



Case Study On Myanmar Military (Tatmadaw)

From 1990 to 2020

Peter

¹Student

¹Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad, India

Abstract: Myanmar is a country with a population of 50 million population. Unfortunately, the country faced the longest civil world since its independence. Myanmar's military played a significant role that impacted not only the lives of the people of Myanmar and its neighboring countries but also regional and global stability. Therefore, studying Myanmar's military (army, navy, and air force), budget, political roles, and what countries support it is worth studying. The researcher applied both quantitative and qualitative methods in this study. There is a limitation to the valid data availability of the Myanmar military, but the researcher tried to use the most reliable sources to substantiate the argument. The study found that Myanmar's military enjoyed the most significant political power in the country from 1990-2020 by a using significant budget on defense ministry more than other ministries, increasing army sizes hugely from 1948 to 2000, and modernizing program in the second phase (2000-2010) along with the partnership of mainly China, Russia and India.

Keywords: Myanmar Military (Tatmadaw), Political Role, Budget, Military Size

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar Military Force (Tatmadaw) has been the most significant institution in Myanmar since its Independence. General Aung San, who founded it for Myanmar's independence, is also called the father of the nation by the people of Myanmar. He is also the father of Daw Aung San Su Kyi, the opposition leader in Myanmar against the military today. In 1958, due to political conflicts and instability among the ruling party, Prime Minister U Nu formed the caretaker government and handed over the power temporarily to the military leader, U Ne Win, until 1960. During the military rule as the caretaker government, the political situation seemed more stable, and the economy developed than before. It made the military leaders over confident, leading them to the military coup in 1962. Since then, the country has been under the rule of the military till today, with some slight changes in the degree of power-sharing with civilian governments throughout the period. The military generals firmly believed that the country surrounded by big powers such as China, India, and Thailand needed a robust standing army to protect the sovereignty against external and internal security threats (Selth, 1996). Today, According to Global Fire Power (GFP), Myanmar's military ranks 38th among 143 countries and the second largest army in the ASEAN, next to Vietnam. In this case study, I explore and analyze the Myanmar military from 1990 to 2020, which spans 30 years with three phases: the first phase (from 1990-2000), the second phase (2001-2010), and the third phase (2011-2020). With the comparative analysis of the three phases, I will examine four main components of the military: the military budget, the political role, the size or capability of the military (Army et al.), and the Myanmar military's partners.

Political Role of the Military:

As I have mentioned in the introduction that the military has ruled the country since 1962 till today. The military faced solid political resistance domestically and internationally for human rights violations, economic mismanagements, ethnic cleansing, etc. Selth (1996), an author of the book, “*Transforming Myanmar Military since 1988*” stated that “Myanmar’s military has also exercised a major influence on the political, economic and social development of the country.”

The military has misused its political power for many years. The military adopted the “Burmanization Policy, or assimilation policy,” which aims to convert ethnic minorities into the majority Burmese by restricting learning of their mother tongues, cultures, and histories. Moreover, throughout their political rules, the military leaders also tried to spread Buddhism by building many pagodas in Christian states like Chin State and Kachin State (Chin et al. Organization (CHRO), n.d). In these ways, the military has misused their political power to protect their and the Burmese majority’s interests. The military leaders had tried to build national unity or integration by using forces. However, the military faced strong repulsion and stronger resistance from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), leading to civil war and economic disruptions till today.

On the other side of robust political control of the army over the country, there are many cases when the generals competed for power among themselves, which almost led to bloodshed and the collapse of the military between 1998 and 2000. After the 1988 uprisings, the political power shifted from General Newin to General Saw Maung who was the chairman of the State Restoration Council of Law and Order (SRCLO). After ruling for a few years, U Khin Ngunt and U Thant Shwe removed General Saw Maung and took charge of the State Restoration Council of Law and Order (SRCLO). Later they changed it into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) that drafted the 2008 constitution without public consultation. The general election was held in 2010 and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), formed by the ex-military generals, won and formed the government. Many political parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) party boycotted the elections and did not contest by citing it as no legitimacy. The 2008 constitution was fully designed by the generals in such a way that military rule will be in place forever in Myanmar politics. Today, significant political power remains in the hands of a handful of military generals, and recently we saw the return of the military coup in 2021. The military will be in politics until they can be overthrown by the people or withdraw by themselves.

Military Budget

The first phase (1990-2000)

It is essential to see the military’s budget to understand a country’s military power. However, the biggest issue to study about the military is the limitation of the works of literature and reliable data, particularly the countries ruled by dictators (military dictators). Only a few scholars have studied the Myanmar military so far. I have tried to use all the data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and government reports. In the first phase (1990-2000), the military’s budget averaged 531.7 million USD annually. This is when the military spent less budget than in other years. Despite the lack of valid sources, the reasons could be because the country’s economy collapsed before 1990 at the hand of General Newin, whose economic Policy, the Burmese Way to Socialism, was based on a closed economy. In 1998, the United Nations designated the country as the poorest country in the world. The second contributing factor to the low budget for the military was that it was still in the early stage of globalization when most countries’ economies did not fully open yet. This did not allow the military to import defense equipment and technologies. The third factor is the sanctions and arms embargos imposed by the Western countries, which also hindered the military’s weaponization.

The second phase (2001-2010)

During this period of 10 years, the military budget averaged 19415.5 million USD annually. This is the period with the highest military budget in Myanmar’s history when China and Russia mainly supported and backed up the military. This was the period when the country modernized its military heavily and spent the highest budget ever (see Table 1).

The third phase (2011-2020)

The budget was still high in this phase but lower than in the previous phase, 2. The reason is that it is the period with quasi-civil military rule. From 2010-2015, the country was ruled by Myanmar generals who changed their uniforms and joined the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), founded by the ex-military generals. The second half of the period was ruled by National League for Democracy Party led by Daw Aung San Su Kyi, with 25% military in parliaments and four central ministries under control by the military. Both governments focused on the country's economic activity and infrastructure development in this period and decreased the military's budget.

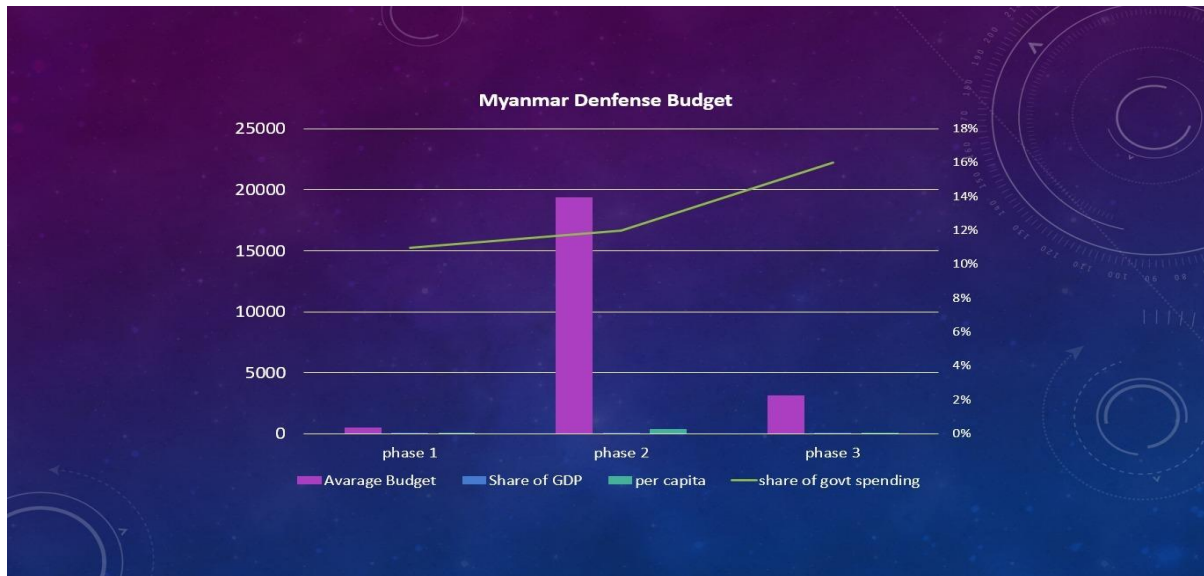


Figure 1: (Source from SIPRI)

The Military Size (Army, Navy, and Air Force):

Andrew Selth, in his article “*Known Knowns and Known Unknowns: measuring the Capability of Myanmar Military*,” wrote that “Since 1988, Myanmar's armed forces have dramatically increased in size and acquired a wide range of new weapons” (2009, p.19). In 1988, Myanmar generals aimed to have a million well-trained army and five million reserved armies to stay secure from external hostile neighboring countries (Myoe, 2009, p.24). It was 5% of the population back then. The analysts said that the Myanmar military generals envisioned becoming like North Korea, which fully controls the country. However, the military was far from achieving its goals, and the number of armies reached only 406,000 in 2010 (SIPRI).

Army (Tatmadaw-Kyi):

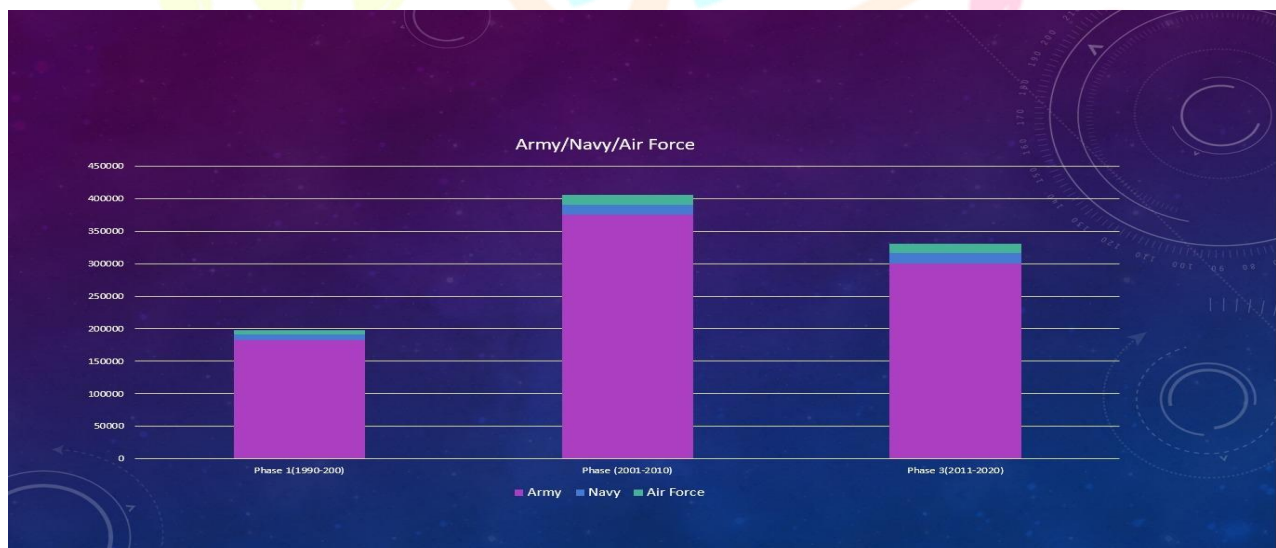
The army's size increased drastically from Phase 1 to Phase 2 and declined gradually from Phase 2 to Phase 3. Aung Myoe, in his book, “*Building the Tatmadaw since 1948*,” wrote that “at the time of Myanmar's independence, there were only fifteen infantry battalions under two regional commands, an infantry division, and an infantry brigade.” Around the year 1990, the size of Myanmar's armed forces was 184,029 (SIPRI). Even the SIPRI admitted that this number is uncertain but the only reliable data. Myoe (2015) stated, “About 184,000 army personnel were spread out among 168 infantry battalions and support corps. These infantry battalions were under nine territorially organized commands and seven centrally controlled light infantry divisions. Regional commands were assigned to form and train people's militias” (p-24). Today, there are 14 regional commands with more than 400 infantry battalions increasing from 2 regional commands in 1948 to 14 regional commands in 2020. However, the number of soldiers has declined slowly from 375,300 to about 300,000 since 2011 due to increased transparency of recruitment, where child-solid recruitment has been banned, retirements, death in battle, and people's unwillingness to join it.

Navy (*Tatmadaw-Yay*):

The Tatmadaw- Yay (the Navy) was founded on December 24, 1947. Around 1950, the Tatmadaw-Yay had only five Navy bases with about 2000 personnel (Myoe, 2015). The number of soldiers in the Navy was about 8,065 in 1995, doubling the size and reaching about 16,000 in Phase 2. Myanmar Navy has undertaken a modernization program, mainly by building indigenous ships with imported equipment since 2000 (Pashadidah.S, 2015). Moreover, the Myanmar Navy bought a Russian-made submarine from India in 2000, and there have been Navy joint exercises with the Indian Navy in West Bengal in 2018. Although the Navy was modernized, it remained almost the same number in the year 2020.

Air Force (*Tatmadaw-Lay*):

Myanmar's Air Force was formed in 1947 with a few hundred personnel, earlier than the Navy. It was not operational until 1950 when the Headquarters was based in Mingaladone (Myoe, 2015). The primary purpose of forming the Air Force was to provide transport, logistics, and air support to the Myanmar army in combating Insurgency. From 1990 onwards, Myanmar Airforce began its modernization program by purchasing over 100 aircraft from China. It also has installed many radiators. The number of personnel in the Air Force was about 6587 in 1990 and increased to 15000 in phase two and phase three (See Table 2). However, the expansion in the Navy and Air Force size was insignificant compared to the Army (*Tatmadaw Kyi*), the highest army ratio to the total number of armed forces in South East Asia Nations. Selth, in his journal article, "*Myanmar Air Force since 1988*," argued that "Myanmar had no credible air defense and its counter-insurgency squadrons consisted largely of training aircraft modified to perform a ground attack role. [Myanmar Air Force] aircrews often showed considerable courage but lacked the necessary skills and equipment to be at the highest level. Ground-to-air co-ordination was poor".



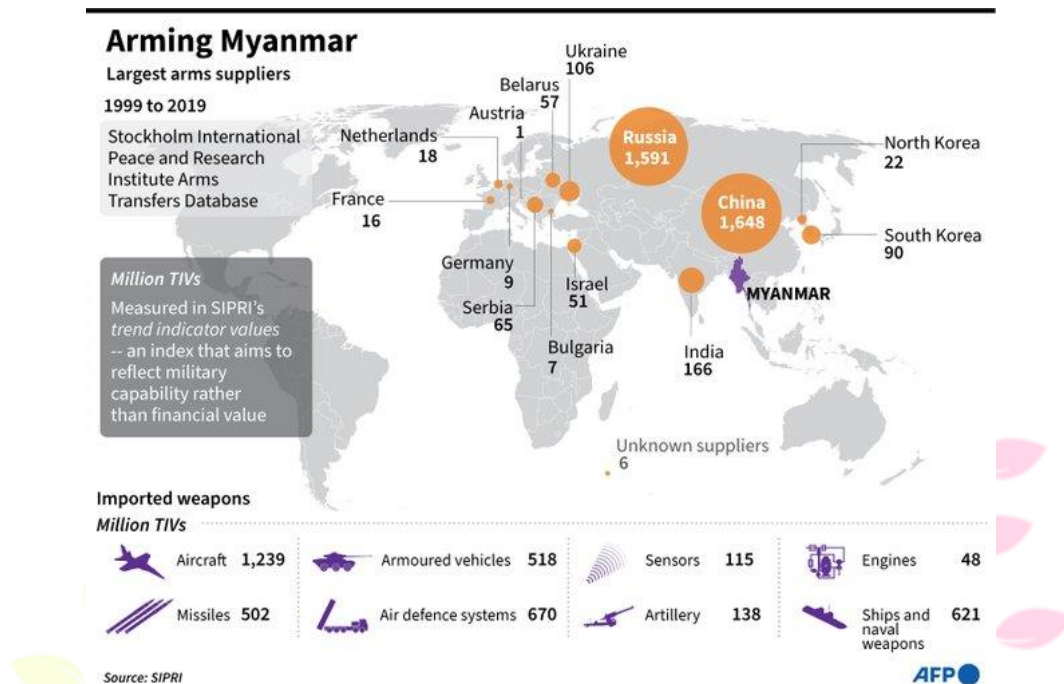
(Figure 2, Size of Myanmar armed Forces, sourced SIPRI)

Myanmar Military's Partners:

Before the 1962 military coup, the military had good partnerships with Western countries who cut the partnership and later built good relationship with China, and Russia. According to Andrew Selth (2000), the author of "*Burma's Military Partners*", the primary secret Burma's military partners around 1990 were China, Germany, Israel, Singapore, and Pakistan. During the second phase (2001-2010), China, Russia, India, Ukraine, and South Korea were the main partners who supplied arms and had ties with the Myanmar military. These are the top five countries that armed Myanmar's military and many other significant counties include North Korea, Belarus, Singapore, Israel, Australia, Netherlands, French, Serbia, Germany, and others (SIPRI, 2019).

It is also good to look at the role of the United States who reconnected with Myanmar's military after 2010 despite insignificant compared to China, Russia and other countries. It seemed that the reasons why the United States came back to engage with Myanmar's military was to inform Myanmar's military into a professional military through giving them training, joint exercises, and intelligence exchanges. On the other hand, some scholars also argue that the United States was interested in sharing intelligence with Myanmar Army and other interests. However, a study by scholars; Murphy, Turpin, and Kucik pointed out that

the reason US's re-ties with the Myanmar military was motivated mainly by the perception or research findings that argue putting Myanmar's army into isolation and economic sanctions will not solve the problems. "It is unreasonable to expect Myanmar's military to professionalize and subordinate itself to a new civilian government" (Murphy, Turpin, and Kucik, 2015,p.8). Instead, it should be connected with the international communities which will be the channels for democratic values and norms to be integrated into Myanmar's military institution.



(Figure 1, Source SIPRI)

Conclusion:

The Myanmar military has faced ups and downs regarding its size or strength, budget, political role, and external partners throughout 30 years from 1990 to 2020. Being the country's most significant institution, the military has had a significant political role since 1948 until to date. The size of the military (army, navy, and airforce) had expanded vastly until the second phase (the year 2010), with a sliding decline in phase 3 (the year 2010 onwards). The military budget peaked in the second phase (2005) when the military started massive modernization and weaponization programs. Lastly, China, Russia, India, and Ukraine have been significant Myanmar military partners since 1990.

References:

- Globalfirepower (2023). World Military Strength Rankings. <https://www.globalfirepower.com/>
- Min, Win. (2008). Looking Inside the Burmese Military. *Asian Survey - ASIAN SURV.* 48. 1018-1037. 10.1525/as.2008.48.6.1018.
- MURPHY, E., TURPIN, M., & KUCIK, P. (2015). Reforming Myanmar's Military. *PRISM*, 5(3), 76–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26470412>
- NAOC. <https://natoassociation.ca/modernization-of-the-myanmar-navy/>
- Selth, A. (2000). *Burma's secret military partners*. Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences.

Pashadidah.S. (2015, August 17). *Modernization of the Myanmar Navy*

Selth, A. (2000). *Burma's secret military partners*. Australian National University, Research School of Social Sciences.

SELTH, A. (1998). The Myanmar Air Force Since 1988: Expansion and Modernization. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 19(4), 388–415. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25798399>

Selth. (2019, May 7). *Myanmar: Pariah status no bar to defence modernisation*. Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/myanmar-pariah-status-no-bar-defence-modernisation>

