 10 May 2022].
- ¹⁴ Andrew Selth, “Myanmar’s Military Numbers”, Lowy Institute, 17 February 2022 [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-military-numbers, accessed 10 May 2022].
- ¹⁵ See for example Myanmar Now, “KIA-PDF joint force attack Myanmar army in Sagaing”, 22 September 2021 [https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/kia-pdf-joint-force-attack-myanmar-army-in-sagaing, accessed 10 May 2022].
- ¹⁶ Many observers use the terms PDF and LDF interchangeably. However, for the purpose of strategic analysis, it is important to distinguish between them: LDF refers to any form of grassroots anti-junta militia, while PDF can refer to the conventional forces trained by the NUG, LDFs that have sworn allegiance to the NUG, or both.
- ¹⁷ Callahan, “Myanmar’s Dry Zone: The History of a Tinderbox”.
- ¹⁸ Myanmar Now, “Over 8000 soldiers and police officers have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, says defector group”, 1 December 2021 [https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/over-8000-soldiers-and-police-officers-have-joined-the-civil-disobedience-movement-says, accessed 10 May 2022]. See also Helene Maria Kyed and Ah Lynn, “Soldier Defections in Myanmar: Motivations and Obstacles following the 2021 military takeover”, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2021 [https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/249929], which notes that the level of, and “degree to which defectors have organised themselves and aligned with the pro-democracy opposition”, is unprecedented.
- ¹⁹ According to Andrew Selth, the Tatmadaw has been recalling retired veterans, training the spouses and children of soldiers, and is even considering conscription to bolster its ranks; see Selth, “Myanmar’s Military Numbers”.
- ²⁰ The Irrawaddy, “Notorious Junta General Removed from Upper Myanmar Command as Resistance Intensifies”, 18 February 2022 [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/notorious-junta-general-removed-from-upper-myanmar-command-as-resistance-intensifies.html, accessed 10 May 2022].
- ²¹ A recently published article by Anthony Davis similarly argues that the Tatmadaw’s continuing loss of territory may eventually lead to a decisive shift in the current “strategic equilibrium”; “Is Myanmar’s military starting to lose the war?”, Asia Times, 30 May 2022 [https://asiatimes.com/2022/05/is-myanmars-military-starting-to-lose-the-war/, accessed 11 June 2022].
- ²² The Irrawaddy, “Local Myanmar Officials Quit in Drove Following Threats From Anti-Junta Groups”, 8 October 2021 [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/local-myanmar-officials-quit-in-drove-following-threats-from-anti-junta-groups.html, accessed 10 May 2022].
- ²³ Matthew Arnold and Kim Jolliffe, “Gaining Ground – Local Administration by Resistance Actors in Myanmar”, unpublished brief, 2022.
- ²⁴ “Anatomy of the Military Coup and Recommendations for U.S. Response”, United States Institute for Peace, 1 February 2022 [https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/02/myanmar-study-group-final-report, accessed 15 June 2022].
- ²⁵ The international community’s ambivalence towards the issue of representation is perhaps best exemplified by how the question of Myanmar’s UN seat was handled, with the UN Credentials Committee opting for the status quo by keeping the civilian-appointed Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun “for the time being”; see The Irrawaddy, “Ignoring Junta’s Request, UN Delays Myanmar Ambassador Replacement”, 7 December 2021 [https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ignoring-juntas-request-un-delays-myanmar-ambassador-replacement.html, accessed 24 May 2022]. Similarly, both regional and Western government are known to be engaging the NUG informally, and no governments (with the exception of India and Saudi Arabia) have sent Ambassador-level envoys to the regime; see Gwen Robinson, “Diplomatic Snubs Isolate Myanmar’s Military

Regime”, Nikkei Asia, 9 May 2022 [<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Diplomatic-snubs-isolate-Myanmar-s-military-regime>].

²⁶ These are the Karen National Union (KNU), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Arakan Army (AA), and the KIA and TNLAA.

²⁷ Bertil Lintner, “Rise of Rakhine Rebels Poses Challenge for Myanmar Junta”, The Irrawaddy, 20 January 2022 [<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/rise-of-rakhine-rebels-poses-challenge-for-myanmar-junta.html>], accessed 10 May 2022].

²⁸ The Irrawaddy, “Myanmar Junta Clashes With Arakan Army After Year’s Peace”, 11 November 2022 [<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-clashes-with-arakan-army-after-years-peace.html>], accessed 10 May 2022].

²⁹ The Irrawaddy, “Arakan Army Threatens War With Myanmar Junta”, 6 April 2022 [<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arakan-army-threatens-war-with-myanmar-junta.html>], accessed 10 May 2022].

³⁰ Thomas Eydoux, “How rebel fighters are using 3D-printed arms to fight the Myanmar junta”, The Observers, 7 January 2022 [<https://observers.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220114-3d-printed-weapons-myanmar-rebels>], accessed 10 May 2022].

³¹ Although defections remain low relative to the total size of the Tatmadaw, they have continued at a steady pace and recently included several battalion commanders which are at the lieutenant-colonel rank. News also recently broke that Australia is offering asylum to defecting soldiers. Although it remains to be seen how effective this incentive will be, it is plausible that it will eventually lead to high-ranking defections from the regime; see The Irrawaddy, “Australia’s Embrace of Defectors Sends Shockwaves Through Myanmar Military”, 23 March 2022 [<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/australias-embrace-of-defectors-sends-shockwaves-through-myanmar-military.html>], accessed 25 May 2022].

³² Somewhat ironically, the NLD is a case in point as several of the party’s founders were high-ranking military officers that broke away from the Tatmadaw in the immediate aftermath of Ne Win’s downfall in 1988.

³³ See for example Anders Kirstein Moeller, “Peering Under the Hood: Coup Narratives and Tatmadaw Factionalism”, Tea Circle, 10 January 2022 [<https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/peering-under-the-hood-coup-narratives-and-tatmadaw-factionalism/>], accessed 10 May 2022].

³⁴ Htet Myet Min Tun and Moe Thuzar, “Myanmar’s National Unity Consultative Council: A Vision of Myanmar’s Federal Future”, Fulcrum, 5 January 2022 [<https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-national-unity-consultative-council-a-vision-of-myanmars-federal-future/>], accessed 15 June 2022].

³⁵ Su Mon Thazin Aung, “Myanmar’s Quest for a Federal and Democratic Future: Considerations, Constraints and Compromises”, ISEAS Perspective, 18 March 2022 [<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-28-myanmars-quest-for-a-federal-and-democratic-future-considerations-constraints-and-compromises-by-su-mon-thazin-aung/>], accessed 15 June 2022].

³⁶ Shona Loong, “Centre-periphery Relations in Myanmar: Leverage and Solidarity After the 1 February Coup”, Trends in Southeast Asia, 2021 [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/TRS9_21.pdf], accessed 15 June 2022].

³⁷ Aye Chan and Billy Ford, “A New Myanmar Forum Aims to Unite Democratic Forces”, United States Institute of Peace, 3 November 2021 [<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/new-myanmar-forum-aims-unite-democratic-forces>], accessed 15 June 2022].

³⁸ The international geopolitical context is also important, starting with the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine which has become the main preoccupation of Western powers, although a thorough treatment is beyond the scope of this essay. It is worth noting that Russia is one of a handful of states that have continued arms sales and given technical support to the Tatmadaw, although disruptions due to the impacts of the war in Ukraine are unlikely to have any significant impact on the Tatmadaw, at least in the short run. For more information, see for example Artyom

Lukin and Andrey Grubin, “Why Russia is Betting on Myanmar’s Military Junta”, East Asia Forum, 27 April 2021 [<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/04/27/why-russia-is-betting-on-myanmars-military-junta/>, accessed 15 June 2022].

³⁹ During the colonial occupation of Burma, British troops faced recurring insurrections and that spilled over into armed banditry not too dissimilar to the fractured security terrain facing the nascent Tatmadaw after independence in 1948; see Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ Even in the short run, there is a need for stepping into the power vacuum in small towns and rural areas where the Tatmadaw has effectively lost control, by supporting various democratic opposition forces in providing basic social services. In the long run, this will help create an institutional structure that can effectively take over from the SAC in case there is a regime change.

⁴¹ Philipp Annawitt, “Myanmar Has Moved Beyond Aung San Suu Kyi vs. the Generals”, 25 January 2022 [<https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/myanmar-has-moved-beyond-aung-san-suu-kyi-vs-the-generals>, accessed 10 May 2022].

⁴² Kaitlyn Robinson, “To Support Democracy in Myanmar, Engage with Ethnic Armed Organizations”, War on The Rocks, 19 January 2022 [<https://warontherocks.com/2022/01/to-support-democracy-in-myanmar-engage-with-ethnic-armed-organizations/>, accessed 15 June 2022].

⁴³ Andrew Ong, “Ethnic Armed Organisations in Post-Coup Myanmar: New Conversations Needed”, ISEAS Perspective, 11 June 2021 [<https://www.iseas-edu-sg-admin.cwp.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-79-ethnic-armed-organisations-in-post-coup-myanmar-new-conversations-needed-by-andrew-ong/>, accessed 15 June 2022].

⁴⁴ Another key area for capacity support is reforming the organizational management of PDF groups to turn them into something that more closely resembles a conventional fighting force under the command of the NUG. Despite their rapidly improving capabilities, PDFs are still little more than a syndicate of armed guerrilla groups. Without significant improvements to the chain of command, the risk that individual LDF or PDF groups will break the NUG’s rules of engagement or take opportunistic actions will only increase with the duration of the conflict.

⁴⁵ China initially hedged its diplomatic approach towards Myanmar in the aftermath of the coup and is known to have informal communication lines with the NUG; see Lucas Myers, “China is Hedging its Best in Myanmar”, Foreign Policy, 10 September 2021 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/10/china-myanmar-coup-national-league-for-democracy/>, accessed 15 June 2022]. However, foreign affairs insiders have privately expressed concern over the NUG’s apparent lack of control over LDF/PDF groups, which has led Beijing to conclude that the Tatmadaw is the “least-bad” option for maintaining peace and security in Myanmar. This can be seen in the gradual normalization of ties between Beijing and Naypyitaw, including the recent top-level meeting between the SACs Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin and his Chinese opposite, Wang Yi; see Sebastian Strangio, “China Pledges Support for Myanmar’s Junta, ‘No Matter How the Situation Changes’”, The Diplomat, 4 April 2022 [<https://www.thediplomat.com/2022/04/china-pledges-support-for-myanmars-junta-no-matter-how-the-situation-changes/>, accessed 25 May 2022]). An insider source also indicated that China is actively restraining its EAO allies in Northern Myanmar from mobilizing their full forces against the Tatmadaw because of fears that it would undermine or defeat the Tatmadaw and, thus, lead to long-term instability.

⁴⁶ Maintaining a national (federal) army is not only necessary for “winning the peace” in the short run, but also touches upon core questions of Myanmar’s national security and sovereignty. Such fundamental questions deserve a comprehensive discussion, one which unfortunately goes beyond the scope of this article.

⁴⁷ Mark Thompson, “How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISI”, Time, 28 May 2015.

⁴⁸ Similarly, the NUG also needs to prepare a demobilization, disarmament and reintegration plan for resistance fighters who choose not to join an eventual federal army, which should be extended to other militias that are not under the direct command of EAOs.

⁴⁹ See for example Zaw Tuseng, “The Revolt Against Myanmar’s Junta Can Succeed”, 20 June 2021 [<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/the-revolt-against-myanmars-junta-can-succeed.html>], accessed 10 May 2022].

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