

Myanmar-US Retired Military-to-Military Dialogue
Yangon, Myanmar, May 11-12, 2015
Key Findings

The Pacific Forum CSIS, in partnership with the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (M-ISIS), and with support from the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (DOE/NNSA), held the second Myanmar-US Retired Military-to-Military Dialogue in Yangon, Myanmar, on May 11-12, 2015. The group included approximately 25 participants and observers from Myanmar and the US, all attending in their private capacities. Topics included the political dynamics that are shaping US-Myanmar relations; the threats of terrorism and illicit trafficking in Southeast Asia; the relationship between security sector reform and good governance; opportunities to build trust by expanding nonproliferation cooperation; and the potential for increased military-to-military cooperation in areas such as peacekeeping, maritime security, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The overall atmosphere was extremely open, friendly, and engaging. It was even more intimate and candid than in 2014. Key findings include:

- Myanmar has made important progress toward democracy over the last few years, including an increase in media freedom, the release of most political prisoners, the inclusion of the opposition party, and movement toward national reconciliation. There is clearly a growing desire to move away from international isolation within both the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw.

- Both sides recognize that Myanmar still has a long way to go. US participants were encouraged by the fact that many seek to help Myanmar in its transition, but also warned that detractors would continue to look for ways to discredit progress. Myanmar participants urged patience, arguing that democratic reform is likely to be a decades-long process; challenges include a complicated political situation, poverty, lack of expertise and capacity, ethnic violence, and illegal businesses. Indonesia was cited as a comparable example of the time it will take for reform to take hold.

- There was general agreement that both sides would benefit from continuing the dialogue. Some, however, questioned the extent to which it is influencing US and Myanmar government policy. Several US participants felt more involvement by the US country team would be beneficial.

- The upcoming election in Myanmar will be watched closely. It is viewed as a key shaping event in the democratization process. An important challenge in the lead-up to the election will be how to successfully integrate ethnic minorities into the political process.

- Myanmar participants stressed that senior Tatmadaw officers have publicly declared that having 25 percent military representation in Parliament is not permanent. The Tatmadaw's priority is to maintain national unity and peace while allowing the government to pursue socio-economic development. It will relinquish its role when it believes that the political and security situations are sufficiently stable.

- The Myanmar government is supportive of increasing autonomy of the ethnic states. The government will consider various proposals for constitutional reform, but the Tatmadaw will not accept a solution that allows state or local governments to maintain their own armed forces. It is feared that such an arrangement would lead to warlordism and a continuation of illegal drug trafficking activities.

- Myanmar's recent ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological and Toxins Weapons Convention (BTWC), its signing of an Additional Protocol (AP) with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and its other nonproliferation efforts were praised. However, these are first steps, and implementation presents new challenges. It requires transparency, including by the Tatmadaw, to avoid accusations of bad faith and suspicions by Myanmar's friends and international

organizations. The perception that Myanmar is not being forthcoming will serve the Tatmadaw's detractors and likely retard US-Myanmar military-military ties. Clarifying the past and current relationship with North Korea is a key US concern. Myanmar participants acknowledged the challenges, but expected greater engagement from the US in exchange for Myanmar's efforts.

- Myanmar participants felt that much of the recent international criticism of their government's conduct in dealing with the media and protests has been unfair. They noted that the Myanmar media lacks professionalism and consistently reports false, unfounded information about the government. However they also acknowledged that police conduct needs to improve and noted that police in Myanmar are receiving training from the European Union.

- Myanmar participants were well aware of domestic political constraints in the US that will limit military engagement, but nonetheless expressed a desire to quickly move toward high-level military-military cooperation such as International Military Education and Training (IMET), combat training, and foreign military sales. The pace of the development of military-military relations could become an issue of contention between the two governments.

- It was frequently noted that several senior government officials in Myanmar were deeply influenced by their experience with US military education and training prior to 1988. Individual participants argued that stronger relations between the militaries would similarly influence current Tatmadaw officers and facilitate the democratic transition in Myanmar. US participants were supportive of military-military engagement, but noted that current sanctions and congressional restrictions limit the possibilities.

- Nontraditional security issues are seen as a good place to start building military-military cooperation. Promising areas include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, public health and military medicine, United Nations peacekeeping training, and World War II remains recovery. Success in these areas will allow the military-military relationship to push to higher levels. Both sides agreed that the initial focus should be military-military disaster relief cooperation. US participants encouraged Myanmar to actively participate in the Lower Mekong Initiative and to seek engagement as observers at humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises.

- Drug cultivation and trafficking in Myanmar present a serious and growing threat. Myanmar participants consistently noted that the problem became much more serious after 1988 when the US ended its support of eradication efforts; they pushed for increased support from the US Drug Enforcement Agency, including training and technology sharing.

- There was a clear divide between US and Myanmar participants regarding the threat of terrorism in Myanmar. Among Buddhist communities in Myanmar there is a belief that their country is the gap in the global Islamic belt, which will make it a target of Islamic extremism. In the US, by contrast, the Rohingya and other Muslim groups in Myanmar are not thought to be a serious terrorism threat. Several US participants noted Myanmar's responsibility to ensure the welfare of the Rohingya.

- Myanmar participants acknowledged that the terrorism threat in the west is currently low, mostly because of the strong actions that Bangladesh has taken against Islamic extremism. But they argued that, in the north and the east, there is an active movement behind the scenes; Muslim groups are involved in illegal jade, drug, and arms smuggling and are in contact with extremists in the Middle East.

This summary represents the impressions of the project coordinator. The Key Findings are not necessarily shared by all members of the US and/or Myanmar delegations. They are provided as an informal accounting of the discussion. Questions or comments should be directed to Ralph Cossa [ralph@pacforum.org] or Carl Baker [carl@pacforum.org] at Pacific Forum CSIS.