



Seizing the State: The Emergence of a Distinct Security Actor in Myanmar

By Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers

“War” ominously dominates the future of post-coup Myanmar, as analysts [increasingly portend](#). Recognizing an increasingly apparent reality, Myanmar’s shadow National Unity Government (NUG) [officially declared](#) a “people’s defensive war” against the struggling military junta on September 7th, 2021. During his video address, Acting President Duwa Lashi La called on all citizens to revolt against the military rule in every corner of the country. A full-scale war may threaten catastrophic destruction and suffering, but a Yangon resident, reflecting the mood amongst much of the population, posted this

on Facebook: “It is a people’s revolutionary war. The NUG just declared it on behalf of the people.”

[A junta spokesperson soon responded](#): “It is just a futile attempt intended to draw international attention before the UN credential committee’s decision on [Myanmar’s representative](#).” However, [he also felt the need to admit](#) that attacks on the Tatmadaw intensified immediately following the NUG’s announcement. According to the NUG’s official statements, there were over 250 bomb detonations and 170 incidences of fighting

throughout the country within the first month of the declaration of war. This escalation only continues. According to the [NUG's Ministry of Home Affairs](#), they claim 1,974 junta soldiers were killed between October 7th and November 6th. These numbers are hard to verify, but reports on the ground concur with the [steep rise in clashes and attacks](#).

Most importantly, the PDFs and the NUG distinguish this phase of the conflict from previous fighting in the past three decades with their role as a distinct security actor with a new political objective. Labeled a “defensive people’s war,” it is indeed defensive in a moral sense as it is undisputable that the Tatmadaw’s brute force terror campaign catalyzed the peaceful anti-junta movement’s metamorphosis into armed resistance. But, in a military sense the NUG’s political objective is more accurately described as strategically offensive in that it intends to overthrow the Tatmadaw and seize the state to restore democracy. However, limited access to heavy equipment and disunity hinder the NUG’s “revolutionary war” strategy and instead

increasingly herald a Myanmar that fractures into a failed state.

The Metamorphosis of the Anti-Junta Movement

Anti-junta public resistance started immediately after the coup with peaceful protests and a non-violent Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). However, it was soon confronted with extremely brutal repression from the Tatmadaw. The young generation, particularly those from urban areas who came of age after reforms began in 2011, were eventually driven towards the conclusion that peaceful resistance by itself cannot restore democracy.

As the junta intensified its unrestrained violence, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – formed of ousted elected lawmakers – [announced](#) that civilians have the right of self-defense on March 14th. Young protestors quickly formed defense teams, while others fled into areas controlled by the established EAOs,



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predominantly in Kachin, Kayin, and Kayah states, for military training and equipping. The CRPH-appointed National Unity Government (NUG) then officially resorted to armed resistance on May 5th with its formation of the [People's Defense Forces \(PDF\)](#) to [fight back against](#) the junta. Since then, PDFs – primarily locally formed militias groups drawing upon the EAO-trained youth – have been mushrooming across the length and breadth of the country. Even so, non-violent [flash-protests](#) continue in Yangon, Mandalay, and other places. The NUG's official statistics claimed over 500 small protests unfolded within the weeks following the declaration.

The LDFs and PDFs

The most impactful result of the NUG's declaration has been the proliferation of anti-junta armed groups. Broadly, there are two types of PDFs: autonomous local PDFs termed "local defense forces" (LDFs) and those linked with the NUG's Ministry of Defense (MoD), which we label "PDFs". LDFs have mostly developed from local defense teams, and they operate in their townships independently and separately from the NUG while remaining outside its command and control. The PDFs on the other hand bear stronger connections to the shadow government – some were formed by, others recognized by, and a few commanded by the NUG.

Although differentiation is made for conceptual clarity, it is difficult in reality to determine the classification of individual LDFs and PDFs, especially because most LDFs have gradually connected with the NUG despite being not under their full control. Another problem is that some groups exist only on paper, quite a few are

inactive, others incorporated into larger groups, a few adopted new names, and many operate secretly due to security concerns. It is therefore almost impossible to develop a comprehensive list of these armed groups in Myanmar.

However, estimates are possible. According to sources close to some PDFs and the NUG, the total number of PDFs and LDFs is approximately over 500. When we developed a list of PDFs and LDFs which have manifested themselves in one manner or another via self-proclamations, media statements, and interviews, there are at least 309 groups across the country. However, this list is not exhaustive. Most PDFs and LDFs are township-level militia groups, and their sizes range from larger groups comprising several hundred personnel to small cells of two or three dozen individuals.

With the declaration of war, Myanmar's still proliferating PDFs and LDFs have joined its pre-existing EAOs. So far, the estimated number of PDF and LDF members hovers around 25,000. This number appears to have expanded as the initial volunteers passed their basic military lessons on to other young activists. To this can be added the EAOs currently engaging in combat against the junta – a further 28,000-30,000. Although upwards of 25,000 PDF and LDF troops is significant considering their standing start, these numbers currently pale in comparison to the junta's reported [300,000 to 350,000](#) troops, assorted [Border Guards Forces](#), and [Pyu Saw Htee pro-government militia](#). At the same time, this new security dynamic has placed the junta under an [enormous amount of pressure](#), stretched it thin to the point of [losing ground](#) in outlying regions, and increased [the risk of defections](#).



Myanmar's New Security Actor

These LDFs and PDFs represent a new type of security actor in Myanmar's post-1990s security context. The dissolution of the Communist Party of Burma and the failure of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front circa 1988-1990 marked the end of armed groups attempting to contest the Tatmadaw's control of the central state apparatus in Yangon (later Naypyidaw). Since the 1990s, the 20-some EAOs' political objectives in their off-and-on again fighting against the military have centered upon carving out and holding territory against military offensives. This is a strategically *defensive* political objective and military strategy. However, as [Andrew Selth describes](#), urban dissidents trained by EAOs constitute a disruptive change in Myanmar's protracted conflict. In contrast to the EAOs, the NUG and its PDFs have a distinct political objective: seize the central state apparatus, which is offensive at its core. In order to "win" and avoid becoming just another insurgency along Myanmar's borders, the NUG will have to directly confront the Tatmadaw in a "revolutionary war" and adopt an offensive military strategy designed to take and hold territory.

Contrary to the early prediction that PDFs would gradually dwindle in its uphill struggle against one of the largest militaries in the region, they have become much stronger and more organized over time. They are currently conducting a variety of operations, including ambushes, skirmishes, bombings, the sabotage of military-related facilities and businesses, and targeted assassinations. Some PDFs have also joined forces with EAOs in sophisticated operations against the military, primarily in ethnic areas in Chin, Kachin, Kayah, and Kayin states. A few of these PDFs may be under the operational control of the local EAOs and are certainly equipped and armed by them.

Over time, other PDFs have steadily matured into more organized formations. For instance, intense fighting has impelled one, PDF (Deemawhso), to expand into several battalions within a short period. The PDFs have been most successful in rural areas with a hit-and-run strategy—including the effective use of land-mines—against cumbersome Tatmadaw formations and [urban guerilla warfare](#) in larger towns and cities, such as Yangon, where they can melt into the often-friendly population.

Cooperation is also strengthening the PDFs and improving their combat effectiveness. This is most obvious in Sagaing and Kayah where coalition-building and coordination among the various PDFs poses a serious challenge to Tatmadaw troops. Shifts in combat tactics, such as the increasing use of landmines, [inflicts heavy casualties on the junta's troops](#). [Recent photos and video footage](#) from the PDFs also demonstrates that some forces have acquired more advanced weapons, such as machine guns, RPG launchers, and artillery – albeit in limited numbers. Much of this equipment comes via black markets in China, Laos, and Thailand or is locally-produced by some of the EAOs and, increasingly, the NUG and PDFs. Finally, despite their pursuit of autonomy, the Northern Alliance and elements of the Karen National Union EAOs (as well as a few smaller groups) have supported PDFs in their localities due to the convergence of their interest in opposing the Tatmadaw locally.

These facts are very promising, and it is undisputable that the various PDFs are making progress. However, this progress is not enough to retake the central state apparatus – the political objective in this war. This is not to say that constant guerilla fighting cannot wear down the junta or spur its implosion, but rather, for an





NUG without reliable access to heavy weaponry or countermeasures to Tatmadaw air power and a unified command structure, the NUG's PDFs will find it difficult to seize control of the state. The current situation and the NUG's weaknesses indicate that neither side will likely win outright, which could result in a complete state breakdown.

The PDF's Limits

The PDFs' lack of heavy armaments hinders their ability to take and hold territory. Although acquiring small arms is relatively manageable along Myanmar's porous borders, heavy equipment is not so readily available. Indeed, many PDFs still rely on [rudimentary small arms](#), and the NUG's logistical route is a trickle from the increasingly restricted Thai black market. The NUG and PDFs have reportedly established some arms workshops, but producing artillery, anti-air, and anti-armor weapons is likely beyond their capabilities. Elsewhere, the EAOs have passed along locally produced or smuggled arms, but themselves either lack heavy equipment or are unlikely to hand over their [China-made anti-air weapons](#) or artillery.

As a result, the PDFs also lack a means to effectively counter the military's airpower. This limitation makes it increasingly difficult to retain control of seized territories, as [happened in Mindat township in Chin state](#). More recently, the Tatmadaw has been deploying a steady barrage of air strikes against PDFs in [Sagaing](#) to terrible effect. This problem will only continue to plague the NUG and PDFs, because, while they have the potential to seize remote rural areas along the borders, they will struggle to take any of the strategic regions in the country's center without a countermeasure against the military's heavy equipment and aerial power. Lack of anti-air is doubly problematic in urban areas. Thus far, the PDFs have been successfully conducting guerilla raids and denying the military's access to wide swathes of rural areas, but the junta's troops still have the ability to hold most urban centers.

Anti-junta forces in urban settings such as Yangon, Mandalay, and elsewhere have been adopting hit-and-run tactics to challenge the junta asymmetrically, but urban guerilla warfare has a poor track record of success historically, as scholar [Anthony James Joes argues](#). Urban environments provide conventional forces the



advantage of encircling guerilla forces, and they can systematically lock insurgents in place, besiege, and reduce them at will with artillery and air power. As is common in the “[authoritarian counterinsurgency](#)” outlined by David H. Ucko, the Tatmadaw has no compunction about deploying indiscriminate violence against civilians to achieve its ends. Its heavy artillery and air power provide its forces with a distinct advantage against poorly equipped PDFs in urban areas.

Perhaps more importantly than lack of arms, the PDFs are operating independently, and the NUG lacks a coherent command and control structure. Although the PDFs jointly launched an [offensive](#) following the NUG’s September declaration of war, it soon became apparent that this was not operationally coordinated beforehand by the NUG and instead organized autonomously by local commanders. Attacks on junta forces occurred throughout the country, but the NUG did not seem to be in overall command. For instance, an attempt by PDFs and LDFs in Chin and Sagaing to carve out a [western corridor](#) between the KIA in Kachin and Arakan Army in Rakhine seems more aligned

with EAO interests than the NUG’s, as the NUG remains geographically isolated in the southeast and the Arakan Army has adopted the role of an armed neutral [defending its territory](#) from incursions by the Tatmadaw but remains unlikely to intervene beyond its borders. Recent efforts by the NUG to establish a “[Central Command and Coordination Committee](#)” appears nascent and the lack of confirmed details indicate limited buy-in at this time.

The anti-junta movement thus remains [splintered](#), and the [EAOs are wary](#) of the NUG’s trustworthiness. Frequent coalition building and coordination among the various PDFs aside, the NUG’s MoD has yet to bring together the sprawling PDFs under a unified command. Based on our findings, an estimated 30 percent of the PDFs are under the command of the NUG and 40 percent have some links to the NUG, but 30 percent operate independently. Without a formal command structure, the disparate PDFs will be unable to overcome the institutionalized military and thus run the risk of being whittled down one by one over the course of years. There are echoes



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in Myanmar's past, as the All Burma Students' Democratic Front steadily morphed into a rural insurgency after 1988 when it failed to take the central state.

From a strategic perspective, PDF disunity hands the Tatmadaw a distinct advantage that offsets some of the junta's poor [tactical](#) and [operational](#) performance by allowing the military to concentrate mass in each theater. Currently, resistance forces predominate along five main "fronts": 1) the western corridor of Sagaing and Chin states; 2) Kachin State where the KIA predominantly operates; 3) the eastern front of Kayah and Kayin states where PDFs and LDFs fight alongside some factions of the KNU and the Karenni National Progressive Party; 4) Northern Shan State where the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and its Northern Alliance have engaged in fierce fighting; and 5) the central regions where various scattered urban and rural PDFs are adopting a more dispersed and urban insurgency. The NUG itself is based out of Kayin State under the protection of the KNU, and the forces in other areas are largely outside its operational control. Meanwhile, the Arakan Army

in Rakhine and the United Wa State Army and its partners in Shan State can be seen as adopting armed neutrality.

Therefore, the Tatmadaw, holding Myanmar's central regions, operating on interior lines, and enjoying the advantage of heavier equipment, vehicles, and air power, can concentrate forces against isolated and uncoordinated PDFs and LDFs in each theater to reduce and defeat them over the course of months, if not years. The EAOs with their own interests will likely refrain from strategic or operational coordination beyond ethnic areas to save besieged NUG PDFs. Simply put, holding out is not enough as the Tatmadaw currently sits atop the apparatus.

There are historical parallels to this approach. As longtime Myanmar watcher Bertil Lintner describes in [The Irrawaddy](#), the Tatmadaw successfully adopted a similar strategy against the former Communist Party of Burma's insurgency by containing them to the border and wiping out isolated pockets in the central regions. Today, the Tatmadaw's dry season campaign, Operation Three Warrior Kings ([Anawrahta](#), Bayint Naung,



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and Alaungpayha) targeting the Sagaing, Magwe, and Chin western theater hopes to accomplish the same. Isolate and reduce the PDFs and LDFs while the EAOs focus on their own borders. The [brutality in the offensive](#) in Chin state attests to this approach.

With this in mind, it is likely that the NUG and the various PDFs will struggle to achieve their aim of seizing the state without heavy equipment or effective unity of command. Furthermore, a negotiated outcome or power sharing agreement does not look to be in the cards. Considering that the junta has [little incentive to negotiate](#) and remains an [ideologically fanatical organization](#), the NUG likely requires a battlefield victory and taking Myanmar's urban settlements, which is a difficult proposition amidst the PDF's current disunity and lack of heavy equipment. To be sure, China is no reliable friend to the junta, but the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus remains of limited effectiveness despite the recent rejection of Min Aung Hlaing's attendance at the October Summit. Beijing is still the most consequential outside actor and is [liable to side with the military](#) so long as it's winning. Therefore, the NUG will need international support, but, as seen in the delayed credentialing of the junta's UN representative, it is likely that garnering that aid necessitates taking and holding ground.

Importantly, this also does not mean that the opposition cannot force the junta to collapse due to [economic strain](#), internal division, or whittling it down through protracted insurgency. It does indicate, however, that a debilitated Tatmadaw but no unified opposition likely portends a [failed state](#), as historian Thant Myint-U argues in *Foreign Affairs*. Local armed actors, such as LDFs and EAOs, could go their own way and descend into warlordism. A united NUG that carries the loyalty of most PDFs and the anti-junta EAOs is more

likely to avoid this catastrophic outcome and have a chance at seizing the state apparatus.

A Military Strategy Suited to the Political Objective

As Mao Zedong's famous model of "[revolutionary war](#)" explains, there are three broad stages to a successful insurgency. At some point, insurgencies must mature from asymmetric guerilla tactics in rural areas to fielding conventional formations that can take and hold territory and major settlements if they wish to contest control of the state. This model arguably still [rings true today](#). For the NUG to succeed in its political objective, it has to overcome its limitations and unify the majority of PDFs and LDFs, attempt to build up conventional strength, and acquire heavy equipment to take the country's center.

Going forward, the NUG's strategy should thus first center on building strength in rural areas near the borders, likely in the eastern front. From there, the NUG could build up a base area where the PDFs under its control can erect a (relative) safe zone, establish a parallel government structure that [provides services and taxation](#), and acquire international recognition and heavy equipment. This will require getting the EAOs more fully on side, for the EAOs – even those most supportive of the anti-junta movement – largely work towards their own ends and would likely dislike ceding territory to the NUG. Continuing to carry out the reforms that address the NLD's poor record in relations with ethnic minorities is therefore also a necessary condition. As an added element, the Northern Alliance and United Wa State Army have access to anti-air weapons, so persuading them and their erstwhile backer China to take a blind eye to arms smuggling could address the heavy equipment deficit.



Operating from a firm base area, more unified NUG-led PDFs with better access to heavy equipment could then begin to challenge the Tatmadaw conventionally. Keeping up the pressure throughout the country in both urban and rural contexts, strategically preventing the Tatmadaw from isolating individual theaters, and flexibly employing a mix of guerilla and conventional operations as conditions permit – as Mao calls for – could allow for advancing the political objective over the long-term. To avoid the past mistakes of the Communist Party of Burma and the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, the NUG should avoid being relegated to the border regions and should instead endeavor to link up the various resistance pockets as soon as possible. This will require continued offensives and attempts to link up disparate and diffuse pockets of resistance.

Certainly, the odds are not great, as the NUG has had trouble establishing itself, the EAOs are fiercely independent, and the Tatmadaw remains powerful. But, the first step in Mao's model, acquiring the population's loyalty, is already accomplished. With a base area, stronger logistics and heavy equipment, and a unified command structure, the NUG and its PDFs may have a chance to seize the state.

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