

Myanmar's military holds key to further reform by
William C. Dickey and Nay Yan Oo

William C. Dickey (william.dickey@icloud.com) is a retired US Army colonel and served as the US senior defense official and defense attaché to Myanmar from 2012-2015. Nay Yan Oo (nayyan@pacforum.org) is a resident fellow at the Pacific Forum of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This article originally appeared in Nikkei Asian Review and can be found [here](#).

What does Myanmar need to push through a successful democratic transition? It must build strong institutions, transform the economy, and end decades of conflict between ethnic armed groups and government forces, among numerous other challenges. Yet, these enormous tasks seem trivial when compared to what is probably the biggest obstacle to further democratic reform: the role of Myanmar's armed forces, or Tatmadaw.

No other institution is more powerful than the Tatmadaw in Myanmar. Over five decades of military rule, the armed forces became entrenched in politics and business. Not only does it occupy 25 percent of total seats in Parliament, granting it an effective veto over constitutional change, but it also controls three key ministries: Defense, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. The president is not the commander-in-chief, and hence, has no official control of the Tatmadaw. Moreover, the constitution grants the military power to take charge of the country in times of emergency.

Building a professional military — a military under civilian control that stays out of politics and respects international norms — is crucial for Myanmar's democratization. Improvement along these lines would also be invaluable for the peace process and ultimately for reform of the military-drafted constitution. For this mission, the Myanmar government — particularly its de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi — should ask the United States to assist with the professionalization of the Myanmar military.

Evolving ties

The US restored full diplomatic relations with Myanmar in 2013, and virtually all economic sanctions were lifted during the Obama administration. However, the Congress has maintained laws, restrictions and policies that do not allow the US military to fully engage with the Myanmar armed forces. This includes providing assistance to the Tatmadaw and offering professional military education to its officers. Curbs such as the Tom Lantos Block Burmese JADE (Junta's Anti-Democratic Efforts) Act of 2008, State Department policies and specific wording in US appropriation acts for Myanmar prohibit US government funding of military training for Myanmar.

Despite these hurdles, Myanmar's military leaders have shown eagerness to forge closer military ties with the Pentagon. Since 2012, the Tatmadaw has sought training from the US in nonlethal areas such as dealing with the media and professional military education. Although laws and policy prevent US training for the Tatmadaw, a formal request from the civilian-led Myanmar government to the US government, per diplomatic norms, would likely be well received by the Congress.

While bilateral relations are not as active as they were under the previous US administration, Suu Kyi's enduring influence in Washington could help change, or at least allow for, certain exceptions to the current restrictive policies. Although her image has been damaged internationally after anti-Muslim violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Suu Kyi still has the power to rally support behind her on Capitol Hill. For instance, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell told Secretary of State Rex Tillerson "[Don't forget about Burma](#)" in their first meeting. Tillerson spoke with Suu Kyi by phone in late June and invited her to the US later this year.

America is well suited to assist Myanmar's armed forces, and has experience helping militaries in many countries through a full menu of nonlethal courses and training offered by the US-funded Expanded International Military and Education Training (E-IMET) program. Its objectives include a focus on proper management of defense resources, improving military justice systems in accordance with internationally recognized human rights, and understanding the principle of civilian control of the military. To attain an E-IMET program, a country must be eligible to receive congressionally appropriated IMET funds. Each year the US Congress reviews each country's situation and can approve or withdraw funding for training if so warranted.

There are many E-IMET success stories. One historical example of success, in terms of helping with a military's professionalization and a country's democratic transition, is Indonesia. Gen. Suharto and his New Order regime ran Indonesia for 32 years from 1966 to 1998 essentially as a military-backed dictatorship. Similar to Myanmar today, Indonesia once had military representation in the legislative body. The US had trained hundreds of Indonesian military officers under the IMET and E-IMET programs. During the country's democratic transition, the Indonesian military, realizing the benefit of democracy due to its exposure to democratic armies, removed itself from the legislative body in 2004.

An influential leader of the reform group that was integral to extracting the Indonesian military from the legislative body was Indonesian army Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Agus Widjojo. He was an IMET recipient who attended the US Army Command and General Staff College in 1988 and the US National Defense

University in 1994. “IMET played a crucial role in Indonesia’s democratization and could so in Burma too,” Widjojo once [stated](#). In mid-August, he traveled to Naypyitaw to give a presentation and share Indonesia’s experience at a high-level gathering organized by the Myanmar government, called Forum on Myanmar’s Democratic Transition. Suu Kyi opened the three-day forum.

Currently, IMET funding and the E-IMET program are unavailable to Myanmar. As her country’s de facto leader, Suu Kyi should ask for this engagement during her upcoming Washington visit. Among courses that would provide appropriate training for the Myanmar military are the US Defense Institute of International Legal Studies, professional military education training courses, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief courses in the US and neighboring Asian countries.

The request should also include attendance of Tatmadaw officers and civilian defense officials in wide-ranging courses offered at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii. Although not part of the IMET program, Suu Kyi should also ask for participation in the US State Partnership Program. Through engagement with a State National Guard unit and attendance at various training programs in the US, Tatmadaw officers could learn firsthand the importance of civilian control of the military and of adhering to international norms.

Engagement necessary

US engagement with the Myanmar military is necessary to help Myanmar stay on track for democratic reforms. Washington could start this process by restoring IMET funding. It is understandable that some Myanmar watchers and local commentators, however, do not subscribe to this thinking. They argue that the US should not reach out to the Myanmar military but use its political leverage instead to pressure the Tatmadaw on a range of issues, from human rights concerns to the nature of military operations. The public is also skeptical about the type of US training offered. People are worried that the Myanmar military will receive tactical or combat training and then use that against its own citizens.

The public’s concern is understandable, which is why we suggest that Suu Kyi should only ask for nonlethal and leadership training that focuses on core objectives of a professional military. Such training would introduce the Myanmar military to democratic values and international norms. Building the capacity of the mid-level officers is, in a way, nurturing the next generation of the Tatmadaw leaders.

Additionally, such developed capacity in the Myanmar military would help them to understand and embrace the concept of a free media in a democratic society and welcome any type of external oversight of disputes involving the security forces, such as the United Nations’s recent request to examine the situation in Rakhine State.

The Trump administration, with its maturing focus on cooperation with member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the Congress with its history of assisting developing nations with their transition to democracy, would likely respond favorably to a request from

Myanmar’s State Counselor Suu Kyi to professionalize the military. A Tatmadaw that is under civilian control, respectful of human rights and international norms would make an invaluable contribution to Myanmar’s transition to democracy.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.

Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.