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Maung Aung Myoe - *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (ISEAS 2009)

reviewed by Ashley South

This is an important resource book, although probably somewhat dry and technical for the non-specialist reader. Maung Aung Myoe constructs a very detailed portrait of the Burmese Armed Forces - the *Tatmadaw* - which have dominated the state and society since the late 1950s, and particularly following the military coup of 1962. To do so, he has used a variety of sources, including the internet encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. However, the author does not assess the accuracy of such non-standard sources, which makes it difficult for the reader to judge the reliability of some of the data cited.

As well as describing the historical development of the *Tatmadaw*, the author provides detailed information regarding its military doctrine, organisation and force structure, armaments, various attempts at modernisation, military training, and finances. These chapters (and the appendices) are replete with useful information, much of it not easily available elsewhere.

Students of politics will of course be interested in the social, economic and political roles of the Burma Army (the wing which has long dominated the Armed Forces). Although Maung Aung Myoe addresses these issues, he does so within a limited framework. From the outset, his book is sympathetic to the Burmese military, its worldview and mission. The first sentence states that the *Tatmadaw* "has been crucial in restoring and maintaining law and order" in Myanmar. In certain respects, this is obviously true. However, such an assertion needs to be unpacked, inasmuch as it glosses over the military's role in dominating society, and brutally suppressing dissent. This said, it is certainly the case, as the author goes on to state, that the *Tatmadaw* "is one of the most important institutions in Myanmar politics." Therefore a detailed - if to this reviewer, overly sympathetic - account of its development and characteristics provided a welcome addition to the literature.

As might be expected from such a specialised text, the reading is sometimes heavy going. (In places, the book resembles a Ph.D. dissertation, on which it is presumably based.) As such, it hardly bears comparison with the more fluent and sophisticated (and critically self-aware) treatment of the subject provided in numerous publications by Andrew Selth - generally regarded as the most authoritative scholar of the *Tatmadaw*.

One of Maung Aung Myoe's main themes is that the *Tatmadaw* has developed from an army focused primarily on civil war fighting (and expelling Kuomintang foreign invasion, in the 1950s), towards a greater emphasis on external security. This transformation from counter-insurgency to a conventional armed forces explains most aspects of *Tatmadaw* modernisation over the past two decades (since the military coup which suppressed the 1988 'democracy uprising').

Without being drawn conclusively on the *Tatmadaw's* troop strength, Maung Aung Myoe suggests the number is approximately 350,000. In an unfortunately rare example of slick phrasing, he suggests that "while most of the countries in the Southeast Asia region have transformed their Armed Forces into meaner and leaner forces, Myanmar is probably the only country where only the 'meaner' bit is applicable, but not the 'leaner'" (201).

The book is particularly interesting when detailing the *Tatmadaw's* counter-insurgency strategy and tactics since the 1960s. Numerous authors have examined the Burma Army's - highly successful - 'Four Cuts' campaigns, directed against Communist (until 1989) and ethnic-nationalist insurgents. Maung Aung Myoe examines the strategy of "denying the water to the fish" from the perspective of the *Tatmadaw*. Unfortunately, the author has little to say regarding one of the most significant aspects of the *Tatmadaw's* counter-insurgency strategy: the series of ceasefires agreed between the military government and various armed ethnic groups, since 1989.

The book is notable for its emphasis on the *Tatmadaw's* efforts to penetrate and mobilise social groups in Burma - for example, by enrolling rural communities in various militias. He demonstrates that, far from being a novel enterprise undertaken by the current SLORC-SPDC regime, this approach has characterised military regimes in Burma since the early 1960s. This leads into a useful discussion of the *Tatmadaw's* role in patronising the pro-government Union Solidarity Development Association, which many observers expect to morph into a political party, in order to represent military interests in the forthcoming elections.

Maung Aung Myoe also touches upon the paranoia which has characterised military rule in Burma, since the time of General Ne Win. Couching his analysis in terms of 'threat perception', he points out how xenophobia (often fuelled by the rhetoric of foreign powers) has helped to "strengthen the siege mentality of the *Tatmadaw* commanders" (33).

The book is largely silent on recent controversies regarding whether and how the *Tatmadaw* has sought to develop a nuclear capability. Likewise, it has little to say on the question of Chinese 'listening stations' in the country. Intriguingly however, the author does suggest that "the *Tatmadaw* will be engaging any foreign aggression with guerrilla warfare and *tunnel warfare* if strategic denial fails" (39 - emphasis added).

Another controversial area addressed by the book is that of splits within the *Tatmadaw* leadership. The issue is first raised in the context of General Ne

Win's assumption of command in 1949, and purging of the original (Karen-dominated, so-called 'Rightist') leadership inherited by the *Tatmadaw*, at the time of independence. The most significant recent episode involves the purge of ex-Military Intelligence chief (and Prime Minister), General Khin Nyunt, in October 2004. Maung Aung Myoe devotes some attention to the fall of Khin Nyunt, and also has interesting things to say about the tensions within the *Tatmadaw* between field commanders and headquarters.

Several of the later chapters, on military force structures, armaments and training are extremely detailed, and thus likely to be of interest to a limited number of specialists. Nevertheless, there are some interesting asides regarding the nature of corruption within the *Tatmadaw*, and the question of whether this institution is capable of implementing good governance in Burma/Myanmar.

Regarding the finances of the *Tatmadaw* and military government, the author notes that "any attempt to calculate Myanmar defence expenditure is fraught with peril" (163). He nevertheless attempts an overview, which is particularly valuable in its account of the *Tatmadaw's* very considerable economic activities and interests. This is a topic of particular relevance, given the military government's current rash of 'privatisations', under which state assets have been transferred to private hands, in the run-up to planned elections. The author notes that "what will eventually determine the future of the *Tatmadaw's* business is the ability of the *Tatmadaw's* leadership to maintain institutional cohesion within the military and to influence the political process in Myanmar" (190).

The author questions whether the *Tatmadaw* will be able to pursue its doctrine of 'People's War, under modern conditions', without "the vitality of the support of the people" (197). However, he does not take the opportunity to further investigate the nature of legitimacy in modern Burma, and whether/how the *Tatmadaw* is able to generate this. He does however, provide an interesting discussion of the manner in which the *Tatmadaw* is dominated by ethnic Burman Buddhists, and the exclusion of non-Burmans and Christians (or for that matter, Muslims) from its senior ranks.

Unfortunately, Maung Aung Myoe largely fails to engage with the well-documented fact that the *Tatmadaw* is an agent of - often brutal - suppression in the country which it is supposed to protect. *Building the Tatmadaw* is nevertheless an important contribution to the relatively sparse literature on an institution which is likely to dominate state and society in Burma/Myanmar for some time to come. It would be even more useful, if the author was able to reflect critically on his sources.