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Fostering Developmental Guardianship: The Case of Myanmar's *Tatmadaw*

Adhi Priamarizki

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military (*Tatmadaw*) launched a coup against the civilian government that was led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) patron, Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup that occurred during the early period of the COVID-19 global outbreak has certainly tilted the civil–military balance in the country. Furthermore, the military coup confirmed the speculation about the military feeling uneasy towards its civilian counterpart. Prior to the coup, there had been several incidents that displayed the growing enmity of the military. The *Tatmadaw* immediately detained most of the senior NLD members, including Suu Kyi who was put under house arrest by the military. Soon after the coup, the military formed a caretaker government under the so-called State Administrative Council (SAC) in which General Min Aung Hlaing, the coup orchestrator and *Tatmadaw* commander, holds the Chair position (The Myanmar Times, 2021). The installation of the SAC has put the *Tatmadaw* back at the helm of Myanmar's government.

The 2021 coup has pretty much destroyed the political transition that was marked by the transfer of authority from a military-led government to a quasi-civilian government in 2011. General Tan Shwe, commander-in-chief of Myanmar's[1] Military (1992–2011), announced the disbandment of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) on 30 March 2011.[2] Before it dispersed itself, the SPDC government held general elections in 2010 that were won by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which allowed the party to form a majority government and installed former military general Thein Sein as president of the country (2011–16). The 2010

General Elections marked a milestone for the so-called democratization, or what others might only see as a transition, from direct to partial military rule in Myanmar. Robert Taylor (2013, p 400) described this reform as a window dressing that failed to bring real change, since the military still maintained significant political control. Such doubt was indeed materialized when the 2021 military takeover occurred.

Existing studies on the *Tatmadaw*'s continued domination after political transition mainly point at the military's control over political liberalization as the enabling factor for the armed forces to maintain its strong political influence (Callahan, 2012; Macdonald, 2013; Croissant and Kamerling, 2013; Egreteau, 2016; Selth, 2018). The military's decision to forgo direct rule is in fact a long process that had been planned many years before (Taylor, 2015). Although the abovementioned studies explain the military's ability to remain in power, they did not explore the reason behind the *Tatmadaw*'s reluctance to fully relinquish its authority and willingness to return to power. The 2021 coup had showcased the *Tatmadaw*'s appetite for political control, though the personal ambitions of General Min Aung Hlaing could be a reason behind such proscribed action (Barany, 2021; Steinberg, 2021). Moreover, the outbreak of COVID-19 generated a complex set of challenges that required a significant amount of resource and bureaucratic mobilization, including the military, to tackle the issue.

This chapter attempts to explain the return of the *Tatmadaw* at the helm of government in Myanmar as well as the military's involvement in COVID-19 management and exploitation to preserve its interests. One element that previous studies have not yet discussed in detail to explain the phenomenon is the influence of doctrinal belief of the *Tatmadaw*, which is heavily inspired by the developmental guardianship idea. The developmental guardianship thinking has driven the *Tatmadaw*'s return to politics as the military aims to maintain its centrality. Moreover, the global outbreak of COVID-19 galvanized the Myanmar military's position as the developmental guardian and justified expansive military involvement in non-defence affairs. The discussion of the role of doctrinal elements, in this case the developmental guardianship paradigm, is this chapter's contribution towards the contemporary literature on military and politics in Myanmar.

In line with the guiding themes presented by Chong and Jenne in the introduction to this volume, the chapter addresses the following general questions: How do colonial legacies shape civil–military evolutions in Myanmar and the *Tatmadaw*'s tutelary belief? How does the *Tatmadaw* perceive civil–military relations? Does the *Tatmadaw* see civil–military relations as primarily related to developmental and modernization goals? In what ways do the 2021 coup and COVID-19 outbreak strengthen the *Tatmadaw*'s guardianship role? To answer the first three questions, this chapter starts with an explanation of the genesis of the *Tatmadaw*'s developmental

guardianship. The discussion is then continued with an analysis on the military's doctrinal evolution. To answer the fourth question, the last part of this chapter examines post-political transition dynamics, the 2021 coup and the *Tatmadaw*'s involvement in COVID-19 management.

Genesis of the *Tatmadaw*'s developmental guardianship

Burma was under the British Colonial administration from 1824 until its independence in 1948, except between 1942 and 1945 when Japan occupied the country. The British paved the way for the birth of an early model of military service in Myanmar, in the form of instituting *tat* (volunteer army corps). The Japanese meanwhile accommodated the rise of a local army to support the country's war efforts during World War Two. Previously, the British had excluded ethnic-majority Burmans from the armed forces and only included ethnic-minority groups that antagonized the Burmans. The British, however, permitted many Burman-majority political organizations to establish their own *tat*. These *tats* were not allowed to carry firearms; however, they could perform military drills and war exercises with bamboo staffs. Many former *tat* members later became part of the *Tatmadaw*, which contributed to the attachment of the military to politics.

When Japan invaded Burma, the Burmese government mobilized locals to help in the war. In the wake of this chaotic circumstance, the first form of national army in Burma, the Burma Independence Army (BIA) emerged in December 1941.The BIA consisted of mostly ethnic-majority Burmans unlike the pre-war military that was dominated by Indians and Burmese minorities. By July 1941, 30 young Burmese also known as the so-called 'Thirty Comrades' went to Hainan Island to receive military training from the Japanese, which became the embryo for the Burmese army. The BIA was transformed into Burma's Defence Army in July 1942 and later changed into the Burma National Army (BNA) in 1943 with General Ne Win as commander. The BNA started to develop two characteristics. The first was the importance of anchoring the population's loyalty to the notion of Burmese independence and the necessity of possessing the people's support in achieving this. The other was the urgency to become involved in politics to compete with other political groups and establish what the corps perceived as a correct social and political order (Taylor, 2009, p 236). When Japan's chance to win the war began to fade away, the BNA switched sides to the allies and worked with the British. The BNA later changed into the Patriotic Burma Forces (PBF), in June 1945. Following the Kandy agreement on 7 September 1945,[3] members of PBF were infused into the regular British Burmese Army under the British colonial authority and later merged into the Burmese Army of Burma.

During its early days, Burma faced numerous armed conflicts, which has forced its military to focus on internal security matters since then. While combating the internal threats, the *Tatmadaw* expanded its influence on the political, economic and social development realms in the name of preserving stability and guarding the state. The prominent threats to the country's sovereignty together with the unstable domestic political situation became two primary reasons for the *Tatmadaw* to stretch its domination to the civilian realm. Many of the ethnic groups in Burma at that time were not entirely supportive towards the creation of the Union, for which the constitution was prepared by the Anti-Fascists People's Freedom League (AFPFL) that was led by General Aung San until his assassination on 19 July 1947. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO) became the two major anti-government movements in the civil war that lasted from 1948 to 1952 (Taylor, 1985, p 24). In addition, the rise of Mao Zedong in China in 1949 caused Kuomintang (KMT) soldiers to disperse and flee to northern parts of Myanmar. The remnants of the KMT led by General Li Mi planned to use the northern area as a springboard for attacks against the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p 17). The war against the KMT remnants lasted until the early 1960s when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) aided the *Tatmadaw* and helped eliminate the rebels.

While the military were combating the insurgents, the civilian politicians in Yangon were too busy quarrelling to gain power in the country. The circumstances triggered a feeling of contempt against the civilian politicians among the *Tatmadaw* officers who perceived themselves as the guardian of the nation. Furthermore, rather than improving the state, many bureaucrats exploited their positions to gain personal benefits. For example, managerial appointments for many state institutions were based on political patronage rather than merit (Richter, 1972, p 225). This type of illegitimate behaviour by civilian politicians triggered further resentment from the military.

The *Tatmadaw*'s doctrinal evolution: galvanizing developmental guardianship

Currently the Burmese military implements a military doctrine with a robust counterinsurgency element; however, the *Tatmadaw* did not always emphasize the internal security realm. Maung Aung Myoe (2009) divides *Tatmadaw*'s doctrinal development into three phases. During the first phase (1948–65), the *Tatmadaw* developed a doctrine that focused on combating external threats through mechanized warfare. The next phase (1965–88) displayed a dramatic turning point as the military adopted a doctrine emphasizing the concept of the people's war and counterinsurgency. In the third phase (1988–), the *Tatmadaw* improved its doctrine by adding a component of

technological development and citing the possibility of foreign invasion through proxy. The current leadership of the *Tatmadaw* also proposed the idea of a 'standard army' that could hint at a new development. In the following we will examine the doctrinal evolution of the *Tatmadaw* from Burma's independence to now.

Burma has been facing insurgency threats since the early days of the Union. However, the early version of the ***Tatmadaw*** doctrine did not put emphasis on counterinsurgency practice, as the military focused its attention on facing external threats in the form of conventional warfare and using mechanized warfare to counter the danger. The doctrine faced its biggest challenge when the remnants of the KMT force crossed the Burmese border. The endeavour ended in a catastrophic failure for the *Tatmadaw* due to the lack of an appropriate command and control system, a proper logistical support structure and training regime, adequate economic and technological sources as well as efficient civil defence organizations (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p 17).

The failure to tackle the threat of KMT remnants forced the Burmese military to review its doctrine and develop a new version that emphasized counterinsurgency. The 1959 *Tatmadaw* conference reviewed the Union's latest internal security situation as well as counterinsurgency operations. During a series of discussions from 1961 to 1964, military officers debated a new doctrine and counterinsurgency strategy for the *Tatmadaw*. The discussions finally produced a fruitful outcome in 1964 with the introduction of the 'People's War' doctrine. The 1964 discussion noted three potential adversaries of the Union: internal insurgents, historical enemies with roughly a equal power and enemies with greater power. In addition, the idea of bringing the military and the people together became an important cornerstone of the counterinsurgency operation. The 1964 conference was proven pivotal for the *Tatmadaw* as it set the foundations for the new military doctrine, which emphasized internal security matters (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, pp 21–3; Nakanishi, 2013, p 232).

In addition to developing a new doctrine, the *Tatmadaw* began to use militias in the early 1960s, particularly with the intensifying insurgency threats in the Shan State as well as communist rebel activities in the northern part of the country. The utilization of militia was further galvanized by the formulation of the Four Cuts counterinsurgency strategy in the 1968 *Tatmadaw* conference. The strategy focused on detaching the insurgents from four resources: food, funding, information and recruits. The strategy was based on the idea of taking the 'fish (guerrilla) out from the water (population)'. The militia came in handy to complement the military in executing this Four Cuts strategy, particularly for mobilizing the population against the insurgents.

The emergence of the new military junta leadership, under the name of State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), in 1988, was also

accompanied with change in the internal security environment, which affected the way the *Tatmadaw* was operating. The possibility of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD cooperating with the ethnic armed groups to undermine the government worried the military junta. Therefore, the SLORC initiated a ceasefire negotiation, led by Khin Nyunt, with the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) (Callahan, 2003, p 215). Between 1989 and 2009, the military government discussed ceasefire agreements with 40 EAOs.[4] The military also believed that with the proliferation of political organizations after the 1988 political upheaval, any mass protest against the military-led socialist government might invite foreign intervention. As a result, the foreign intervention dimension appeared as a new source of threat that required special attention. In addition, the development of new technology, particularly cyberspace, became another consideration for the revision of the *Tatmadaw*'s doctrine.

Despite the additional focus on possible foreign intrusion, the adoption of the People's War notion has still remained as the core of *Tatmadaw*'s doctrine. According to Maung Aung Myoe (2009, pp 196–197) *Tatmadaw*'s interpretation on the inclusion of the People's War concept includes the primacy of politics, the primacy of people over weapons, the strategy of using the weak against the strong, the mobilization of the masses to fight a protracted war against invasion and the multiple roles of the *Tatmadaw*. The inclusion of the phrase 'under modern conditions' points at the importance of new battlespace (cyberwar) rather than a change from people-centric into technology-centric warfare. Therefore, the military seems wanting to maintain its status quo relationship with the civilian population by any means, including keeping its political role vigorous.

Meanwhile, the creation of the term 'Three Main National Causes' (non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national unity and perpetuation of national sovereignty)[5] strengthened the guardianship of the military. The term outlined that a clear objective of the state is to maintain the integration and unity of the nation in which the *Tatmadaw* is expected to achieve the goal at all costs. The 'Three Main National Causes' evolved into a kind of mantra that military leaders regularly cited during their speeches. For example, General Min Aung Hlaing, *Tatmadaw* commander-in-chief, argued the need for the armed forces to safeguard the 'Three Main National Causes' in his speech for the 70th Armed Forces Day in 2015. By 2011, the military perceived that external threats had greatly declined; however, the international community might still intervene in Myanmar's internal matters via the 'responsibility to protect' framework (Selth, 2016, p 14).

At the first Union Peace Conference in January 2016, General Min Aung Hlaingintroduced the so-called 'standard army' concept to describe the modernization plan within the armed forces. The idea can be seen as an attempt to enhance the current doctrine, which probably required an overhaul

given the changing threat environment, especially domestic security.[6] At a meeting with the Union Military Committee in November 2016, Min Aung Hlaing also mentioned the 'standard army' idea, his dream of overhauling the obsolete armaments of the *Tatmadaw* and receiving military drill from the West, as well as gaining wider access to the international arms market (Dunant, 2017). International engagement, together with modernization and defence capability, became the focus of the 'standard army' concept. Moreover, the concept neglected the inclusion of professionalism due to the term's close association with civilian control and the image of being a mercenary army (Thiha, 2017).

Interestingly, Myanmar's 2015 Defence White Paper (DWP) did not mention the 'standard army' concept in its discussion. The white paper nevertheless cited three main security challenges for the country: the 'neighbouring countries' military build-up; the provision of equipment, financial assistance, encouragement by external elements to internal armed groups; and unresolved boundary issues'. Furthermore, the paper recommended key priorities that the *Tatmadaw* must do as 'guardian of the state'. Ending conflicts with EAOs through peaceful means was among the top priorities as the have been hindering internal security stability and national development. Furthermore, the white paper advocates wider political involvement of the *Tatmadaw* in brokering peace with EAOs and outlined the necessity for developing MOOTW capabilities to protect Myanmar from non-traditional security threats, such as trade in narcotics, terrorism, human trafficking and transnational crime (Maung Aung Myoe, 2016). The 2015 DWP pretty much galvanized the guardianship of the *Tatmadaw* as it stretched the role of the military into the internal security realm and justified political involvement using the peace process.

The *Tatmadaw,* in February 2018, held its biggest joint military exercise since 1996 in the Ayeyarwady delta region. Interestingly, General Min Aung Hlaing announced that the *Tatmadaw* was still far from being a 'standard army' in a statement following the exercise. He also noted the requirement for the military to forge closer cooperation with the people for defending Myanmar (Shin, 2018). Based on the available, but minimal and vague, information on the 'standard army' idea, we can conclude that the concept primarily aims at modernizing the combat capability of the *Tatmadaw* without creating a gap in civil–military relations. The concept also reflects the military's desire to prolong its political hegemony. Therefore, political domination of the *Tatmadaw* and the non-existence of division in civil–military relations would persist even if there were a new doctrine based on the 'standard army' concept.

The dissolution of the SPDC in 2011 marked the emergence of a new political environment with civilian political players on the rise. The election in 2010 gave way to a new leadership under the USDP, a surrogate party of

the military junta. The next election, in 2015, produced the NLD as the winner. These two general elections made the military, at least, share the political arena with emerging civilian leaders. Nonetheless, the landslide victory of the NLD in the 2020 general elections and the party's intention to revise the 2008 Constitution have irritated the military, which resulted in a coup in February 2021. Prior to the coup, the outbreak of COVID-19 has posed a challenge towards civil–military dynamics in Myanmar. Those events have strengthened the status of the *Tatmadaw*'s developmental guardianship, which will be discussed in the following section.

Post-SPDC, COVID-19 and the February 2021 coup

On 1 February 2021, the *Tatmadaw* detained Aung San Suu Kyi, a number of NLD party leaders and President Win Myint (2018–21), citing election fraud as the reason behind the detentions.[7] The military then blocked roads in the country's capital, Nay Pyi Taw, and the main city, Yangon, disrupted phone and internet connections, forced banks to halt their service and imposed night curfew. The *Tatmadaw* also dissolved the cabinet and appointed Vice President Myint Swe (2016–), who is a former army officer, as acting president (BBC, 2021). The February 2021 coup did not only become the first coup against civilian government since 1962 but also galvanized the *Tatmadaw*'s continued domination in Myanmar. In fact, the *Tatmadaw* had never fully withdrew from politics and relinquished its political control, not to mention the military's role in orchestrating the political transition in the first place back in 2011.

The process of political change did not only happen in the period of the 2010 General Elections and the demise of the SPDC the subsequent year. Instead, it was a concerted and long overdue process that can be traced back to the year 1993 when the first National Convention resumed.[8] The military junta held the 2010 General Elections based on the 2008 Constitution. Ironically, the 2008 Constitution provided a safeguard for the *Tatmadaw* to keep its presence in politics, though it did not play the most prominen role. The constitution granted the military a number of privileges and blocked Aung San Suu Kyi's presidential candidacy. The 2008 Constitution gave the military full autonomy in its internal matters. Moreover, the military was given the authority to nominate three ministerial positions (home affairs, defence and border affairs). The constitution intentionally obstructed Daw Suu Kyi's candidacy since it prohibited any person who has family relations with foreign nationals to be president of Myanmar.[9]

In addition, the constitution mandated the formation of the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) to act as a channel for defence and security consultation with the *Tatmadaw*. In reality, the armed forces made the council another tool to exercise its influence. The NDSC has 11 members

of which 6 are appointed by the commander-in-chief. Also, granting amnesty and declaring any state of emergency by the president requires recommendation from the NDSC. In the legislative field, the *Tatmadaw* automatically owns 25 per cent of the Union Assembly or *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* seats. It provides them a veto power as constitutional amendments can only be done if more than 75 per cent of the total members of the Union Assembly agree. This circumstance made the military representatives prominent players in the parliament as decisions related to constitutional amendment required at least one parliament member from the faction, with the condition that the rest of the parliament has a united voice.

The victory of the NLD in the 2015 General Elections did not immediately reduce the domination of the *Tatmadaw*. The party leadership seemed aware of the persistent prominence of the *Tatmadaw* in the country's political stage. Daw Suu Kyi met General Min Aung Hlaing, who has held the *Tatmadaw* commander-in-chief position since 2011, several times in the aftermath of the 2015 General Elections (Maung Aung Myoe, 2017, p 267). The two of them, nevertheless, did not reveal any details of their meetings. One speculation was that the NLD realized the need to form a good enough relationship with the military, which made the meetings possible. On the other hand, General Min Aung Hlaing had signalled the military's hesitation to reduce its grip on the country's political stage by citing the need for the military to stay in politics in order to tame ethnic armed groups (Fisher, 2015). Min Aung Hlaing also believed maintaining political influence and preventing the military from being marginalized or manipulated were paramount for the *Tatmadaw* as he mentioned in his speech on 2 December 2017 to newly graduating officers of the Defence Service Academy in the Pyin Oo Lwin, Mandalay, region (Nyein, 2017).

The NLD leadership, meanwhile, had expressed their concern over the 2008 Constitution and aspired to amend it. The party believed the constitution was the main obstacle for further reform to take place in Myanmar. However, the intention is most likely far from being realized as the military has blatantly rejected the idea. In an interview with the BBC in July 2015, General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the *Tatmadaw* since 2011, declared that constitutional amendments will only happen if peace, security and stability have been achieved in Myanmar (Fisher, 2015).

The seemingly good relations between the NLD and the military were at best superficial. Both camps fundamentally opposed each other, particularly over the 2008 Constitution. Despite their disagreement, both the civilians and the *Tatmadaw* have been avoiding criticizing or opposing each other in front of the public. The civilians have also learned that attacking military interests blatantly would be counterproductive.[10] For example, the military did not face any criticism when it launched attacks on ethnic armed groups in northern Shan and Kachin States in late 2016. Daw Suu Kyi instead tried

to justify the military operation as a response to Muslim militants' attacks on police posts along Myanmar's border with Bangladesh on 9 October 2016 (Thawnghmung and Robinson, 2017, p 239). The civilian side nonetheless tried to challenge the military's domination in a symbolic way. Until the February 2021 military coup, the NLD government did not arrange a single meeting of the NDSC. On the other hand, Daw Suu Kyi established her own Rule of Law and Tranquillity Committee, headed by Gen (ret) U Tin Oo, a long-term NLD member and Suu Kyi's supporter.[11]

On 29 January 2019, the NLD administration proposed to initiate a constitutional amendment process, which resulted in the formation of the Union of Myanmar Constitution (2008) Amendment Joint Committee (UMCAJC). The party aimed to gradually reduce the military's parliamentary seats, abolish military autonomy and remove Section 59(f) of the constitution, which restricts Aung San Suu Kyi's presidential candidacy (Nyi Kyaw, 2019). The *Tatmadaw* itself meanwhile displayed no intention of tolerating any structural changes that might undermine its national political role in the Constitution, institutional autonomy or the fundamental principles it has set for national unity (Maung Aung Myoe, 2018, p 221).

In the meantime, the internal conflicts that have been haunting Myanmar for decades showed no significant signs of abatement. The peace negotiation between the government and various EAOs under the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) framework seemed to be going nowhere. Continued fighting between the *Tatmadaw* and EAOs, particularly the Karen National Union (KNU) and Restoration Council of the Shan State (RCSS), as well as boycotts from other negotiation participants, such as Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA), had significantly delayed the peace talks (Pauli, 2020). These continuing internal conflicts consequently provided the military a compelling reason for rejecting any attempts to amend the 2008 Constitution by citing national security issues.

The continued electoral ascendancy of the NLD following the 2020 election has alarmed the *Tatmadaw* on the possible overhaul of its autonomy and political role. The military accused the NLD of rigging the 2020 general elections. The political crisis then culminated in a military coup in February 2021, which re-established the military position at the helm of the government through the establishment of the SAC. The international pressure and domestic resistance through the civil disobedience movement (CDM) did little to force the military to revert authority to the civilian side. It was only on 18 October 2021 that the military regime finally accommodated international pressure, notably from ASEAN, by releasing hundreds of political prisoners (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The domestic politics brouhaha happened in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak and indeed further complicated the already murky situation

due to the pandemic. The lack of health infrastructure made the military involvement in COVID-19 management in Myanmar critical as military hospitals became crucial additional sites for quarantine (Lwin, 2020). Despite the urgency, the skirmish between the military and the EAOs did not entirely stop. This continued battle in the rural and conflict areas consequently jeopardized the fight against COVID-19 as many of the civilian facilities, including medical resources, were destroyed (Barklamb, 2020; Hoelzl and Diamond, 2020).

Furthermore, the 2021 coup had further complicated the COVID-19 management in the country following the emergence of the civil disobedience movement (CDM) against the military government. The movement crippled the public sector, including medical services, which consequently paralyzed COVID-19 management (Peter, 2021). The military, however, seemed to be taking advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak to legitimize and strengthen its control. For example, the military cited the breaking of COVID-19 rules to charge Suu Kyi (Myanmar Now, 2021a). Moreover, the detention of CDM movement participants, particularly medical staff and doctors, has further crippled COVID-19 management (Myanmar Now, 2021b). Moreover, the military exploited the pandemic to impose a lockdown and greater political control. The military even put political detainees in prisons unprotected against COVID-19. Many of these political detainees already suffered from underlying conditions or were prone to COVID-19 due to old age, such as the NLD's legal advisor U Nyan Win (Khit, 2021). In addition, the crisis situation turned into an opportunity for some military officers to conduct illicit activities, notably oxygen hoarding (The Irrawaddy, 2021).

From the above discussion we can deduce three propositions regarding the *Tatmadaw*'s developmental guardianship under the contemporary circumstances. First, the political liberalization prior to the 2021 coup did not erode the developmental guardianship mentality of the military. The political liberalization has indeed allowed the rise of civilian political players on Myanmar's political stage. Nonetheless, the debut of civilian leadership does not mean that the military will automatically relinquish its guardianship and hand over the authority to the new player. Instead of doing so, the military has shared the spotlight with civilians, while still possessing the strongest control and influence in the country.

Second, the 2021 coup indicated the persistence of the military in safeguarding its privileges. The takeover has practically ended the civilian's attempt to amend the 2008 Constitution, which guaranteed the political upper hand of the military. The coup also diminished the expanding political influence of the NLD administration. The preservation of the 2008 Constitution is crucial for the military as the continued domination of the military in the country can limit intervention towards the *Tatmadaw*'s internal security campaign.

Third, the COVID-19 outbreak illuminates both the usefulness of the *Tatmadaw*'s developmental guardianship and exploitation of the pandemic to safeguard the military's political interests. The military involvement in COVID-19 management displayed how developmental guardianship thinking drove and justified the *Tatmadaw*'s participation in managing the outbreak. The severe impact of the virus spread became a call for the military to step forward and take the responsibility even without explicit command from the civilian authority. Following the 2021 coup, the military exploited the pandemic situation to impose a severe political lockdown and even to punish its political opponents.

Conclusion

Prior to the 2021 coup, the *Tatmadaw* had been resisting any attempts to radically alter the political system in Myanmar and seemed to be favouring gradual and administered political transformation. The withdrawal of the military from the government helm certainly did not erode the armed forces' political privilege. Instead, the *Tatmadaw* had carefully designed a safeguard to protect such self-entitlement. The discussion in this chapter showed that the political involvement of the *Tatmadaw* has been part of its developmental guardianship. First, historical legacies set the foundation for the developmental guardianship thinking of the *Tatmadaw*. Political involvement is not a taboo for Myanmar's military. The origin of the *Tamadaw* as part of a political organization induced its political entrenchment. Distrust between the military and ethnic armed groups cultivated during colonialism and the civil war experience contributed significantly in shaping the *Tatmadaw* into a military with a strong focus on domestic security.

Second, the developmental guardianship of the *Tatmadaw* played a crucial role in sustaining its political involvement, as the ideological belief requires the military to be at the forefront of every aspect of public life. The political liberalization did little in altering such a mindset. The military even resisted any attempts to revamp its political domination. Moreover, civil–military relations evolved merely into a tool for supporting the military's guardianship role where the *Tatmadaw* determines the nature of their relationship rather than it being based on a consensus between the two sides. The 2021 coup, which abolished the attempt to amend the constitution and expansion of civilian political power, has proven that the military was willing to go the extra mile to preserve its upper hand position.

Third, keeping the unity of the country at all costs has been the greatest objective of the military. The military perceived the status quo, guaranteed by the 2008 Constitution, as the key in achieving this goal. In addition, threats to the unity of the country in the form of secessionist movements

have been regularly cited by the military to justify its rejection of attempts to amend the constitution. Fourth, the military has shown no hesitation to protect and enforce its developmental guardianship role as seen in the 2021 coup and during the COVID-19 outbreak. The outbreak of COVID-19 has galvanized this belief in which the military positioned itself as the spearhead in combating the pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak provided a great opportunity for the military to enhance its post-coup political domination. There is a blurred distinction between punishing political opponents and managing the pandemic. The implementation of a lockdown policy is an example of such conflated objectives.

Developmental guardianship for the *Tatmadaw* is not only a guiding principle but also the *raison d'être*. Prior to the 2021 coup, the *Tatmadaw* devised its own version of political liberalization in order to fit with the ideal of the military being at the forefront of every aspect of life. The military perceived the alteration as a necessity to safeguard Myanmar and its people. Nonetheless, once an attempt to undermine the centrality of the military occurred, the *Tatmadaw* rolled back the political liberalization process. The military indeed does not perceive rolling back the democratic progress as a problem as long as its authority remains intact. Here we can see that the slow pace of political transformation was implemented in order to preserve the presence and authority of the *Tatmadaw* in politics.

The developmental guardianship indeed played a crucial part in driving the *Tatmadaw*'s decision in maintaining its political influence and privilege. As a result, the emergence of a civilian government did not correlate with the waning political authority of the *Tatmadaw*. The developmental guardianship justified the *Tatmadaw* preserving the 'guardian of the nation' status in which the military perceived contributing to the development of the country as its primary duty. Studies on military and politics in Myanmar have extensively discussed the *Tatmadaw*'s ability to remain in power. This chapter complements the existing literature by examining the doctrinal element of the military to understand its persistence in maintaining its political supremacy. Furthermore, this chapter showcased that the idea of developmental guardianship has shielded any attempts to undermine the military's political authority.

Notes

[1] This chapter uses Burma when discussing events prior to 1989 and Myanmar for the afterwards.

[2] SPDC was the name of the military junta government. It was known as State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) from 1988 to 1997. It became SPDC from 1997 until its dissolvement in 2011.

[3] The agreement regulated the fusion of PBF with other colonial army battalions, such as Karen, Kachin and Chin battalions. The Karen nonetheless withdrew from the agreement by joining the Karen separatist movement in 1949.

[4] The central authority since 2009 also proposed the formation of a militia group called Border Guard Force (BGF) to integrate the military wing of the insurgents into the *Tatmadaw*'s structure. The government included the BGF scheme in the negotiation with the rebels. Nonetheless, some of the insurgents rejected the scheme as they see it as part of the military's plan to weaken them. See Buchanan (2016) for study on the use of militia in Myanmar.

[5] The concept appeared when the SLORC planned to hold the 1993 National Convention with ethnic representatives for achieving peace with them. The SLORC on 2 October 1992 pledged six objectives for the convention: (1) Non-disintegration of the Union; (2) Non-disintegration of national unity; (3) Perpetuation of national sovereignty; (4) Promotion of a genuine multiparty democracy; (5) Promotion of the universal principles of justice, liberty and equality; (6) Participation by the defence services in a national political leadership role in the future state. The first three objectives became the 'Three Main National Causes'.

[6] The Myanmar government has managed to reach ceasefire agreement with a number of insurgents and includes some of them into the BGF. The *Tatmadaw* also has slowly gained the upper hand in the conflict against the Kachin. The biggest challenges are probably the brouhaha in the Rakhine State and the new conflict with the Karen, which started in the early months of 2018.

[7] The military accuses NLD of rigging the November 2020 General Elections in which the party secured a landslide victory. Although some weakness and errors in voters lists were discovered, the voting in general was conducted in a fair and transparent way (Strangio, 2021).

[8] The National Convention started its first session on 9 January 1993 to initiate reform process. However, the convention was suspended in 1996 as the NLD boycotted. The NLD members accused the convention as being 'nothing but a ruse by the military to stay in power' (*Asia News*, 2007).

[9] Aung San Suu Kyi married a foreigner and her children hold foreign passports.

[10] For example, a protest of an NLD MP against the Letpadaung copper mine project, in which a military conglomerate heavily involved, triggered a boycott from military representatives in the parliament. See Bünte (2017).

[11] Author's interview with Dr Andrew Ngun Cun Liang, former member of Myanmar Peace Center, Yangon, 22 November 2017.

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