

Burma Briefing

Is Serbia still arming the Burmese military?

Burma
campaign UK

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Introduction

Serbia has a long and close relationship with the Burmese military. Is Serbia still arming the Burmese military?

Since the Burmese military attempted to grab power through a coup on February 1st 2021 there have been unconfirmed rumours and reports of military contacts and Serbia supplying arms or equipment to the Burmese military.

These reports have been given more credence by the fact that Serbia has had a close relationship with the Burmese military for decades, signed a defence co-operation agreement in 2015, and continued to supply arms and publicly discuss increased defence co-operation as recently as 2019.

In June 2021 Serbia backed a UN General Assembly Resolution calling for the flow of arms to the military to be stopped, but also has a long track record of failing to bring its foreign

policy into line with the EU as part of its EU membership process, including continuing to sell arms to the Burmese military despite an EU arms embargo.

In August 2021 Burma Campaign UK wrote to the Serbian Embassy in the UK asking for clarification of Serbia's current policy. We did not receive a response.

Serbia must now clarify its policy.

It must publicly state that it does now have an arms embargo in place, does not supply military equipment, technology or parts, and that it has ended defence co-operation with the Burmese military.

Historically close relations

The Serbian government boasts on its website that: "Since the first contacts in the 1950s, the two countries have had very close military and economic co-operation."¹



Min Aung Hlaing visiting Serbia in 2015

Burma was Yugoslavia's first international customer for arms sales.²

Ne Win's military dictatorship admired and was inspired by the so-called socialist policies of the Yugoslavian dictatorship and its non-aligned foreign policy.

The two regimes became close allies. Yugoslavia was a major arms supplier to Ne Win's dictatorship from the 1950s onwards, including jets and heavy artillery.

Serbia inherited significant arms manufacturing facilities following the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the close relationship continued between the Serbian government and the Burmese military.

Despite the fact that Serbia was supposed to be aligning itself with EU foreign policy as it sought potential candidate status for joining the EU, in practice it rarely actually did so, and ignored the EU arms embargo against Burma which it was supposed to be joining.

Serbia continued supplying both arms and equipment to the military. There is little transparency on arms sales, but on public record is the sale of 54 heavy artillery howitzers to the Burmese military in 2001 and 36 heavy artillery howitzers in 2004.³

They are likely to be Nora B-52 Howitzers manufactured by the BSS factory and exported by Yugoimport, the state-owned defence equipment company and exporter.⁴

It is also reported that Serbia sent engineers to Burma in 2003 to repair 12 4 G4 jets which had

been sold to the military in the 1990s.⁵ Three of these are still in operation today, indicating that the military is either cannibalising old jets for parts, or that Serbia may still be providing parts and servicing support.⁶

Following the crushing of the Monk-led uprising in 2007, there were renewed calls for arms embargoes and a Serbian defence official, speaking on condition of anonymity, was quite open about its role supplying the military.

The news organisation Balkan Insight reported:

"Following the breakup of the federal Yugoslavia of six republics, Serbia's state-run weapons exporter Yugoimport SDPR maintained its deals with Myanmar, as "they are dependent on our logistical support", the official said."⁷

"Since 2001 we have exported some 30 World War II vintage M2A1 and M56 105mm towed howitzers and an additional batch of 155mm Nora self-propelled howitzers, all for Myanmar's military", the official said."⁸

Increasing relations post 2010

Once the EU began the process of prematurely lifting sanctions in 2012, Serbia significantly stepped up official diplomatic and military relations with Burma. Increasing military sales was a top priority for Serbia in its relations with Burma.

This effort culminated on 11th May 2015 with Serbia signing a formal defence co-operation agreement with the Burmese military.⁹



Min Aung Hlaing at the signing of the defence co-operation agreement with Serbia 2015

This agreement was signed during a visit to Serbia by Min Aung Hlaing, head of the Burmese military. During the visit he met not only with the defence minister of Serbia, but also with the President.

The Serbian Ministry of Defence reported on a meeting between Min Aung Hlaing and Minister of Defence, Bratislav Gasic during the visit. It stated: “Gasic and Hlaing discussed current political security issues, and the possibility of improvement of cooperation in the field of defence, primarily in the fields of military economy, military technique and military medicine.”¹⁰

The report also referred to: “...the principled support that Myanmar provides for preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty in Kosovo and Metohija.” This issue is a top foreign policy for Serbia and is referred to in almost all publications by the government of Serbia when referring to relations with Burma. Around half of UN members recognise the independence of Kosovo. Burma does not.

Following the signing of agreement, Min Aung Hlaing stayed in Serbia holding more meetings and visiting tourist sites. He also went shopping for arms. In June 2015 the Burmese military were one of the delegations attending the seventh defence exhibition “Partner 2015” at the Belgrade Fair.¹¹

The state run propaganda newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar reported on 13th May 2015 that: “The senior general and party visited the booth of Yogoimport Company in Nikinci and viewed artillery and tanks.”¹² (Note, the report misspelt Yugoimport).

In 2016 First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic met with the Ambassador from Burma and in an official report on the meeting on the Serbian government website stated that they: “spoke today about the strengthening of bilateral cooperation, especially investment and military-economic cooperation.”¹³

In 2017 Reuters reported that Burma was a recipient of Serbia weapons, stating:

“Serbia exports small arms, artillery systems, missiles, ammunition and various equipment through 173 licensed companies to dozens of countries, including the United States, Israel, Canada, Myanmar and Saudi Arabia.”¹⁴

On 22nd May 2019 in a meeting between the Burmese Ambassador to Belgrade, Myo Aye and the Ministry of Defence: “exchanged views on co-operation of the two countries in the area of defense and finding opportunities for its further improvement.”¹⁵

Serbia was not alone at the time

During the time Serbia was engaged in deepening relations with the military, EU members were also engaged in similar activities. The UK was providing two UK taxpayer funded training programmes to the Burmese military.¹⁶

Austria and Germany¹⁷ had also offered training to the Burmese military. Italy, Germany, Belgium and France had invited Min Aung Hlaing to visit their countries and tours provided by Germany, Austria and Italy included visiting military equipment manufacturers.

Min Aung Hlaing was guest of honour at a meeting of EU military chiefs in Brussels, and France and Germany were selling equipment to the Burmese military because of their lax interpretation of the EU arms embargoes.



Partner 2015 Defence Exhibition

Relations since the military coup on 1st February 2021

Serbia aligned itself with the EU declaration on 2nd February 2021 condemning the military coup, and has done so with sanctions and declarations since then. This was in a context of the EU challenging Serbia of its failure to align itself with EU foreign policy as required as part of its process towards EU membership.¹⁸ Serbia also supported the UN General Assembly Resolution on Burma in June 2021, which called for action to stop the flow of arms to the military.

However, Serbia has not followed EU diplomatic practices.

The government of Serbia has accepted the military as the legitimate government of Burma.

In October 2021 they invited the military to a special event hosted in Belgrade for the 60th anniversary of the Non-Aligned Movement. They invited former colonel Wunna Maung Lwin, who was appointed by the military as Foreign Minister of the State Administration Council, the body the military has unsuccessfully tried to claim is the government of Myanmar. He has been sanctioned by the EU because of his role in human rights violations and the military coup, summit. He addressed the summit via video link.¹⁹ The Belgrade-based Ambassador who works for the military also attended.

On 4th January 2022, Independence Day in Burma, the military published a message of felicitations from Mr Nikola Selaković, Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, in the military run propaganda newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar.²⁰ Serbia was one of only a handful of countries around the world to do so, and the only European country.

Arms supplies

In its 'Arms Trade Bulletin March – April 2021' the International Peace Information Service stated:

"According to the United Nations International Trade Statistics Database (COMTRADE) and the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) the main suppliers of arms and ammunition to Myanmar, between 2001 and 2019, have been China, India, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine. The transfers included, more specifically: tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery systems, rocket launchers, combat aircraft, attack helicopters, parts and accessories, and ammunition."²¹

The Defense & Security 2019 Exhibition was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 18-21 November 2019, where on its website Yugoimport listed it was exhibiting:

"The special emphasis was put on the following Yugoimport-SDPR exhibits: 8x8 multipurpose combat armored vehicle "Lazar 3", 4x4 combat armored vehicle "Milosh", 155 mm self-propelled gun-howitzer "NORA", 155 mm self-propelled gun-howitzer "Aleksandar", self-propelled multiple-barrel missile launcher "Sumadija", modular multiple-barrel rocket system "Tamnava", "Alas" missile system, patrol boats (2 pcs), "Sova" and "Lasta" aircraft, small and medium caliber ammunition, ammunition for grenade launchers, artillery ammunition 105-155 mm, fuzes, artillery rockets in 107, 122 and 128 mm caliber, 57 mm rockets as well as 128 mm "Munja" rocket (guided and non-guided), 122 mm GRAD rocket, 128 mm PLAMEN-D rocket and more."

Mr Nikola Selaković, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia sends congratulatory message to Union Minister for Foreign Affairs

ON the occasion of the Independence Day of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, I extend to you, on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia and my own behalf, cordial felicitations and best wishes for the overall progress of your country and its people.

I am convinced that the traditionally friendly relations between the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, established back in the founding days of the Non-Aligned Movement, constitute a stable basis for further advancement of cooperation in many areas of common interest, to the benefit of our two peoples.

In that context, I would like to underline the importance and to once again express my gratitude for the participation of Myanmar and you personally at the High-Level Commemorative Meeting to mark the 60th anniversary of the Non-Aligned Movement, held in Belgrade on 11 and 12 October 2021.

I take this opportunity as well to express my deep gratitude for the consistent and principled support of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, which I hope will continue in the future.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurance of my highest consideration.

They listed the Myanmar delegation at the top of its list of military delegations which visited: “Jugoimport-SDPR exhibition booth was visited by a large number of commercial visitors as well as official foreign delegations (Myanmar, Malaysia, Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Russia, Mexico and many other).”²²

This is after the EU tightened its arms embargo in 2018 following the genocidal military attacks against the Rohingya in 2017.²³

In a submission to the United Nations Secretariat of the Arms Trade Treaty, as a signatory of the Arms Trade Treaty, Serbia reported that in the year 2019 it sold large caliber artillery systems and pistols and other light weapons to the Burmese military.²⁴

In another documented incident that took place after the strengthening of the EU arms embargo, the human rights organisation Justice for Myanmar exposed how the Burmese military was using private Burmese companies to purchase arms abroad, including from Serbia.²⁵

A letter from Myanmar Chemical and Machinery Co Ltd (MCM) to the Burmese Air Force, dated 5th September 2019, detailed bombs and equipment its partner company in Serbia, Sloboda, could provide.²⁶

During the period of Slobodan Milosovic's Presidency of Serbia, the General Director of Sloboda was sanctioned by the EU because of his role in supporting Milosovic.

Milosevic died in 2006 whilst on trial for war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.²⁷

Aung Hlaing Oo, owner of MCM, is close to the Burmese military, and his companies benefit from this close relationship, including earning lucrative commissions on facilitating the supply of arms and equipment to the military.²⁸

As of January 2022 he and his companies had not yet been sanctioned for their role in supplying arms and equipment to the military.

KOMPANIJA "SLOBODA" A.D. - SRBIJA

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Kompanija "SLOBODA"

Image from the Sloboda website

Rough translation of the MCM letter obtained by Justice for Myanmar

Copy of the first page of the letter from MCM naming the Serbia arms company Sloboda:

To Defence Ministry (Air)

Naypyidaw

Subject: Regarding submitting technical proposal

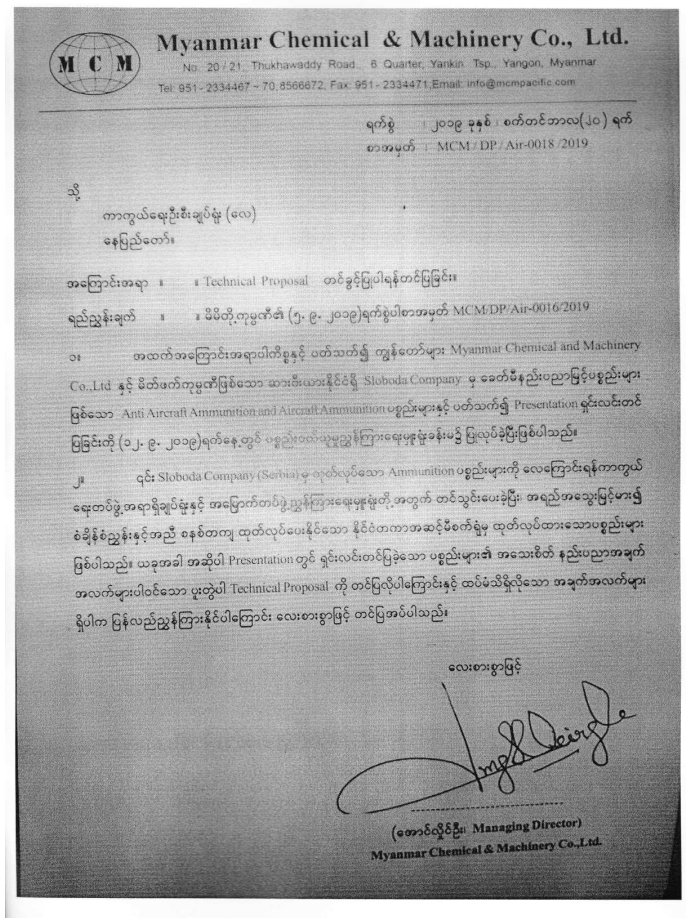
Reference: Our company letter from 05.09.2019

1- Our company, Myanmar Chemical and Machinery Co Ltd, our partner company based in Serbia, Sloboda Company, had given presentations on 12.09.2019 at the Purchasing Department Hall regarding our high-tech Anti-Aircraft Ammunition and Aircraft Ammunition.

2- We acquired ammunition equipment produced by Sloboda Company (Serbia) for the office of Air Defence Force and for the office of Artillery director (?). The equipment is high quality products produced in internationally high standard factories. We would like to submit Technical Proposal of this equipment and their detailed technology which we mentioned in our presentation and please contact us for any further information.

Sincerely,

Aung Hlaing Oo



Serbia has questions to answer

Serbia has a decades long history of supplying arms to the Burmese military and doing so at the same time as the United Nations was documenting how the Burmese military was targeting civilians and violating international law.

Serbia even continued to discuss increasing military co-operation after the genocidal attacks against the Rohingya in 2016 and 2017. It ignored the EU arms embargo with which it was supposed to be aligning.

Serbia must now clarify its policy. It must publicly state that it does now have an arms embargo in place, does not supply military equipment, technology, servicing or parts, and that it has ended all forms of defence co-operation with the Burmese military.

ENDNOTES:

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