The Great Jigsaw
Myanmar's Insurgency

by Terence Co

Drug warlords control labs mainly in eastern Myanmar, and do a brisk export business in heroin, methamphetamine, and crystal meth.

Born of War

The territory comprising modern Myanmar was conquered gradually by the British during their nineteenth century competition with the French over Southeast Asian resources. Three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824-26, 1852, and 1883-86) saw British and Indian troops defeat the armies of the Burmese Konbaung dynasty. The Third Anglo-Burmese War ended with Burma becoming an appendage to the British colonial government in India. The elimination of traditional local officials led to the destruction of centuries-old social ties, which in turn caused a breakdown of the social order. Burma became the most dangerous place in the British Empire, and the capital of Rangoon one of the most lawless and crime ridden of British colonial cities.

The British tried to stem the rising tide of violence by the use of force and the raising of a local police force and administration. Most of the staffing was provided by Indian, Kachin, Chin, and Karen minorities, producing much resentment among the Bamar.

What's in a Name?
The names Burma and Myanmar are used interchangeably throughout the article. Burma, an English corruption of Bamar, is used by many countries, among them the US, UK, France, Canada, and even the Burmese themselves. The name was changed officially to Myanmar on 27 May 1989 by the ruling junta; according to rumor the change was made at the urging of the junta’s soothsayers.

Myanmar is the largest country in Southeast Asia. The terrain is rough, with mountain ranges ringing the north along the Chinese border, central lowland valleys, and hilly jungle highlands cut by three major rivers, the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy), Mekong, and Salween. The population of 50,000,000 is spread among an estimated 108 ethnicities in several major groups. The Bamar constitute 60 percent of the population and are spread throughout the country. The remaining 40 percent are split roughly evenly among five major groups, most concentrated in a particular province or state. The Shan are found mostly in the northeast, the Karen in the south and southeast along the Thai border, the Wa in the north, and the Kachin, renowned warriors, in the far north. Burmese of Chinese descent are congregated in the big cities and along the borders, and control the majority of the businesses in Myanmar. The country is rich in petroleum, timber, precious gems, and gold. It is also one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of opium.
The Tatmadaw

The Tatmadaw (Armed Forces of Myanmar) was formed with British oversight during the Kandy Conference (6–7 September 1945). The aim of the conference was to create a Burmese national army, bringing together the various political and ethnic groups which emerged during the Japanese occupation.

The plan was to form an army of two wings, one of ethnic Bamar and the other of all non-Bamar. The total strength of 12,000 men was to be divided among some support units and operational battalions: four of Bamar infantry, two each of Chinese, Karen, and Kachin infantry, and one each of artillery and armored cars (the latter two termed “regiments”). Weapons were a variety of British, American, and Japanese World War II castoffs. It first entered combat shortly after independence (4 January 1948), fighting a variety of insurgent forces in a rising civil war.

The army not surprisingly fractured along ethnic lines with the mutiny of the non-Bamar units. From 1948 to 1950 the nation collapsed into a collection of warlords and independent insurgent states. To make things worse, Chinese Nationalist military units retreated into Burma in the aftermath of the Chinese civil war, adding to the mix of warring parties. From 1950–1953, the Tatmadaw expanded and reorganized itself in response to the KMT threat and fear of the Chinese communist invasion of Burma. The transformation of the Tatmadaw from a disorganized militia army to a centralized and organized regular army was done with minimal foreign assistance other than arms procurement, and was the work of a staff of imaginative British- and Japanese-trained Burmese army officers. The Yugoslavian and Israeli armies were used as role models for the new Tatmadaw with the aim of establishing an army with effective conventional and counterinsurgent qualities.

The revitalized military staved off the collapse of the Rangoon government and slowly regained control of the country. By 1982 the Tatmadaw had expanded to around 100,000 men in 57 battalions. It had become central to the Burmese government and economy and by 1980 was running banks, shops, schools, and business, and had a virtual monopoly on the Burmese economy. The power of the Tatmadaw also led to tensions with the Burmese civil government which resulted in the March 1982 military coup which brought Ne Win to power.

From 1962–1987, the Tatmadaw became primarily a counterinsurgent army with the assistance of Switzerland, Yugoslavia, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. The 1988 coup deposing Ne Win established the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and led to another military reorganization. The Tatmadaw’s focus shifted from counterguerrilla to a conventional mission of resisting foreign invasion due to the fear of a U.S-led invasion, a fear raised mainly by the appearance of a carrier group off the coast of Burma during the 1988 uprisings. The Tatmadaw was increased to around 500,000 men by 2010, in addition to 72,000 in the national police force. The army/Tatmadaw Kyaw/controls the bulk of them. The battalion retains its primary combat unit, but increasingly sophisticated larger organizations are being fielded. In addition to ten light infantry divisions, there are nine artillery and five armored division-equivalents, plus eleven regional Military Operational Commands controlling a variable number of battalions. Heavy weapons have been increased as well, with massive procurement of Chinese, Russian, and Ukrainian tanks and artillery.

The 19,000-man navy/Tatmadaw Yay/has an estimated 122 vessels, mostly corvettes and patrol boats, while the 15,000-man air force/Tatmadaw Lei/fields a few hundred aircraft. In both cases the equipment has been modernized with the purchase of British, American, and Russian guns and tanks.

Training is considered by observers to be generally good, particularly in jungle and guerrilla warfare. On the other hand, there are significant numbers of children soldiers as young as 12 forcefully recruited due to low volunteer rates.

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Gen. Ne Win assumed the position of commander in chief of the Burmese Armed Forces, the Tatmadaw, in early 1949. Reduced to 2,000 men of questionable loyalty, the army could secure little more than the capital and its immediate environs.

The government had little choice but to appeal to the Rangoon on ethnic lines alone. Local bosses, bandit rings, thugs, and other criminals were brought into the ruling structure. Much of the economy, or those portions still operating, fell into government control.

Ne Win accepted warlord bands into the army, and grabbed whatever recruits he could, from boys to old men. Many of the army’s existing weapons moving with the non-Bamar soldiers. The cutting of ties with Great Britain forced the army to turn to the black market to arm its expanding ranks.

The army’s one strength was its experience in guerrilla warfare, a relic of operations during the war. The rebels were also experienced fighters, and each side conducted a hit-and-run campaign against the other. Supplies were acquired by plundering enemy territory, but the insurgents exacted a heavy toll even in their own lands, making the Tatmadaw incrementally more a warlord than an army.

The situation got worse in 1950. Several thousand disciplined and well-armed Chinese Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese Nationalists) troops retreated into Burma after their defeat in the Chinese Civil War. The Burmese military was galvanized by the incursion, fearing a Communist

Communist Insurgent Groups

Communist Party of Burma (CPB). Formed in 1939, the CPB fought the Japanese from 1941 to 1945, then went underground in 1948 due to governmental crackdown. Concentrated in the Shan and Kayah states, its membership is mainly ethnic Chinese. Its strength fluctuated wildly, from an estimated 30,000 in 1979 to a current estimate of 3,000 spread into four factionalized units (see below). The factions originated in a 1989 offer by Beijing to retire CPB leaders to China, leaving behind many hardcore Marxist members who despise a revisionist China.

New Democratic Army (NDA). Led by Teng Yang and based mainly on the Chinese border northwest of Myitkyina. It has around 400 trained fighters and has been involved in logging and the drug trade with China. As of 2010, the NDA has become another warlord army allied with the Myanmar government (Ting Yang himself ran for a seat in Myanmar’s Parliament).

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Party/Army (MNDA/MDAA). Based in the Shan state and led by Peng Jinshao and his younger brother Peng Jinjui, its estimated strength is around 2,000. It is one of the main drug trafficking organizations in Myanmar. Its relations with the Myanmar government have been varied, going from ally to enemy. A 2009 Tatmadaw offensive to control the Shan State envisioned it. Its remnants are still fighting a guerrilla war against the Tatmadaw.

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MDAA). Based north of Keng Tung, eastern Shan State, it is led by Lin Mingxiong and Zhang Zhiming. With an estimated strength of 5,000, it is one of the best organized drug warlord organizations in Myanmar, also operating the casinos in Mongla, “Burma’s Las Vegas.” Though currently allied with the Myanmar government, it is known as a puppet of Chinese intelligence (MSS: Ministry of State Security).

Communist Party Red Flag (CPRF). A radical faction of the CPB founded by Thakin Soe in 1946. Its main strongholds were centered in the Arakan Yoma area of Upper Burma where Soe fought the Japanese. In 1960s heyday it fielded 2,000 men. It collapsed in 1970 when Thakin Soe was captured. On his death in 1988, the remnants of the CPRF was absorbed by other insurgent groups.

People’s Volunteer Organization/People’s Comrade Party (PVO/PCC). The PVO was set up in 1946 as a military ally to Aung San. After his assassination, the PVO split into two factions. The PVO “Yellow Band” led by Boh Aung were moderates and allied with the Burmese government. The PVO “White Band” led by Bo La Yaung and Bo Po Kun were more radical and anti-government. After a rift with the Tatmadaw, Bo La Yaung surrendered to the government in the 1950s. The “White Band” reformed into the PCC until surviving until 1958 when Bo Po Kun surrendered to the Tatmadaw. The PVO collapsed and many of its leaders became part of the Burmese government.

Chin National Vanguard Party (CNVP). This was a small communist group set up in 1946 in the localized Chin in the Thingyaing area. It was absorbed in 1963 by the CPB.

Communist Party of Arakan (CPA). The CPA was set up in 1982 by Kyaw Zan and a breakaway group from the CPB. Active mainly in the Myebon township (Kayahla), it collapsed in 1980 with the surrender of its leader. Its remnants are thought to be active in Thailand.

Riding the Dragon

Burma was a mess in the aftermath of the war. Its infrastructure was ruined and mutually antagonistic armed groups were reorganizing themselves for civil war. The British, trying to prepare Burma for independence wanted to leave behind an orderly nation willing and able to part of the British Commonwealth. The odds were stacked against them however: the majority Bamar were firmly anti-communist, while the minority groups had been promised separate homelands. A national election in 1947 returned a parliament dominated by the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFFPL), the latest incarnation of the BNA. The nation officially became independent on 4 January 1948, with the AFFPL’s U Nu as its first prime minister. The new government declared membership non-Bamar minorities — Kachins, Karens, Chins — and promised independent homeland after the war. By early 1945 it was clear Japan would lose the war and sign the Cairo Declaration, allowing the Allies clear Burma in 1945.

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Kachin Insurgent Groups

Koongtartung (KMT). This splinter of the Chinese Nationalist organization was directed initially by Lt.-Gen. Liu Yuanlin, a radiologist of KMT leader Chiang Kai-Shek. Based on its bases along the Sino-Burmese border in the Shan State and the Thai border in the south, where it built up the opium trade to finance its operations and carried out cross border raids into China. In 1950, it worked closely with Taiwanese intelligence, Thai military authorities, and the CIA. In 1952 it numbered 12,000 under arms with an unknown number of reserves drawn from the local ethnic Chinese population. The Tatmadaw viewed them as foreign invaders and also feared that their antics would provoke a military invasion from China. Joint military action by the Thai and Chinese against the KMT convinced them that it was time to leave China. By 1961, they retained proxy groups in the Shan State through the 1970s.

Kachin Independence Army (KIA/KIAK) Formally established in 1961 in the Shan State, it was an estimated strength of 10,000 men under arms plus an unknown number in local militias. In 1964 it signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government, which broke down after the 2010 election.

Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization/Army (DKBA/DKIA) A faction of the KNLA broken away in 1986, this mainly Buddhist Karen armed force is a Tatmadaw proxy. It has been fighting on the KIA’s behalf in Shan State to assist the Tatmadaw’s military operations. The DKIA has several thousand fighters and access to substantial Chinese aid. In 2006 it launched a campaign to forced tens of thousands of refugees to flee from the KIA-controlled areas into areas under government control. It has been fighting in the KIA’s behalf in Shan State to assist the Tatmadaw’s military operations.

Who’s Who in the Burmese Jigsaw

Aung San. Born on 13 February 1915 in Namfak, Burma, into a family active in the Burmese anti-colonial resistance, he graduated from Rangoon University in 1938 with a BA in English Literature and Political Science. In 1939 he became one of the founders of the CBD (Communist Party of Burma) and agitated against the British administration in Burma. With a warrant issued for his arrest, he fled to China in 1940 to get assistance from the KMT. He was captured en route by the Japanese and convinced to go to Japan instead. He is said to have been given military training, material, and money. In 1941 he formed the Burma Independence Army in Thailand to assist the Japanese invasion of Burma. By 1945 the Japanese proclaimed Burmese independence with the now renamed Burma National Army (BNA) as its armed forces and Aung San as its War Minister. Not trusting the Japanese and seeing the wind was blowing, he contacted the British and communist guerrillas and struck a deal. The BNA helped eject the Japanese in 1945. In 1946 he became Prime Minister of the interim Burmese government. He was killed in a 19 July 1947 gunmen working for former colonial China and intelligence agents against the Burmese independence movement. His name is known in both Burmese government and anti-government circles. Since the 1990s, the Myanmar government has tried to eradicate all traces of his memory, even removing his face from Burmese currency.

Ne Win. His birth date is not known with certainty — accounts are confused and range from 1910-1919 — but he was born in Pangyang, Puga, Burma. A Bamar descent, he studied biology at Rangoon University but was expelled in 1939 for failing his exams. He was one of the “Thirty Comrades” trained by the Japanese to help during the occupation. By 1949, he was appointed commander in chief of the Tatmadaw and proceeded to expand, reform, and restructure the organization. In 1962, he seized power in a coup. From 1962-1988, he instituted the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” a hodgepodge of nationalism, Marxism, and Buddhism, and outlawed all political parties except his BSP (Burmese Socialist Programme Party). His economic and political policies, formed with the advice of soviet advisors, were centered on isolating Burma from the rest of the world. This result was an economic disaster. He resigned in 1988 but manipulated Burmese politics behind the scenes. In 2002, he and his daughter, Sandar Win, were placed under house arrest. Three of his grandsons were executed for their part in a failed attempt to overthrow the junta. He died on 5 December 2002 in Yangon and was refused a state funeral.

Khan Sa (Zhang Qia). Probably the most famous of the Golden Triangle drug warlords, he was born on 17 February 1933 of Shan Chinese extraction. As a teenager, he trained with KMT armies in the China-Burma border regions. In 1963, he formed a militia of several hundred men with the assistance of the Tatmadaw in exchange for help against Shan rebels. By 1967, he was strong enough to cut his ties to the Tatmadaw and establish his own headquarters, covering a large area in the Shan and Wa states, and expand opium production. He adopted the name “Khan Sa” which means “Prosperous Prince,” to reflect his success in the drug trade. By 1969 his army was decimated by clashes with KMT and Tatmadaw forces and he was captured. Freed in 1973, he returned to the drug trade, set up a private Shan United Army to enforce drug operations, and agitated for Shan independence. In 1982, elements of the Thai police and army drove him from his Shan base back into Burma. From 1984 to 1994, his network had the lion’s share of the heroin market in the USA (80 percent in the New York area) and his heroin was said to be 90 percent pure “the best in the business” according to DEA. By 1989, he was at the top of the US DEA most wanted list and had a $12 million bounty on his arrest. He surrendered to Burmese officials in 1995 and lived the rest of his life in the Rangoon area, where he had significant investments. He died on 26 October 2007.


Than Shwe. Born 2 February 1933 in Kyaukse, Mandalay province, Burma, he worked as a postman in his hometown before joining the Tatmadaw to fight Karen guerrillas in eastern Burma. He rose through the ranks until becoming prime minister and chairman of the State Peace and Development Council in 1992, making him the de facto ruler of Myanmar. During his rule, he has continued his predecessor’s policy of using pohtaino for use in the political system, and has done little to control runaway corruption, mismanagement, and human rights abuses.

Aung San Suu Kyi. Born 19 June 1945 in Yangon, she is the daughter of Aung San. She earned a Ph.D. at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, in 1985. Returning to Burma three years later to help her ailing mother, she got caught up in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, becoming its face and leader. She was put under house arrest in 1989 and remained there for most of the period 1989-2010. Free since 2010, she was elected to the Myanmar parliament and has announced her intention to run for president. Her activities and steadfast opposition to military dictatorship have made her the focus of the international movement calling for reform in Myanmar.