Defence cooperation with Myanmar—Australia and other countries: a quick guide

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Since late August 2017, there have been renewed allegations of systematic human rights abuses by Myanmar (also ‘Burma’) security forces conducting counter-insurgency and so-called ‘clearance operations’ against Rohingya militants in Rakhine State. The security operations followed coordinated insurgent attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on police and army posts, as well as alleged ARSA attacks on civilians, and have resulted in an ongoing humanitarian crisis in western Myanmar and southern Bangladesh. On 28 September 2017, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, António Guterres, described the situation as ‘the world’s fastest-developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare’.

These developments have heightened demands from international human rights groups and non-government organisations (NGOs) for Western countries to withdraw their re-engagement with Myanmar’s military (also ‘Tatmadaw’) and for the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo on Myanmar. The Myanmar Government has repeatedly denied claims of systematic abuses of human rights against the Rohingya Muslim population in Rakhine State, including allegations of ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’.

In light of the allegations of human rights abuses, the recent decision by the United Kingdom to suspend defence cooperation with the Myanmar military and calls by NGOs for the Australian Government to do the same, this quick guide provides a snapshot of current international defence engagement with Myanmar by the following countries—Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, and India.
Map: Rakhine State, Myanmar

Source: United Nations Myanmar Information Management Unit
Australia

2013 re-establishment of defence ties

As part of broader moves to re-establish a ‘normal’ bilateral relationship with Myanmar in response to Naypyidaw’s post-2011 political and economic reforms, in March 2013 the Gillard Government announced:

In view of the significant reforms that have taken place in Myanmar, the Government will also lift some restrictions on defence engagement. Our objective is to encourage the development of a modern, professional defence force in Myanmar that continues to support democratisation and reform.

The Government will therefore post a resident Defence Attaché to Myanmar to allow for greater engagement and dialogue with the Myanmar Defence Force. The Government is also lifting restrictions on defence interactions in certain areas, including humanitarian and disaster relief activities and peacekeeping.

Australia will maintain its arms embargo with Myanmar. Further moves towards a normalised bilateral defence relationship will be considered over time on a step-by-step basis.

The resident defence attaché position had been vacant since 1979 and was filled in January 2014 by Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Captain Jon Dudley. Captain Dudley’s appointment coincided with the arrival at the Port of Yangon of the RAN Armidale Class patrol boat, HMAS Childers—‘the first such visit by an Australian warship to Myanmar since HMAS Quiberon, in 1959’.

In 2013–14, Australia also incorporated Myanmar into its Defence Cooperation Program (DCP), with an initial allocation of $172,000. In 2016–17, it is estimated that $288,000 was spent on DCP activities involving Myanmar. The Australian Defence Force (ADF) also contributed to humanitarian assistance in Myanmar following floods in August 2015.

In terms of training activities, in 2015 Foreign Minister Julie Bishop noted that Australia’s enhanced defence engagement was focused on ‘humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in multilateral settings’. It has been reported that one of the most recent Australian training programs was a ten-day ‘United Nations Peacekeeping Training Course’ that ended in mid-August 2017.

In addition to defence cooperation, since the early 2000s the Australian Federal Police (AFP) have worked with Myanmar’s Ministry for Home Affairs and the Myanmar Police Force on issues such as anti-narcotics, people trafficking, and money laundering. Under the 2008 Constitution, the Minister of Home Affairs is always a serving army officer. In June 2016, the AFP signed a new Memorandum of Understanding with its Myanmar counterparts aimed at enhancing transnational crime cooperation and intelligence sharing.

Australia maintains an arms embargo on Myanmar ‘due to concerns about ongoing armed conflict, weapons proliferation and human rights’.

Commentary and responses

John Blaxland, head of the Australian National University’s Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and a former Australian defence attaché to Thailand and Myanmar, welcomed the 2013 decision as a positive move, given Myanmar’s ongoing transition from military to civilian rule:

‘There’s been plenty to criticise about the way the Myanmar military has operated’, he said. ‘But if we want them to reform, we need to actually show them, what we would like them to do’. It was an armed force that had for decades, been isolated from the rest of the world, he added. ‘So if we want change to come about, if we want (Myanmar) to not unwind the reforms that have taken place so far, we actually need to speak to people. We need to engage with them and talk to them about the way we think they should do business’

Andrew Selth, an expert on Myanmar’s military at Griffith University, was also supportive:

...the Tatmadaw will exert a strong influence on Burma’s government, economy and society for the foreseeable future. In considering the question of bilateral defence relations, the Australian Government can look at Burma’s dark past and imperfect present, or it can look to the future and take the opportunity to assist in the development of a more professional, capable and open-minded officer corps. That would not only be in Burma’s long term interests, but also Australia’s.
Human rights groups and representatives of ethnic minority groups were more sceptical, with one activist arguing:

In a sense, human rights is (sic) getting worse. Although there are a lot of exciting reforms happening in Rangoon and in Naypyidaw, but in ethnic areas it’s not getting better...In Kachin states, in Shan states we see a lot of human rights violations happening, including torture, including landmine issues, all of this still happening.

**Calls to suspend defence cooperation**

In September 2017, the human rights group Amnesty International called upon the Australian Government to suspend cooperation with the Myanmar military in response to allegations of human rights abuses in Rakhine State:

‘While a campaign of ethnic cleansing is being committed against the Rohingya people, the Australian Government must suspend all forms of support to Myanmar’s military’, Amnesty International Australia’s Campaigns Manager Michael Hayworth said.

‘Amnesty International is calling on governments with military relationships with the Myanmar Army to use these relationships to press the army to stop the violations; and those providing training to the military to immediately suspend co-operation. This includes Australia’.

Former Labor foreign minister, Bob Carr, has gone further and called upon the Australian Government to re-impose targeted travel and financial sanctions on Myanmar’s military leaders.

The Turnbull Government has rejected these calls, arguing that Australia’s cooperation with the Myanmar military aims to ‘promote professionalism and adherence to international laws’ and that is ‘important we maintain appropriate lines of communication with the Myanmar military to do this’. The Defence Department has stated, however, that it will ‘review current and planned defence activities on a case-by-case basis’.

John Blaxland has argued that suspending defence cooperation would be ‘like cutting off your nose to spite your face ... it’s actually unhelpful because this is the only venue for engagement with the Burmese military on issues relating to human rights’. He has also suggested that Australia could play the role of ‘honest broker’ between Myanmar and those ASEAN countries most likely to exert influence on Myanmar with regard to the Rakhine State crisis, especially Muslim-majority Indonesia and Buddhist-majority Thailand. Foreign Minister Bishop has confirmed that Australia is working closely with the Indonesian Government as part of the international humanitarian response to the Rohingya crisis.

**United States**

**Defence cooperation with Myanmar**

The US has gradually increased its military-to-military engagement with Myanmar since the latter’s implementation of major political and economic reforms after 2011 and the election of a new civilian-led government in November 2015.

After President Barack Obama’s historic visit to Myanmar in November 2012, Naypyidaw was invited to send observers to the US-led multinational ‘Cobra Gold’ military exercises in Thailand. In April 2013, the State Department announced that the US was looking at ways to support ‘nascent military engagement’ with Myanmar as a way of encouraging further political reforms.

Speaking in May 2016, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia, Patrick Murphy, stated that while the US Defense Department would not establish ‘conventional’ bilateral relations with Myanmar’s armed forces, the US does need to ‘open a relationship’—‘Burma’s military has been a key institution, like it or not, since independence ... We want to incentivize and promote full civilian control. That’s going to take a lot of work’.

More recently, the US ambassador to Myanmar, Scott Marciel, affirmed that this gradual and calibrated approach would be continued by the Trump administration:

Certainly some details of American foreign policy will be different under the Trump administration, but everything I’m hearing from the secretary of state, and from the White House, as well as from our congress, which plays a very important role in our relationship with Myanmar, everything I’m hearing is that it’s consistent support for this democratic transition and for building a closer relationship between the two countries.
We have some military-military engagement, it’s quite limited. We’re working to try to help support efforts in the Myanmar military to turn it into a more traditional military focused on external defense and one that is appropriate for a democratic country. But we have also been very clear in our conversations with the Tatmadaw that for a full normalization of a military to military relationship we would have to see a lot more progress on reform, accountability, human rights and civilian control. So we have very honest discussions with the military on that front.

In March 2017, an expeditionary transport ship, USNS Fall River, completed the first official port visit to Myanmar by the US Navy in seven decades.

The US has a resident defence attaché in its embassy in Yangon. While the US lifted a range of financial sanctions against Myanmar in October 2016, the US maintains an arms embargo on Myanmar.

**Calls to suspend defence cooperation**

In September 2017, US-based NGO Human Rights Watch called for an end to defence cooperation with Myanmar and for the US to re-impose targeted travel and financial sanctions on senior military personnel:

Concerned governments should not wait for [the United Nations] Security Council action to address the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Burma. They should impose travel bans and asset freezes on security officials implicated in serious abuses; expand existing arms embargoes to include all military sales, assistance, and cooperation; and place a ban on financial transactions with key Burmese military-owned enterprises.

The United States government should place the senior leadership of the Burmese military, notably commander-in-chief Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, on the US Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list, which cuts off access to US financial institutions, restricts travel to the US, and freezes US assets.

Several days prior to this statement, prominent US Senator John McCain, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, urged the Congress to remove language from the draft ‘National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018’ (NDAA) that would expand military cooperation with Myanmar:

Along with many Americans, I was encouraged by the historic 2015 elections in Burma that led to a successful transition of power to a civilian government and I was optimistic that it would provide an opportunity for greater engagement with the United States. That’s why the Senate Armed Services Committee included a provision in the committee-passed NDAA that would expand military-to-military cooperation between our countries. However, the circumstances have changed dramatically since the NDAA was passed out of committee in June.

In just the last month, more than 370,000 Rohingya have fled their villages to escape persecution at the hands of the Burmese military – a campaign of violence and destruction that the United Nations has deemed a ‘textbook example of ethnic cleansing.’ The international community has called upon Aung San Suu Kyi—who has long been a source of inspiration for democracy—to stop the violence and hold human rights abusers accountable, but there has been no action to-date.

While I had hoped the NDAA could contribute to positive reform in Burma, I can no longer support expanding military-to-military cooperation given the worsening humanitarian crisis and human rights crackdown against the Rohingya people, and will seek to remove this language when the Senate begins debating the NDAA.

The committee-endorsed draft of the NDAA would authorise the US to engage with the Myanmar military through: ‘courses or workshops to improve the Burmese military’s understanding of regional and global security issues and ability to adhere to international training standards; consultation, education, and training on maritime domain awareness; consultation, education, and training on peacekeeping operations; and courses or workshops on combating illegal trafficking and migration.’

On 28 September, a group of 22 senators, including Senator McCain, wrote to US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson calling upon the Trump administration to also consider imposing travel and financial sanctions on members of the Myanmar military found to be complicit in human rights abuses:

...given the credible allegations of mass atrocities, including the risk of genocide, we urge you to hold accountable under US law and international humanitarian law the perpetrators of such atrocities in Rakhine State, as identified by credible international organizations and US law enforcement agencies. We note that current US law, such as the...
Global Magnitsky Act, allows the President to impose sanctions on individuals “responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights committed against individuals in any foreign country,” against people seeking to “obtain, exercise, defend, or promote internationally recognized human rights and freedoms”.

The US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, has stated that ‘any country that is currently providing weapons to the Burmese military should suspend these activities until sufficient accountability measures are in place’.

**United Kingdom**

*Defence cooperation with Myanmar*

The UK has also increased its defence engagement with Myanmar over the last several years. According to a statement from the UK’s embassy in Yangon issued in January 2015:

The UK government will continue to engage with the Burmese military to promote adherence to democratic accountability, international law and human rights. The Burmese military (Tatmadaw) remain a core political force in Burma and will be key to the process of political reform. Engaging with the Tatmadaw remains a sensitive issue. However, it is important to engage the military and encourage them to support reforms. It is only through wide engagement, including the military, that we will see greater democracy in Burma. To that end a UK Defence Attaché has been resident in Rangoon since December 2013. Much of the early work of this Defence Attaché has been to establish an office and begin forming productive lines of communication with local contacts.

Educational courses also form part of our engagement. We use these opportunities to convey messages on professionalisation, the rule of law, military governance under civilian government, human rights and humanitarian law. In January 2014 the UK Defence Academy, with academic partners from Cranfield University, delivered its first defence education course, “Managing Defence in a Wider Security Context” (MDWSC). The course focussed on rule of law, democratic transition and human rights. Shortly after, a Tatmadaw officer visited the UK’s Defence Academy to attend a residential version of this course.

In 2015, we will continue this educational work, delivering another MDWSC course in January. Again the course will focus on rule of law, democratic transition and human rights, but will also be an opportunity to address issues such as the use and recruitment of child soldiers and sexual violence in conflict directly with Tatmadaw officers.

In June 2013, the chief of the UK Defence Force, General David Richards, visited Myanmar—the most senior UK military figure to travel to the country since General Ne Win’s 1962 military coup. His successor, General Nicholas Houghton, visited Myanmar in January 2016.

In December 2016, the UK Minister of State for Defence, Mike Penning, provided the following response to a parliamentary question regarding the UK’s defence cooperation with Myanmar:

The Ministry of Defence does not provide combat training to the Burmese military. We do provide educational training to the Burmese military in the form of programmes delivered by the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom on the role of the military in a democracy, leadership and English language training. Our programme of engagement with the Burmese military remains under continual review. The Government did not allocate any funds to training programmes for the Burmese army in financial year (FY) 2012–13.

Funds were allocated for training programmes in FYs 2013–14; 2014–15; 2015–16 and 2016–17. These funds were allocated as follows:

- FY 2012–13: No funds allocated
- FY 2013–14: £86,560
- FY 2014–15: £131,235
- FY 2015–16: £158,563
- FY 2016–17: £250,000
A European Union (EU) arms embargo on Myanmar has been implemented in UK law. There is also a ban on the supply of equipment which could be used for ‘internal repression’.

**Suspension of defence cooperation**

On 20 September 2017, the UK Government announced that it would suspend defence cooperation with Myanmar in response to the allegations of human rights abuses by Myanmar security forces operating in Rakhine State. UK Prime Minister Theresa May stated:

‘We are very concerned about what’s happening to the Rohingya people in Burma. The military action against them must stop’, May said. ‘We have seen too many vulnerable people having to flee for their lives. Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese government need to make it very clear that the military action should stop. The British government is announcing today that we are going to stop all defence engagement and training of the Burmese military by the Ministry of Defence until this issue is resolved.’

Asked if the action was coordinated with international allies, May said: ‘There has been very clear international concern about the issue of the Rohingya people and what is happening to them. ‘I was discussing this yesterday in Canada with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The British government believes we must show our concern, and that’s why we are going to stop all defence engagement and training of the Burmese military by the Ministry of Defence until this issue is satisfactorily resolved’.

Myanmar’s military responded negatively to this move, with state media reporting that the Tatmadaw would immediately recall officers currently undertaking training in the UK and would ‘never send any trainees to Britain, including trainees agreed on previously’.

In early October 2017, it was reported that in response to the allegations of systematic human rights abuses the EU has also been considering measures that include suspending invitations to senior Myanmar military officers and reviewing ‘all practical defence cooperation’.

**China**

While much of the current focus is on Western countries’ defence engagement, throughout the period of Western sanctions in the 1990s and up to the present day, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has remained Myanmar’s most important military partner.

As Table 1 shows, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), between 2014 and 2016, China accounted for over 70 per cent of the value of Myanmar’s weapons imports, followed by Belarus (9 per cent) and Russia (6 per cent).

**Table 1: arms transfers to Myanmar, 2014–2016 (USDm)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>440</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>India</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>607</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: this data is taken from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database and expressed in SIPRI’s Trend Indicator Values (USD millions). The data was generated on 21 September 2017.
In addition to arms exports, ‘Beijing has an interest in maintaining stability on its long border with Myanmar and generally cooperates with Myanmar security organisations, both military and police, in attempting to control drug trafficking and other illegal cross-border activities, although not with great success in recent years’.

There are institutionalised senior-level dialogues between China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Tatmadaw. In October 2016, General Fang Fenghui, a member of China’s Central Military Commission (CMC) and chief of the CMC’s Joint Staff Department, hosted talks with Tatmadaw chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. In February 2017, China hosted the China–Myanmar ‘2+2’ foreign and defence ministers’ consultations in Kunming.

Despite these deep links, it is widely asserted that one of the main drivers behind Myanmar’s post-2011 political and economic reforms has been a fear of an overreliance on China as a security provider and an associated desire to diversify its military relationships. In addition, ongoing conflicts in Myanmar’s north and north-east have undermined trust on both sides. For Myanmar’s part, there has been frustration in Naypyidaw with Yunnan’s support for the Kachin Independence Army and other ethnic armed groups’ continuing conflicts with the Tatmadaw. According to a US-based expert, ‘while this support is not readily visible, there is no question that illegal cross-border trade and Chinese mining in Kachin State provide a great deal of the wealth that supports the continuing conflict’.

In September 2017, Chinese authorities stated that Beijing ‘understands and supports’ Myanmar’s efforts to protect security in Rakhine and hopes the ‘fire of war’ can soon be extinguished:

‘China advocates Myanmar and Bangladesh resolving the problem via dialogue and consultation’, the Foreign Ministry cited [Foreign Minister] Wang as saying. ‘China is willing to continue promoting peace talks in its own way, and hopes the international community can play a constructive role to ease the situation and promote dialogue’, he said.

Russia

As noted, Russia remains an important source of defence imports for Myanmar.

In June 2016, the Myanmar and Russian defence ministries signed a new defence cooperation agreement encompassing ‘cooperation in the navy sphere, hydrography, topography, military medicine, military education and other promising spheres of military cooperation’. The Russian Defense Ministry said that the agreement also envisages exchanging information on international security issues, ‘including fight against terrorism, cooperation in the sphere of culture and vacation of servicemen and their families, along with exchanging experience in peacekeeping activities’.

Russia has rejected calls for a UN-enforced arms embargo on Myanmar and the country’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated in late September 2017:

Reports of civilian and police deaths during the clashes in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, the mass exodus of refugees and the threat of a humanitarian crisis are causing serious concern. Our consistent position is that all the problems in the region, which are complicated and multifaceted, should be solved only by political means, via dialogue between representatives of all nationalities and confessions. We call on the parties to show restraint and to take an objective view of current events.

India

As Myanmar has sought to diversify its defence links, India is also emerging as an important security partner.

While India has supplied the Tatmadaw with defence equipment in the past, an enhanced level of cooperation is aimed at ‘comprehensive cooperation along the lines of India’s defence partnership with Nepal and Bhutan’. From New Delhi’s perspective, in addition to addressing shared transboundary security concerns, this cooperation is also aimed at countering Chinese influence along India’s periphery. While cooperation on the security of the land border has been a focus, India and Myanmar have also agreed to increase naval cooperation in the Bay of Bengal.

Like China and Russia, India has been less critical than Western countries of the Myanmar authorities’ actions in Rakhine State. The Modi Government has stated that it shares Naypyidaw’s concerns over ‘extremist violence’, while urging the Myanmar authorities to exercise ‘maturity and restraint’.