Between 1962 and 2011, Myanmar boasted the modern world’s most durable military dictatorship. Since then, its armed forces, or Tatmadaw, have overseen a managed transition to a more open and democratic system. While the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) landslide victory in the 2015 elections dramatically changed the political landscape, the Tatmadaw remains the country’s most powerful institution. It is also becoming a more capable military force. However, the evolution of Myanmar society and demands for wider reforms will test the generals’ willingness to permit further changes to their status and influence, and their ability to control developments.

The data deficit

Despite its prominence in national affairs since Myanmar regained its independence in 1948, the Tatmadaw’s internal workings have long been a closed book. Even basic data have been beyond the reach of researchers. For example, the size of Myanmar’s armed forces is a mystery. By the end of the Ne Win era (1962–1988), it was generally accepted that there were about 186,000 men and women in its three services (IISS 1986, 152). The actual number, however, was a state secret. After the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, when the Tatmadaw took back direct political power from the socialist government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) launched an ambitious military expansion and modernisation programme. By 2000, the Tatmadaw had doubled in size to an estimated 400,000, about 370,000 of whom were in the army (Selth 2000, 296). Since then, however, the total number has declined, possibly to 300,000. It could even be lower.

Nor can anyone be sure about the level of Myanmar’s defence expenditure. Ne Win’s curbs on military spending were abandoned by the SLORC and its successor, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), lending credence to claims that the armed forces were routinely allocated 45% of the national budget. A more likely average annual figure was 32%, but this was still more than double the funds formally allocated to the health and education portfolios combined (Selth 2009, 12–13). Also, the budget did not take account of the other ways that the Tatmadaw supplemented its income, from both official and unofficial sources. Since 2011, annual defence spending has fluctuated, but remained high. In 2014/2015, for example, defence was allocated about 23% of total government expenditure, estimated by the Asian Development
Bank to be 4.8% of GDP (DVB 2015). In terms of defence spending per capita, Myanmar still rates below most other regional countries, but the Tatmadaw has enjoyed a privileged position in Naypyitaw’s accounts.

How these statistics translated into the Tatmadaw’s order of battle and operational capabilities are two more ‘known unknowns’, to quote Donald Rumsfeld. Under the SLORC/SPDC, Myanmar purchased a wide range of arms and military equipment. Most came from China, but several other countries contributed to the influx of armoured vehicles and artillery, missiles and munitions, fighter and transport aircraft, frigates and patrol boats. Few of these acquisitions were new or state of the art, raising doubts about their reliability and effectiveness. The Tatmadaw’s command, control, communications and intelligence capabilities were also largely unknown. Questions hung over its combat proficiency. Under Ne Win, the Tatmadaw was considered an experienced and battle-hardened counter-insurgency force, but its ability to perform in a larger, more conventional and multi-dimensional conflict still cannot be reliably assessed (Selth 2009, 15–18).

Given this level of uncertainty, all reports about the Tatmadaw need to be treated carefully. It has become evident, however, that since the advent of a hybrid civilian–military government in 2011 Commander-in-Chief (CinC) Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has presided over a far-reaching plan to develop the Tatmadaw as a military organisation. The extension of his appointment until 2021 should help it maintain momentum.

The new look Tatmadaw

In an effort to create a better equipped, more professional and more respected force – what former President Thein Sein called a ‘world-class Tatmadaw’ – the CinC took steps to strengthen its cohesion and unity. He removed several senior officers and rotated others to new positions, in a major generational shift. He trimmed the top-heavy command structure and replaced most of the country’s Regional Military Commanders. The infusion of new talent and (potentially, at least) new thinking has been maintained through periodic reshuffles of personnel. Officer cadet intakes have been reduced and child soldiers are being demobilised. There have been large scale transfers of personnel to the Myanmar Police Force (MPF). Pay levels have been increased, new uniforms have been issued and greater control has been exerted over the Tatmadaw’s finances. The CinC has introduced new training programmes and revised others, while seeking to diversify the sources of the armed forces’ expertise. He has also spoken out against corruption and sought to improve the Tatmadaw’s public image.

There have been major equipment upgrades and new arms production programmes. Between 2011 and 2014 Myanmar reportedly purchased arms valued at US$1.6 billion (SIPRI 2015). The main suppliers were China, Russia, Ukraine, India and possibly North Korea. The army has acquired armoured vehicles, ground-based air defence systems, trucks and artillery. The air force is taking delivery of new fighters, combat helicopters, trainers and light transport aircraft. In 2015, it reportedly ordered 16 JF-17 multi-role jets. Since 2011, Myanmar’s navy has commissioned five new frigates, three of which were built with foreign technology in local shipyards. Several corvettes and patrol boats are under construction or on order. It has also been widely reported that Myanmar plans to buy two Russian submarines, but no evidence has yet been offered to support such a claim (Selth 2014). In 2015, nearly 35% of the defence budget was earmarked for new warships, fighter jets, armoured and other vehicles, heavy weapons and ammunition, suggesting that Myanmar’s order of battle is still expanding.

Myanmar has also continued to develop its defence industries. This has not just been to upgrade and expand its weapons holdings but also to make the Tatmadaw more self-sufficient.
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(Selth 2015a, 9). There are some 25 factories and other major sites (such as shipyards and research institutes) producing a wide range of arms, ammunition and equipment. For example, Ukrainian BTR-3U and MT-LB armoured vehicles are currently being built in Myanmar. The Tatmadaw is also able to build, and provide ammunition for, truck-mounted 122mm multiple-launch rocket systems. It is likely that most of the 60 K-8 jet trainers ordered from China in 2009 will be assembled at the Aircraft Production and Maintenance Base at Meiktila, in cooperation with a Chinese firm. The Tatmadaw reportedly hopes to build most of its new JF-17 jet fighters in Myanmar. As noted above, it is already constructing a range of major naval vessels in its Yangon shipyards. To facilitate these projects, Naypyitaw has signed agreements with several foreign countries, related mainly to technology transfers and licensed production.

Over the past 30 years, there have been numerous claims that Myanmar has tried to develop, or has even acquired, weapons of mass destruction. Arguably, before the international community embraced Thein Sein’s reform programme and developed closer relations with his government, Myanmar had a strategic rationale for the acquisition of such weapons. An invasion was never a real prospect, but the hostility shown towards the SLORC and SPDC by the Western democracies between 1988 and 2011 encouraged military leaders to believe that Myanmar faced an existential threat (Selth 2008). The regime’s interest in nuclear technology fell well short of an actual weapons programme, however, and no hard evidence has ever been produced to support reports that the Tatmadaw has developed, tested or used chemical and biological weapons. Accusations that North Korea is helping Myanmar to produce ballistic missiles are harder to refute, but little is known about this programme, its scope, the stage it has reached and the type of missiles possibly involved.

Min Aung Hlaing’s military reform programme is still a work in progress, and appears to be encountering obstacles. There are reportedly divisions within the Tatmadaw over the loss of certain powers and privileges, both on active service and after retirement. There are problems of poor recruitment levels, low morale and high desertion rates. There are also concerns about an inflated junior officer corps, which threatens a promotions logjam (Maung Aung Myoe 2014, 233–49). In addition, recent campaigns against non-state armed groups have exposed deficiencies in leadership, tactics, training and equipment. Many officers and men lack combat experience. Confidence in the ability of the Tatmadaw concurrently to pursue counter-insurgency campaigns in different parts of the country is low. Reports of human rights abuses against both combatants and non-combatants in Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karen States have raised questions over discipline, an issue that also arose in Rakhine State in 2012, when the army was called in to help quell widespread sectarian violence (Human Rights Watch 2013). Similar concerns were raised over operations against the Muslim Rohingyas in late 2016 and early 2017.

The Tatmadaw’s military doctrine has been revised to ‘suit the new political context’ and changed strategic circumstances (Callahan 2012, 128; Maung Aung Myoe 2016). However, there are doubts over its ability to reach the levels of professionalism to which Min Aung Hlaing aspires. In Myanmar military circles, ‘professional’ is often equated with ‘mercenary’. Such an approach to soldiering is anathema to many officers, who see themselves as patriots charged with an historical responsibility to protect the country and constitution. This mindset envisions a perpetual role for the armed forces in national politics. At the same time, accusations have been made that ‘the Tatmadaw’s idealism, professionalism and patriotism have over the years been eroded by nepotism and corruption’. It has been suggested that ‘returning to a more disciplined system is not really practical’ (Euro-Burma Office 2013). Whether or not that is true, the expansion of Myanmar’s polity, economy and civil society since 2011 means that a military career is no longer the only way to obtain an education, technical skills, employment and social status.
The Tatmadaw’s political role

One question often asked is: when will the Tatmadaw ‘return to the barracks’ (ICG 2014)? This reflects a widespread wish for an elected civilian government in Myanmar, but it misses a vital point. The Tatmadaw has never seen itself as having separate military and political roles, with the first naturally having primacy over the second. Rather, it is deeply imbued with the idea that since 1948 it alone has been responsible for holding the Union together, defeating its enemies – both internal and external – and saving the country from chaos. This has given rise to an abiding belief, strengthened by indoctrination programmes, in the importance of ‘national politics’, as opposed to ‘party politics’. It has also led to the conviction that the Tatmadaw has both a right and duty to supersede other state institutions if circumstances demand. It was on this basis that the armed forces took power in 1962 and crushed the 1988 uprising. As Robert Taylor has written, after the latter upheaval the Tatmadaw ‘set out on its own to reunify or, as later termed “reconsolidate”, the country in order to create the conditions for passing authority to a constitutional government’ (Taylor 2015a, 8).

In the 2008 constitution, the Tatmadaw was recognised as an autonomous institution free from civilian control or oversight. It was given the right to administer and adjudicate its own affairs independently, including the management of its personnel. It also has an exclusive right to set its own agenda, particularly with regard to military strategy and operations. In some areas authority is shared, leading to questions over the power of the CinC, relative to the president. However, the constitution specifies that the portfolios of defence, home affairs and border affairs are filled by serving officers chosen by the CinC. If the military-nominated vice president is included, the CinC exercises effective control over 6 of the 11 members of the powerful National Defence and Security Council (NDSC). More to the point, as supreme commander of all ‘Defence Services’ in Myanmar, the CinC has ultimate control over the MPF (including its 30-plus armed security battalions), Border Guard Forces and all other paramilitary organisations.

Under Thein Sein, Myanmar’s executive and armed forces were in broad agreement about the way forward. The Tatmadaw as an institution no longer ran day-to-day politics. It let the government formulate policy in most areas and implement a wide-ranging programme of economic and social reforms. It went from being a ‘hegemonic player’ to a ‘veto player’. As Renaud Egreteau pointed out, the military appointees in parliament did not ‘pursue active law-making, but rather a detailed scrutiny of legislations and motions prepared either by the executive branch or the executive bloc of the legislature’ (Egreteau 2015, 1). In contrast to their more powerful predecessors, the 14 Regional Commanders tended to exercise their authority only on military matters, deferring on other issues to the local civil authorities. For its part, the government seemed content to let the armed forces manage their own affairs. Complications could arise when military and political factors coincided, as may have occurred over peace talks with ethnic armies and the Tatmadaw’s links to North Korea, but these issues were manageable.

The Tatmadaw’s attitude to reform, and the extent to which it feels obliged to control the transition process, will be tested by several issues over the next few years. These include the policies of the NLD government, any new attempts to amend the constitution, and negotiations with non-state armed groups over a comprehensive peace agreement.

Before considering these issues, it is worth noting that the paradigm shift from a dictatorship to a more liberal government is taking place because the Tatmadaw has permitted it to do so. Contrary to the claims of some foreign politicians and activists, Myanmar’s military leadership was not persuaded to loosen its grip on national affairs by external factors such as economic sanctions. Nor was its hand forced by internal strife or military defeat. The decision to launch a transition to a ‘discipline-flourishing democracy’ was made on the basis of careful calculations
as to the Tatmadaw’s status, the political state of the country, its needs in terms of development, and how best to manage its complex security problems. The 2008 constitution was designed to ensure that the armed forces retained overall control of a top-down reform process that met those broad requirements. The pace and degree with which the Tatmadaw steps back further from political power will depend on the nature of the new government and the way in which it manages those issues the Tatmadaw deems most important.

Also, the 2015 elections were held, were relatively free and fair, and produced an accurate result, because the armed forces leadership permitted them to occur and did not interfere. As history attests, it could have intervened at any stage of the process and ensured that the elections were cancelled, postponed or manipulated to give a different outcome. Given their resources and control of Myanmar’s internal affairs, the generals must have known that an honest election would result in a decisive victory for the NLD. The final statistics may have come as a bit of a surprise (before the poll some analysts were doubtful the NLD could achieve a landslide) but the outcome could not have been in doubt. This being the case, it can be assumed that, before the election took place, the Tatmadaw’s senior leadership, in consultation with Thein Sein, took a collective decision to accept the results. There is no tradition in Myanmar of sharing political power, but they must also have faced the prospect of negotiating the future governance of the country with Aung San Suu Kyi and her party.

This is all encouraging, but the Tatmadaw and the NLD still needed to strike a deal of some kind. The massive show of popular support for the main opposition party in 2015 gave it enormous moral authority and a strong bargaining position, but it did not guarantee a free hand to shape Myanmar’s future. That can only be done in cooperation with the armed forces. As Robert Taylor noted before the election, ‘Only the army can end its own role in Myanmar’s politics, and that decision is dependent on its perception of the civilian political elite’s ability to manage the future’ (Taylor 2015b). He might have added, ‘and protect the Tatmadaw as a national institution’. Neither the Tatmadaw’s leadership, nor Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, however, would gain anything from a direct confrontation. Such a clash of wills would inevitably slow down the democratic transition process. It could even halt it.

The Tatmadaw and the NLD government

A deal appears to have been struck between Aung San Suu Kyi and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, but a continuing bone of contention will be the constitution, which is seen by the generals as ‘the main or mother law’ of Myanmar, protecting their core interests and guaranteeing them a role in national affairs. Any attempt to reduce the status of the armed forces will also be resisted. They have already rejected moves to reduce their guaranteed 25% representation in all national and regional assemblies. Future amendments have not been ruled out, but have been opposed on the grounds that Myanmar is still a ‘young democracy’. Concerns have also been expressed that ‘Myanmar is still in a democratic transition . . . stability and reconciliation are very important in this period and democratic practices are not mature enough yet’ (Hnin Yadana Zaw 2015). The generals also opposed changing the constitution to permit Aung San Suu Kyi to become president. In response, she rejected the notion that the president ‘takes precedence over all other persons’ in Myanmar (Constitution 2008, 19), and declared that she would ‘run the government’ and ‘make all decisions’ (Min Zin 2016).

One message consistently given by the generals is that the Tatmadaw will always act according to the law, in particular the constitution. Given that there is a plethora of restrictive laws already on the books, some dating back to the colonial era, and the 2008 charter was written specifically to safeguard the Tatmadaw’s independence, operations and national role, this is
rather disingenuous. The generals will always be able to find some formal legal basis for their actions. Under the provisions of chapter 11 of the constitution, for example, the Tatmadaw can return the country to full military control, if such a step is deemed necessary by the president. Given certain triggers, the CinC could simply mount another coup. Some observers have put the likelihood of that happening over the next five years at 20% (Kurlantzick and Stewart 2013). A few have rated the prospect even higher, but these kinds of estimates are highly speculative. A more realistic notion of the Tatmadaw’s future behaviour can be gauged by examining factors involved at the national, institutional and personal levels.

At the national level, the Tatmadaw is committed to Myanmar’s sovereignty, unity and internal stability, as it judges such matters. These goals were encapsulated in the SLORC/SPDC’s three ‘national causes’ and have been enshrined in the constitution. If they are challenged, military intervention of some kind becomes more likely. Since 2011, perceived external threats have greatly diminished. However, any attempt by the international community to intervene, for example by exercising its ‘responsibility to protect’ the Rohingyas, would be resisted. There is the potential for civil unrest to erupt over several contentious political, economic and social issues. There are 23 Border Guard Force battalions and about a dozen People’s Militia Force units, the reliability of which is suspect. There are also about 100,000 armed personnel in Myanmar, divided among nearly 40 non-state groups (Maung Aung Myoe 2014). Most have resisted efforts to place them under government control, including the estimated 30,000-strong United Wa State Army and the 20,000-strong Kachin Independence Army.

At the institutional level, the Tatmadaw would be concerned at any attempts to deny it a central place in national affairs. This is not only spelt out in the constitution but has been reaffirmed on several occasions by the former president and CinC. Most military officers are intensely nationalistic and take seriously their role as guardians of the country, with its responsibility to step in and ‘save’ Myanmar, if believed necessary. The military leadership is also likely to act if the Tatmadaw itself was considered under threat. Since 2011, the two military-controlled conglomerates known as the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings and the Myanmar Economic Corporation have lost profitable monopolies and certain tax exemptions, but the Tatmadaw’s leadership seems to have accepted that it will still have the men and materiel necessary to ‘safeguard the constitution’. Should a future government or parliament drastically reduce the defence budget, however, or seriously try to restrict the armed forces’ sources of off-budget income, there is likely to be trouble.

At the personal level, many servicemen would be unhappy about an attempt to remove the constitutional clause that effectively grants them immunity from prosecution for human rights violations committed before 2011. If any local politicians, or members of the international community, tried to put Myanmar military personnel on trial for such offences, that would cause considerable concern within the armed forces. According to one senior officer, the SLORC did not hand over power to the NLD after the 1990 elections because the Tatmadaw feared it would face a Nuremberg-style trial. Yet, such issues continue to arise. In 2014, for example, Harvard Law School researchers accused three senior officers, including the then Home Affairs Minister, of war crimes and crimes against humanity (Harvard 2014). Operations against the Rohingyas in 2016 and 2017 were branded ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’. The US has also cited individual officers for their links to Pyongyang. Another possible scenario that deserves brief mention is an attempt by a faction within the Tatmadaw to slow down the reform process, or to preserve perks and privileges that seem to be slipping away.

All that said, the Tatmadaw is no longer the institution it once was and there are significant constraints on direct action of the kind seen in the past. If it should occur, there would inevitably be a strong reaction, both within the country and outside it. Even Myanmar’s
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traditional friends are unlikely to welcome such a retrograde step. Indeed, it could lead to precisely the kind of external pressure and internal ‘chaos’ that the military leadership has tried to avoid. The generals would also need to weigh the benefits of such a move against the possibility that it might spark a serious breakdown in military discipline, as there are clearly many NLD supporters in its ranks. A mutiny has always been one of the generals’ greatest fears, and a reason for some of the measures taken by Myanmar’s security agencies over the past 50 years. In any case, they need not resort to anything as crude as a coup. Thanks to the constitution, and the Tatmadaw’s historical legacy, the CinC can exercise considerable influence without actually assuming power.

For example, through its control of the state’s coercive apparatus, its monopoly of the means of exercising armed force, its guaranteed ministerial appointments and its domination of the NDSC, the Tatmadaw exercises a powerful influence over Myanmar’s internal affairs (Selth 2015b). While the role of the armed forces in the national economy has been declining since 2011, the generals and their capitalist ‘cronies’ could still exert considerable economic pressure on the new government, if they chose to do so. Also, Aung San Suu Kyi knows that an early resolution of the country’s many long-running insurgencies will be one of the NLD’s most pressing policy issues. Yet, there is no hope of a more comprehensive ceasefire agreement – let alone a nation-wide peace settlement – without the full cooperation and active support of the armed forces. Talk of a federal system of government, of the kind mooted by the NLD and some ethnic groups, has already made the Tatmadaw nervous.

It is also relevant that 37 of the 46 ministers in Thein Sein’s government were from the Tatmadaw, including 5 on active duty. Of the 14 Chief Ministers of the states and regions, all but one were retired military officers (Maung Aung Myoe 2014, 247). The UN estimated that nearly 90% of the national parliament had some affiliation to the former military regime (IBAHRI 2012, 52–3). These numbers have changed dramatically as a result of the 2015 elections, but in all national, state and regional assemblies 25% of the seats are still reserved for military personnel. In addition, 80% of senior civil service positions are currently filled by ex-servicemen and women. Of the 33 permanent secretary positions created in 2015, 23 were held by former military personnel. As Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan have written, over decades the officer corps has been socialised into believing that the Tatmadaw is the sole and uncontested embodiment of the state (Egreteau and Jagan 2013). The NLD has resisted purging the public service, but that means many positions of authority will be occupied by former military officers with a strong institutional loyalty to the armed forces.

The Tatmadaw and the international community

While Myanmar continues to attract criticism from governments and organisations, for various reasons, one striking aspect of its re-emergence as an international actor in recent years has been the readiness of foreign countries to renew or strengthen ties with the country’s armed forces and police. Before the advent of Thein Sein’s reformist government, any relationship with the security forces was politically difficult, if not (in the case of some Western democracies) impossible. Yet, since 2011 several governments, international institutions and private foundations have offered Myanmar aid in this sector. These approaches were enthusiastically welcomed by Naypyitaw and, albeit more cautiously, by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Most of these initiatives have been expressed in principled terms, but broadly speaking they make up two separate, if related, sets of proposals. One is aimed at increasing the professionalism of the armed forces, reducing their direct political role and encouraging them to observe internationally accepted norms of behaviour. The other relates to the modernisation and
civilisation of the MPF. While the latter set has been couched in vague terms, refers to the ‘rule of law’ in Myanmar, and alludes to the reform of the country’s deeply flawed judicial system, most seem to envisage aid to the MPF as a way of ‘civilianising’ Myanmar’s coercive apparatus. The thinking seems to be that, the more the police force accepts primary responsibility for law and order, the less the army needs to be involved. Such programmes also help develop bilateral relationships and exert a positive influence on the government, by encouraging the reform process.

The US has been interested in restoring defence ties with Myanmar since Barack Obama came to office, something he hinted at during his state visit in 2012. In 2013, the Tatmadaw sent two observers to Exercise Cobra Gold in Thailand. Later that year, the State Department announced that the US was looking at ways to support ‘nascent military engagement’ with Myanmar as a way of encouraging further political reforms. Pentagon officials have since referred to a ‘carefully calibrated’ plan of engagement that includes Myanmar’s cooperation in the search for the remains of 730 US military personnel missing since 1945. Tatmadaw officers have participated in events sponsored by the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Hawaii, and the US Defence Institute for International Legal Studies has also become involved. Training places in the US for Tatmadaw personnel and a formal military–military dialogue or ‘partnership’ with Myanmar have not been ruled out.

Other countries have followed the US’s lead. During Thein Sein’s 2013 visit to Canberra, for example, Australia’s government announced that it was restoring the resident Defence Attache position in Yangon, which was closed in 1979. Then Prime Minister Gillard said that this would permit engagement with the Tatmadaw in areas like peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as enhancing other forms of dialogue. When Thein Sein visited the UK in 2013, the British government announced that it too was posting a Defence Attache to Yangon. Myanmar was also offered training in human rights, the laws of armed conflict and the accountability of democratic armed forces. Thirty Tatmadaw officers attended a UK-sponsored staff course in 2014 and additional training has been discussed. A European Union (EU) arms embargo remains in place but the EU has provided training in crowd control to the MPF.

The activist community has pointed out that the Tatmadaw still dominates politics in Myanmar, is waging campaigns against armed ethnic groups and is guilty of numerous human rights violations. The MPF has been accused of corruption and other abuses. Another criticism has been that assistance to the security forces gives them a legitimacy they do not deserve and helps them oppress Myanmar society. Some activists have even claimed that foreign training directly helps the army and police to suppress the ethnic minorities, Muslims and the democracy movement. While these accusations have not stopped foreign governments from cautiously providing aid to the security sector, the US Senate has warned of the potential for ‘well-intended engagement [to be] misdirected towards a negative result’ (Lohman 2013). Should the Tatmadaw make life difficult for Aung San Suu Kyi’s government, or fail to curb its excesses in Rakhine State, the attitude of the US and other countries towards bilateral security links would doubtless harden.

**Looking ahead**

Myanmar’s future is unclear, but the Tatmadaw seems to have two main goals over the next decade. The first is the development of a ‘world-class Tatmadaw’, that is more professional, more capable and more respected, both within Myanmar and abroad. As it has acquired new arms and technology, and built up its defence industries, so defence relations with China, Russia and other arms suppliers have strengthened. The Tatmadaw hopes also to develop closer contacts with the forces of Western and ASEAN countries. As far as can be judged, the military
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reform programme seems to have been reasonably successful, but many difficult problems remain to be dealt with. As it tackles these issues, the relationship of the CinC and the Tatmadaw with Aung San Suu Kyi’s government and the new parliament will be critical. That said, the Tatmadaw will remain a powerful political force. By exercising its considerable influence, both directly and indirectly, it is likely to be able to continue its current modernisation and rearmament programmes.

The Tatmadaw’s other main goal seems to be a measured withdrawal from government, while retaining its institutional independence and key national role. It has long been the generals’ intention, however, to decide the time frame for Myanmar’s transition to a genuinely democratic system. Before 2015, there were signs that they envisaged at least one more term under a military-endorsed president before any real handover of power, and then only if certain conditions were met. It remains to be seen how the modus vivendi negotiated between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing fares as the NLD settles into government, policy priorities change and more far-reaching reforms are proposed. The Tatmadaw is unlikely to welcome the constraints on its power and influence that will be required for Myanmar to become a real democracy. Any perceived challenges to the country’s unity, internal stability and sovereignty will also disrupt this process. As the International Crisis group has written, ‘Tatmadaw backing for the transition is indispensable, but by no means unproblematic’ (ICG 2014).

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