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Myanmar: Army seeks a meeting of National Defence & Security Council : Why?

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On 30th September, the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw) formally sought a meeting of the National Defence & Security Council Meeting. It had not met at all since the NLD Government took over.

The reasons given by the Army in calling for a meeting were to address the current political, economic and military affairs of the country and particularly to the conflict in Rakhine State between the Military and the Arakan Army that has been going on for nearly one year and that it should be handled by the Council.

It is also learnt that the Army would still be willing to talk to the three groups of the Northern Alliance who have termed themselves as “brotherhood group” despite collapse of the talks on September 21st this year.

In the absence of any response from the Government as it is the President who has to authorize the meeting, Maj. Gen. Htun Htun Nyi posed a question to the Government “Will you only call for a meeting when we go to War”. He added that they need to have regular meetings to analyze, discuss and evaluate the security situation in the country.

One is unable to understand the desperate urgency of the Army to convene the National Security meeting when they have been unilaterally taking decisions in dealing with the situation in Rakhine state.

In this context the following points will be relevant.

1. The National Security Council has eleven members with the President, two Vice Presidents, the Foreign Minister, the three Ministers from Defence, Home and Border Affairs selected from the Army, Speakers of the Parliament and the upper House and Army Chief with his Deputy. The configuration is such that the Army with 6 of its representatives of the eleven will have a majority and an upper hand in taking decisions. The civilian component being in a minority can only officially endorse whatever the Army wants. This is the reason why the NLD in the amendments suggested for the 2008 Constitution wanted the addition of the two Deputy speakers of the Houses so that the civilians will have the majority in taking vital decisions relating to national security.
2. Since 2016, the National Security Council has not met and the civilian component having only a minority representation did not find it necessary either to go to the Council for taking any decision. In fact, Suu Kyi appointed a civilian and former diplomat Thaing Tun as her National Security Adviser. She had another inner circle of members – a kind of mechanism in place of the Security council to discuss the security issues. In the process she has made the National Defence and Security Council irrelevant, much to the chagrin of the Army. Many Observers who have been watching the developments in Myanmar feel that the relationship between the Civilian Government led by Suu Kyi and the Army is at its lowest ebb now for various reasons.
3. On the other hand, the Army's proposals in amending the present constitution involves considerable strengthening of powers of the National Defence and Security Council that includes the dismissal of elected Provincial governments. Amendments included meeting of the NDSC (Nation Defence and Security Council) every month with a provision to call for emergency meeting if five of its members call for such a meeting. The idea is to make the Council an all-powerful body with the Army taking the decisions but fully endorsed by the Civilian Government through the National Security Council. Details of the NDSC are given in Chapter 5 of the Constitution and it gets really more powerful when emergency is declared as is mentioned in the last part of the Constitution.
4. There is no doubt that the ethnic strife has intensified thanks to the Army and is likely to spread from Rakhine, Chin States now to Northern Shan State and beyond. Kachins have not been spared either. That the Northern alliance was able to spring a surprise and the nasty attack on an elite Military Academy at Pyin Oo Lwin in Mandalay region is quite significant. Recent inputs on 26TH September by the Army Intelligence of the likelihood of terrorist attacks in Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw appear more to highlight the tense security situation and the need to address the issues and full support for the Army to deal with those.
5. The negotiations between the Government and the three groups of the Northern Alliance at Kengtung had begun well and both sides agreed in the last meeting on many points. These included a commitment to end current fighting, plan for further bilateral cease fire negotiations, cooperation on rehabilitation and return of displaced people and further talks on troop deployment and code of conduct, further negotiations on preventing further clashes, build trust by avoiding arrests and legal action related to the conflicts (the top AA leadership have cases of subversion against them) etc. - But there were two major sticking points. One of course was the return of the groups to their original places which will never be agreed to by the ethnic outfits the AA and the TNLA and the other- the proposal that in the bilateral ceasefire when implemented to be monitored by China and /or its proxy UWSA and included in the Joint Cease fire

monitoring Committee.

6. During the meeting at Kengtung itself last September, the three groups on its own declared a cease fire till the end of this year to show their sincerity in signing bilateral cease fire agreements in due course. In fact, the Secretary of the Peace Commission U Khin Zaw described the declaration as “constructive” and a result of the negotiations. But the Army on the other hand abruptly ended the self-imposed ceasefire in Kachin and Shan States from 21st September on the ground that the armed ethnic groups do not seem to be interested in signing the nationwide Cease fire agreement (NCA). Despite frequent statements by the Army like- “ We will continue to move on the peace process under the leadership of the National reconciliation & Peace Centre”, probably this decision was taken by the Army without due consultations with the Peace Commission.

With the National Ceasefire agreement going nowhere, with the all powerful China supported FPNCC led by Wa calling for a different narrative on the peace process, with the danger of ethnic fighting getting more intensive spreading to other regions and with possibility of international sanctions against the top Generals of the Army, it looks that the Army wants the civilian leaders of the Government take full ownership for all the activities relating to the ethnic conflict and the ceasefire process.

One way to get the Civilian endorsement would be to convene the National Defence and Security committee meeting where it has a majority to approve and validate all that had happened and whatever they have planned for the future.

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