

Civil-Military Relations in Contemporary Myanmar: A Security Perspective

P J Khache

Abstract

Security as a concept has evolved significantly beyond its traditional state-centric and military-focused definition. Contemporary security discourse increasingly broadens and deepens its scope to include non-military or non-traditional threats such as pandemic, cybersecurity, human insecurity, environmental degradation, climate change, economic instability and political fragility. In this context, contemporary Myanmar faces complex and multidimensional security challenges that cannot be addressed through military means alone.

This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine civil-military relations in Myanmar, focusing on three key periods: military rule under Ne Win, the democratic transition (2011–2021) and the aftermath of the 2021 Myanmar coup d'état. It analyses the military's security narrative and its framing of national stability, as well as the structural and institutional mechanisms that have shaped relations between military and civilian authorities over time. The study also engages with the widespread societal rejection of the Tatmadaw, particularly following the 2021 coup. Mass protests, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the emergence of resistance forces reflect a profound legitimacy crisis. In this context, the paper critically examines whether the military is perceived by civilians as a provider of security or as a source of insecurity and political violence.

Drawing on historical patterns of civil-military relations, the study argues that Myanmar's security approach requires recalibration to forge a more cooperative and balanced relationship between military and civilian institutions. While the military possesses professional expertise in defence, its effectiveness is constrained by declining public trust and legitimacy. The findings suggest that sustainable security cannot depend solely on military control and coercive capacity; rather, it requires strengthening civilian institutions, democratic accountability and inclusive governance. The paper contributes to broader debates on security and civil-military relations in transitional and conflict-affected states by highlighting the limitations of military-led security frameworks in contexts of deep societal contestation.