State-building, Military Modernization and Cross-border Ethnic Violence in Myanmar

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Abstract
This article explains cross-border uses of force against ethnic armed groups along Myanmar’s bloody borders with China and Thailand. I trace the history of Burma’s ethnic disputes, its state-society relations, and the “modernization” of its military doctrine to understand how its state-building enterprise can shape the use of force along a state’s frontier. I treat each of the border regions as distinct subcategories to highlight variation in the micro-dynamics as well as types and conditions under which the use of state-orchestrated violence occurs. First, I point to the role of greater state-building – extractive, coercive, etc. – and how it influences the use of force along border regions. Second, I explore the modernization of Burma’s military and evolution of its doctrine – this includes early efforts by the tatmadaw’s post-1988 shift toward a more conventional counterinsurgency strategy. An implication of my theory is that more peaceful relations between states perversely can create the conditions for more cross-border violence, as there are greater opportunities for states to either “pool” border security or outsource the use of force to proxies or paramilitary forces.

Keywords
Burma, Myanmar, state-building, civil-military relations, Tatmadaw, civil war, counterinsurgency, state-society relations, China, Thailand

Introduction
The world’s longest civil war rages on in the frontiers of Myanmar between a government historically dominated by its military and several bands of ethnic rebels, many of them seeking self-rule. At the same time, a number of other
insurgencies, including one against a Muslim minority, the Rohingya, continue along Myanmar’s other frontier regions. Even as Myanmar begins to democratize, there has been little to no let-up in the violence along its periphery. To understand Myanmar’s use of force against these groups, one must understand the complicated origins of its military rule, its fitful attempts at state-building and shifts in its threat environment, both internal and external.

This article posits that the Myanmar’s approach to counterinsurgency and application of force is a function of two simultaneous processes: First, the state under military rule has carried out aggressive state-building along its frontier as a way to further consolidate its boundaries, alternating between the use of local paramilitary forces and its own armed forces to quell these border regions, while purposely not eradicating these groups given that the military benefits from some level of a threat to legitimize its control. Simultaneously, Myanmar’s military (or tatmadaw) seeks to profit from cross-border trade (timber, jade, opium, etc.), both licit and illicit (see Lintner, 1999; Meehan, 2011). As a result, it has vacillated between military coercion and political accommodation as a means of bringing order to its frontiers while also enhancing its economy, capacity and legitimacy. To this day, these areas, hilly, remote, rich in natural resources and ethnic hodgepodges, have proved difficult to control and bring into the political fold.

Second, Myanmar’s civil-military relations have gone through a series of institutional crises and challenges to the regime’s authority. Together with shifts in its threat environment, this has spurred on a modernization of its military doctrine (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, pp. 16–46). During the first years of postcolonial rule (1948–1958), Myanmar’s military posture was based largely on fear of external invasion from China (ibid., p. 11). Over the next few decades (1958–1988), its doctrine congealed around the threat of the country’s internal insurgency and ethnic armed actors along the periphery. Following 1988, military doctrine focused almost exclusively on modernization, as external threats took on renewed attention and the armed forces shifted towards a more conventional warfare stance (ibid., p. 11). Interestingly, its use of force against ethnic armed groups, even across borders into neighbouring states, would become more routinized as the military modernized itself after Ne Win stepped down in 1988. Part of this modernization process was to consolidate its borders and reduce the threat these groups posed while simultaneously guarding its border against conventional threats. The tatmadaw would rely increasingly on local border patrols, some of them comprising ethnic armed factions it was previously fighting. It was a counterinsurgency policy that mixed co-optation with coercion.

Myanmar’s military rules over a fragmented society. The tatmadaw itself is riven by elite divisions, yet still rules as a leviathan-like entity. It views itself as a ‘modernizing’ force, despite claims to the contrary. The case of Myanmar reveals how military rulers, insulated from public opinion, perceive of state and non-state threats along its periphery, and how this perception shapes its military doctrine, at a time of rapid state-building. Its use of force is manifested by the centre’s exertions of greater control—economic, political and cultural—over its upland periphery. Despite greater civilian control, the government still retains a strong
praetorian composition, which explains its aggressive use of force along its frontier (Ben-Eliezer, 1997).

Externally, despite relatively peaceful relations with its neighbouring states, and despite greater civilian control, Myanmar has taken a largely offensive approach to counterinsurgency, one that mixes conciliatory gestures to co-opt armed actors with the application of brute military force. This article argues that the peripheral threat is necessary for the tatmadaw’s claims to institutional authority and legitimacy, as well as for the military to profit from the booming economy along the border. The implications of my argument are that the state should have little incentive in seeing these areas become completely pacified and so will continue to wage a border war that mixes conventional counterinsurgency with political accommodation.

This article proceeds as follows: First, I examine the country’s historical background of ethnic war, looking at the postcolonial roots of the conflict. Then, I discuss its early attempts at state-building, placing Myanmar in the larger literature. Next, I situate my case study in the broader literature on civil-military relations and explore the historical evolution of its military, how its military doctrine has evolved, and specifically its use of cross-border force against rebels in Thailand and China. I conclude with a recap of my theory.

**Background of Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar**

Myanmar is strategically located in Southeast Asia, wedged between two more powerful state rivals, China and India. It is a nation hemmed in by a horseshoe of hill country, ethnically diverse, impoverished and constituting what James Scott has referred to as a ‘negative space’ (Scott, 2009). The highlands of Kachin state along the northern Chinese border provide insurgents with a natural canopy to evade being targeted (Tucker, 2000). Likewise, the jungles between Myanmar and Thailand, rich in lumber and lucrative teal, are some of the world’s thickest. As John Seabury Thomson noted in 1957, ‘[The] topography of the country and its isolation from trade routes tended to make the [Burmese] people look inward rather than outward […]’ (Thomson, 1957, p. 269). That shapes the country’s view of itself in the wider region as well as its own poorly defined borders and helps explain why the country currently faces no fewer than a dozen armed ethnic conflicts.

Besides the ethnically dominant Burman, which constitutes over two-thirds of the population, the government officially recognizes 135 distinct ethnic groups. Virtually all of the ethnic groups can be carved up further into various subgroups. The categories still in use today were mostly derived by the British administrators and missionaries, who made perceptions-based differentiations mostly based on a group’s language and culture. As one British official noted in 1931, ‘[S]ome of the races or tribes in Burma change their language almost as often as they change their clothes’ (Smith, 1991, p. 34). Interpreting Myanmar’s history by delineating it into various political-ethnic groups is problematic, if only because of these groups’ complex identities and overlapping cultures. Myanmar retains
some of the strictest citizenship laws, which in theory require proof of ancestry present in Myanmar before arrival of the British in 1824. This has typically been a ploy to discriminate against non-Buddhist minorities, like the Rohingya, a Muslim minority not considered citizens of Myanmar (Tang, 2013).

The pluralistic societies of postcolonial states, widely dissected by anthropologists, demonstrate the dangers of one ethnic group dominating others and imposing narrow primordial definitions of citizenship upon them. The narrative of Burma’s postcolonialist struggles, as Clifford Geertz noted, became defined as ‘the Irrawaddy Valley Burmese versus the various hill tribes’ (Geertz, 1963). National identity, previously forged in opposition to British and Japanese occupation, re-emerged among hill tribes in opposition to state enclosure, the growing influence of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), and the ‘internal imperialism’ of the Burman lowlanders. Still, Myanmar’s ethnic opposition suffered from its own fractiousness and from its own strongmen, who were driven by profit over peace.

Non-state opposition to the state can be traced back to the early days of resistance to outside rule by the British and Japanese. Aung San, after resigning from the army in October 1945, formed a ‘welfare organization’ meant to ease the transition of officers back into civilian life called the People’s Volunteer Organization (PVO). What emerged instead was an ‘alternative army’, largely made up of former soldiers, resisters and Burmese youth (Callahan, 2004, p. 109). Because of the decentralized nature of early Burmese resistance to Japanese rule, there were literally dozens if not hundreds of underground armies. These localized militias employed guerrilla tactics and from their early days financed their operations from gambling, prostitution and other illicit activities. The PVO was Aung San’s effort to centralize these private armies. Yet when the war against the Japanese ended, the PVO neither gave up its arms nor its smuggling networks. The significance of this umbrella organization, even after Aung San’s death in July 1947 and Burmese independence the following year, notes Mary Callahan, is it ‘greatly expanded the form and institutional capacity of non- and anti-state armies in the postwar period’ (ibid., p. 111). Attempts to disarm these local militias after 1948 failed, and instead these groups would be reconstituted as extra-state paramilitary organizations, thus ensuring the centrality of violence as the dominant feature of state-building in Burma until (and after) the army takeover in 1968.

One of the signature divisive issues was the disproportionate presence of Karen in senior ranks of the Burmese army (ibid., p. 122). Even before the Japanese surrender in 1945, these ethnic minorities proposed the creation of an autonomous new state, ‘Karenistan’. But the proposal ran into the inconvenient fact that Karen did not inhabit one unitary ‘frontier area’, but rather were geographically dispersed. The British considered the creation of two separate local armies: the national army and also a ‘frontier’ army run by their British officers or Karen deemed loyal to the crown. This would lead to the open rebellion by Karen against the Burmese government shortly after independence. Political power became increasingly fragmented—no single group exercised a Weberian monopoly on the use of force. Half of the army mutinied. When Ne Win took control of the army in 1949, he commanded fewer than 2000 troops. Three-quarters of Myanmar’s towns and villages were under insurgent control. Violence was no longer random but a
routinized form of life, and undergirded the state formation process in Burma. As the main sources of power, the army, the Parliament and the civil service, according to Callahan:

… built alliances with and linkages to powerful forces in the countryside. This knitting together of networks of violence constituted a tenuous but nonetheless productive form of state building. As elites in Rangoon and rural leaders negotiated over how to manage violence and scarce resources, they momentarily appeared to be constructing accommodationist institutions of governance. (ibid., p. 115)

This point is important to understanding centre-periphery relations under tatmadaw rule, and the emergence of its application of counterinsurgency across borders. Indeed, the fractiousness of the frontier and the presence of a thriving illicit economy were not antithetical but rather integral to the state formation process (Meehan, 2011). As evidenced by state-society relations along the Thai–Burmese border, state-building became bundled up in various processes of co-optation and corrupt deal-making in order to reap profits from cross-border trade.

**Divide and Rule**

The initial conflict among Burma’s disparate ethnic groups and its Burman majority dates back to the British colonial era, when ethnic minorities were given favourable treatment over the Burman majority. The reason for this is manifold. Ethnic minorities from Burma’s hinterlands did not shun Western education, as did the majority Burman, who associated it with Christianity. This opened up new opportunities for commercial employment as well as colonial administration. On the eve of World War II, Karen soldiers outnumbered Burmans in the army by a factor of three to one (South, 2008, p. 12). It was these missionary schools that forged a pan-Karen Christian identity that would give rise to the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the biggest separatist groups to challenge Burma’s centre.

In precolonial society, the Karen were perceived by most as little more than semi-nomadic hill peoples and rice farmers. They were animist, not Buddhist, highly localized and almost apolitical. Seen as ethnically inferior, they were forced to pay tribute to the Burman lowlanders in forestry products (ibid., p.13). Thus, given their position in Burmese society having long been one of marginalization and oppression, when the British arrived in the nineteenth century, they were greeted as ‘‘liberators’’ from Burman domination’ (Smith, 1991, p. 12).

British rule did little to mend relations between Burma’s hill peoples of the periphery and the plain peoples of the centre. Hundreds of miles of the country’s borders were never formally demarcated, as insurgent movements claimed frontier areas and put up an armed resistance to any state attempts to bring them into the political fold. Hence, when civil war broke out shortly after Burma’s independence in 1948, law and order quickly broke down. Coercion became the currency for the country’s postcolonial politics, and the state emerged as just one among many actors vying for power and legitimacy (Callahan, 2004, p. 36).
Because of the senior military ranks enjoyed by Burma’s ethnic classes under British rule, armed groups displayed considerable military skills and command and control during the initial outbreak of hostilities (ibid., p. 36). In the southeast, Karen units defected from the Burmese Army and formed the KNU, thus beginning the twentieth century’s longest-running insurgency. They settled in a narrow strip of southeast highlands called ‘Kaw Thoo Lei’, or ‘peaceful land’. Across the Delta and upper Myanmar, a number of minorities—Mon, Karenni, Pao and Kachin—also openly revolted (Smith, 1991, p. 28). When ethnic Shan and Kachin made significant inroads at declaring semi-autonomy, this prompted a military coup in March 1962 by Ne Win (ibid., p. 28).

The inability to forge a peace follows patterns in other ethnically fragmented societies—lack of credible commitments, unfair distribution of natural resources, and security dilemmas arising from distrust at the local level (Fearon, 1995, pp. 379–414; Posen, 1993, pp. 27–47). The country’s roughly 30,000 insurgents, a mixture of communist and ethnically motivated rebels, have been in open rebellion since Burma’s independence from the British in 1948 and to this day control roughly one-quarter of Burmese territory. But they have largely been cordoned off by the highlands that ring the country’s Irrawaddy delta (Smith, 1991, p. 10). Because of the ongoing conflict, these areas remain plagued by high poverty, underdevelopment, a thriving illegal drug trade and unfair distribution of natural resources revenues. Human rights abuses are well documented, including forced labour by the tatmadaw, confiscation of land, forced displacement, arbitrary taxation, religious discrimination, human trafficking and recruitment of child soldiers.7

To understand Myanmar’s current approach to counterinsurgency, it is necessary to first put it in the context of the literature on modern state-building.

**State-building**

To define state-building, I borrow from Max Weber, who emphasized structural and organizational characteristics of the process. A state presumes that ‘the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be’ (Weber, 1991, p. 78). This claim to authority is granted via the mechanism of its possession of a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a given territory. It emphasizes that legitimacy is derived from the people. Charles Tilly defined state-building in a more positional and relational way, by noting the importance of not only controlling a population within a defined territory, much in the way that Weber does, but also the state differentiating itself among other entities and organizations in an area, being centralized and autonomous (Migdal, 1988; Tilly, 1985). This process is carried out over centuries through a mixture of co-optation and coercion. By contrast, Anthony Giddens emphasizes the state’s control over means of external as well as internal uses of force, thus separating state formation from its pre-nineteenth century predecessors (Giddens, 1985).

Much of our scholarly preconception of state-building is informed by Europe’s turbulent yet mostly linear history. This is a useful but incomplete—and
determinately one-sided—guide to explaining how things like institutional capacity and economic development emerge, as well as the fragments and remnants of states, or non-state actors. To recap, from the Middle Ages onward—that is, for much of the modern Westphalian era of statecraft—land was scarce and densely populated. This made it particularly valuable for monarchs, lords and commoners to control territory. Taken together with advances in offensive military technology, this led to a steady string of conflicts between kings and commoners over territory but also drew a kind of Darwinian conflict between empires and states. To pay for these territorial conquests, kings required money and loyalty among their subjects. Rather than rely solely on repression or patronage, which was costly, parliaments were formed and taxes collected (Levi, 1989).

Kings built bureaucracies to provide greater legibility over their territories and collect intelligence, but also as a concession to extract loyalty and let their subjects vent. Political institutions developed somewhat ad hoc to protect property rights and provide for a separation of powers that varied from state to state, leading later scholars to debate the path-dependent sequencing quality of institutional development (North & Weingast, 1989). Within this framework, the state emerges as the principal arbiter of force. The explanatory variable of state-building in this context was population density, as it drove up the value of land and made territorial acquisition by force more profitable (Scott, 2014, p. 72). Hence, Tilly’s observation: ‘War made the state, and the state made war’.

Yet, war was not the only factor behind modern state-building, even though most scholars would argue it was the most important and mostly quibble over the mechanisms, which are manifold. Albert Hirschman stressed interstate war’s importance in improving national cohesiveness by removing the ‘exit’ option of discontents (Hirschman, 1978, pp. 90–107). Relatedly, others emphasize the importance of conscription, not only for the mass mobilization of armies but also to create a sense of national identity necessary for effective state-building. Large armies both required states to extract resources from their populations and improved the states’ ability to coerce their subjects, which in turn spurred governments to develop bureaucracies to collect taxes and distribute resources, a virtuous circle from the standpoint of the crown or cabinet (Hintze et al., 1975). External threats of foreign invasion helped solidify common national identities, which reduced the costs of coercion and tax collection (Desch, 1999, pp. 247–248). States, in this sense, were both a cause and a consequence of greater militarization. State consolidation, as one scholar notes, was ‘rarely peaceful: consider the three wars of German unification, or the bloody excesses of the Italian unification’ (Brooks, 2016, p. 229).

Obviously, there are alternative and less violent causal pathways to state consolidation. One advanced by political economists stresses the importance of institutions at lowering the barriers to trade. The sovereign state emerged most efficient at consolidating its rulers’ authority, which in turn made free-riding and other barriers to trade less likely. States were better able to rationalize their economies through the use of standardizations of measures and coinage. What emerges across Europe by the seventeenth century, however imperfect and incomplete, is a kind of aspirational rationalist-legalist framework in the Weberian
mould, a mass bureaucracy that provided public goods and social order. It was not preordained, as Hendrik Spruyt notes, but rather proved more efficient than the city-state and city-league, its main sovereign rivals.

To consolidate their holdings and increase legibility, state leaders enacted mass standardization of measures, erected monuments and composed national anthems and carried out mass programmes to increase uniformity across their sovereign lands. That said, as states sought greater control and social cohesion, they began providing their societies with greater rights and laws less out of altruism or liberalism than legibility concerns (Scott, 1998). As Joel Migdal writes,

> Getting the population to obey the rules of the state rather than the rules of the local manor, clan, or any other organization arose much less from lofty visions of universal justice and what society should be than from the need for political leaders to ensure their own survival. (1988, p. 23)

The instrumentalist Europe-centric model of state-building outlined above was largely absent in the rest of the non-Western world. There are several ‘routes to the modern world’, to borrow Barrington Moore’s phrase (Moore, 1993). In Africa, for example, land was not scarce but labour was. The result was very well-defined property rights when it came to the continent’s most valuable commodity, people, but very poorly defined rights when it came to land, a problem that persists even today. Combined with the absence of external threats, there was little demand for precolonial states to defend their borders, which in turn left such boundaries open to interpretation.

Not all of the Third World failed at state-building, to be sure. As Michael Desch points out, those places that developed the most cohesive states ‘faced harsh external environments’, citing states such as Cuba, Israel and South Korea (Desch, 1999, p. 242). But throughout much of the postcolonial world, what emerged in the absence of a strong state with robust institutions was a weak state apparatus with a robust society (Migdal, 1988). In this neo-institutionalist view of state formation, the state was just one among many institutions—ethnic groups, economic institutions, religious groups—competing for control, loyalties and sovereign recognition. Raiding and predation of their own subjects became substitutes for the provision of public goods. State rule in these postcolonial states, whereby the gap between state and society was much wider, was largely coercive. Establishing a national consciousness via assimilation and homogenization among all the fragments of society—ethnic, religious and linguistic—proved in most cases elusive. The result, as exemplified by the case of Myanmar, was civil war.

State-building in Myanmar has also been heavily influenced by the so-called ‘border effect’, namely that its regime has sought to penetrate into its potentially lucrative peripheries and bring the local illicit economy under its control not only as a way to bankroll itself and stem capital flight, but also to cajole local actors along the periphery to lay down their arms (Gallant, 1999, pp. 25–62). Presumably a state as it builds up greater institutional and coercive capacity should be in a greater position of strength vis-à-vis the rebel groups along its periphery to strike a bargain in its favour, and likewise, the latter would be in a weaker position. But greater state capacity does not result in the eradication of these regions’ illicit
economies. In Burma, for example, state consolidation in the 1990s coincided not with the eradication of the drug trade along its rebel-strong peripheries, but rather saw greater state co-optation of its illicit economy—a means of the tatmadaw’s construction and reproduction of power (Meehan, 2011).

Indeed, Myanmar’s insurgencies are interwoven into the country’s history of illicit trade of drugs and mineral resources such as jade (Global Witness Report, 2015). Myanmar accounts for a quarter of the world’s opium production, second in the world after Afghanistan (Myanmar News International, 2013). The centre of poppy cultivation is Shan state, east of the capital along the Chinese border. Much of the drug trade flows through China and Laos via an area popular among smugglers called the Golden Triangle. The ongoing conflict has fuelled the drug trade through various mechanisms: First, local farmers were impoverished and so relied on opium production to survive. Second, rebel groups required the trade of opium to earn cash to buy weapons to continue fighting. Even those that had signed tentative ceasefires were producing more opium as a safeguard measure to fight the government later if necessary. Government-allied proxy groups and militias—so-called People’s Militia Forces (PMFs)—utilized the drug trade to pay for their food, clothing and other equipment. Rebel forces have perceived recent ceasefire agreements as a ploy by the government in Naypyidaw to achieve greater legitimacy abroad and profit from trade. It should be noted that commanders on both sides of the conflict enriched themselves by taxing black market and other unregulated goods. Illicit flows of narcotics and natural resources actually gave the state greater incentives (i.e., protection, money laundering) as well as leverage (i.e., threats of prosecution) both to co-opt and to coerce insurgent groups it previously had little control of. In so doing, the drug trade has become an integral part of the state’s projection of power into these areas (Meehan, 2011).

The tatmadaw continues to control most of the country’s largest economic holdings, from banking to transport to telecommunications (Selth, 2002, p. 267). In 2015, the international NGO Global Witness detailed illegal connections between Myanmar’s US $31 billion jade industry and a number of former generals (Global Witness Report, 2015). This followed a wave of military advances in the 1980s and 1990s, presaged by the modernization schemes of the pre-coup 1950s, which saw pockets of insurgent control dwindle, the presence of more refugee camps across borders, and the fleeing of rebels seeking shelter in neighbouring states.

Burmese State-Society Relations

James Scott postulates that tribalism and Barbarians, as constructs, exist vis-à-vis in opposition to the Leviathan of the state (Scott, 2014, p. 122). Such groups flee not just to avoid the enclosure of state institutions, but also to avoid disease, poverty, prison, capitalism and other state constructs (ibid., p. 122). Samuel Huntington describes political order, absent reliable political institutions (e.g., political parties), as breaking down when the variety and number of social groups in a society increases, since leaders cannot satisfy the heterogeneity of so many demands
In this explanation, the history of such state-society relations can be defined as one of conflict, evasion and passive or non-passive opposition to state rule. ‘Tribal society’, writes Scott, ‘virtually by definition, exists at the edge of nontribal society as its dark reciprocal twin’ (Scott, 2014, p. 123). The process, probability and speed by which non-state groups avoid state enclosure are driven by exogenous variables (e.g., topography—upland tribes and hill societies are more likely to resist state encroachment than their lowland counterparts) as well as endogenous ones (e.g., transportation infrastructure). This theory also contends that the norm of human history has been one of primal statelessness, not vice versa, and that state evasion should thus be viewed as a normal and logical process, not as an aberration or inexplicable quirk of modern state-building to be explained away.

In short, the oppositional model of state-society relations can be defined by three broader assumptions: First, state and society form opposite poles along a spectrum of values, preferences and interests with very little overlap. Second, state-building is mostly coercive in nature because of these divergent and irreconcilable interests, in turn giving rise to local communities resorting to mobilizing upland or across borders to escape state enclosure. Third, states are driven to erase or erode cultural identities in the peripheries, as these traits interfere with the centralization of the state and construction of a national consciousness. This oppositional model helps explain why one-third of all countries have experienced a civil war since World War II (Blattman, 2010, pp. 3–57).

But this view is contested by some anthropologists and political economists. First, this kind of state-society relations also gives way to warlord rule based upon personal patronage. These local strongmen act as brokers who levy tolls, taxes and arbitrary rules across the small swaths of peripheral territory they control, and enforce their patronage systems with force, which in turns raises transaction costs for trade and leads to capital flight. They typically engage in illegal activities, such as smuggling of weapons, drugs and humans across borders (the frontier regions of Myanmar fit this description perfectly). David Nugent proposes an alternative viewpoint whereby peripheral groups, at least at first, welcome the expansion of the state as a way to guard themselves against the arbitrariness of local elites and warlords. Contra Scott, he argues, local populations tend to find state intrusion as liberating rather than intrusive or coercive. In this alternative model, state-society relations are more nuanced, resembling more of a Venn diagram than the bipolar ends of a spectrum of interests. They are defined by both fits of cooperation and conflict, depending on the state’s level of fragmentation and consolidation, as well as the type of local culture (Nugent, 1994, pp. 333–369). Others say Scott ignores the internal politics of state formation and dispute his claim that the level of governance in modern contexts is presumed as fixed or so high that local societies cannot control the state. So instead they flee rather than fight or resist.

It should be noted that state expansion has typically been endogenous to non-state resistance, especially in the non-Western world. States founded by conquest see local competing claims to authority as threats to their legitimacy and Weberian claim of sovereignty, and so typically seek to coerce rather than co-opt or assimilate
these forces through peaceful means. Efforts to expand the writ of the state are thus a consequence of local warlordism, social movements and other peripheral forms of rebellion—whereby state power is ‘productive’ of regional consciousness, in a Foucauldian sense—and a cause of them.

As Nugent writes, ‘[P]ower has an important dialectical dimension and is simultaneously enabling and disabling’ (Nugent, 1994). In that way, state and society do not represent oppositional poles but rather a phased approach: In the first phase, the peripheral societies welcome state expansion, even at the expense of surrendering some local autonomy and rights, as a way to guard themselves against local elites, which present a graver threat to peripheral societies. But over time the dynamic changes and the intrusion by the state generates greater resistance. I argue that both theories describe how the tatmadaw’s consolidation of power has fed endless war.

Historians debate how the military in Myanmar initially came to power—whether it emerged as a praetorian guard to bring order to a postcolonial society that was fragmented and riven by violence, or whether they emerged as the most disciplined of an entourage of armed actors and took up the necessary task of state-builder, despite its lack of control over Myanmar’s ethnically disparate peripheries. The military has long positioned itself as a vital bulwark against threats internal (namely Karen, Kachin, Wa and Shan separatist rebels) and external (Chinese communists, later Thai forces).

The tatmadaw under Ne Win, through its build-up of coercive-intensive institutions, emerged as the ultimate power broker and arbiter of which groups were considered enemies and which were deemed permissible. This imposition of authority would define state-society relations from 1948 onwards. The tatmadaw were conscious to prevent the ethnic fractionalization and disunity characteristic of British colonial times. They sought to forge a new national identity, proud, patriotic, free of foreign rule, yet one dominated by the Burman majority, which by this point controlled most of the levers of power.

Despite its professed ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’, the tatmadaw ruled with an iron fist, banning most civil society and booting out foreign journalists. From early on it was threats, however real or imagined, which provided the military’s claim to legitimacy. These threats allowed the tatmadaw to forge a common identity among its majority-Burman members. Its Defense Services Academy provided its lower ranks with a professional training that was messianic in its call to keep Myanmar unified and safe from external interference. Threats to unity, they thought, were driven by ethnic diversity. So they expelled hundreds of thousands of Indian nationals, and thus state-society relations came to be dominated by a strong centre and a weak periphery in which all ‘opposition is either eliminated, driven underground, or forced into open revolt’ (South, 2008, p. 34). According to Smith, ‘In the face of countrywide rebellion and such obvious ethnic, cultural and political diversity, any notion of Aung San’s “unity in diversity” or “federal” democracy was abandoned; instead security became the government’s major concern’ (1991, p. 199). Even a half-century later, the country’s ethnic strife continues to provide the military with its main claim to legitimacy in power. To borrow Tilly’s phrase, war made the tatmadaw and the tatmadaw made war (Tilly, 1985).
The Burmese regime’s durability also sustains itself via institutionalized norms of power sharing among its ruling elite, as well as through the distribution of patronage, from subsidized housing to business licenses, to lower-ranking officials (Koo, 2015). Coercion alone is an inefficient mechanism to sustain autocratic regimes indefinitely. Here it is important to distinguish the military in Myanmar as an ‘institution’ from its role as a ‘government’, borrowing from Alfred Stepan’s useful typology (Stepan, 1988, pp. 30–31). Obviously the military rulers did not possess a Weberian monopoly of violence across Myanmar’s vast frontiers. And the unwavering support they once commanded was called into question after the 2015 elections swept Aung San Suu Kyi’s opposition party to power. Yet, the institutionalization of the tatmadaw has been largely path-dependent (Koo, 2015). From the first days of its postcolonial rule, the military has wisely positioned itself as the bulwark against communist infiltrators from within and colonizing forces from without.

Though the tatmadaw remains a black box to outsiders, even as it stays the dominant institution, this was not always the case (Callahan, 2004, pp. 111–141). Initially after independence, the tatmadaw was just one among several sources of power. The development of its strength as an institution stemmed from the threats posed to the unity of the Burmese state dating back to 1948. Its early losses at the hands of the Kuomintang (KMT) and ethnic rebels, who dominated the upper echelons of the colonial-era army, led to fears of a potential Chinese invasion of the peninsula. The incursion of the KMT and the CPB, as well as the aspirations of its ethnic populations, led to the institutionalization of the military into politics and society, whereby insurgency and counterinsurgency became almost a routinized ‘way of life’.

**Evolution of Myanmar’s Military Doctrine**

The tatmadaw from the very outset of Burma’s civil war was given wide autonomy to carry out its counterinsurgency operations. The strategy would come to vacillate between the use of co-optation and coercion, between accommodationist policies and aggressive uses of blunt force (Myoe, 2009). The highest ranks of the tatmadaw were heavily influenced by British tactics and relied on scorched earth tactics (Smith, 1991). Villages suspected of providing communists safe haven were razed. As one former colonel remarked, ‘The government would never win the people over to its side with that kind of tactics’ (Callahan, 2004, p. 123). One of the central ironies of the early years of the civil war was that it was the ethnic units within the Burmese Army—the Chin, Kachin and Karen—and their perceived loyalty that prevented the military from ultimately disintegrating before 1948, units that would later mutiny and re-establish themselves as localized resistance armies (Smith, 1991, p. 109).

In late 1948, a Burman-led paramilitary group threw a hand grenade in a Palaw church that killed 80 Christian Karens praying. A series of other bloody massacres soon followed, which would shift the main front of violence from one of Karen fighting communist forces to one of open rebellion between Burmese forces and
their Karen counterparts. The socialist government at the time was on the brink of collapse, as was the *tatmadaw*. The army refilled its ranks by co-opting local so-called ‘territorial forces’ that dotted Burma’s periphery—or what one scholar described as ‘a mad dash to shore up countryside allegiances’ (Callahan, 2004, p.141). The government bargained with these peripheral groups by offering them land concessions and trading licences to allow them to pocket more profits from smuggling teak, rice and other commodities. The state, one might say, adopted an accommodationist approach to securing its periphery, as counterinsurgency operations would be outsourced to local paramilitary units.

Fighting was highly decentralized, localized and eventually routinized. The weakness of the central state and the omnipresence of internal warfare gave rise to a messy patchwork of shifting centre-peripheral alliances. A half-century later, the state would expand its coercive capacity and ability to exert greater control over its peripheries. But not much would change, in the sense that the upland periphery to this day remains dominated by local armed groups relying on a mix of guerrilla-style tactics and financed by illicit trade and other activities, fighting a mixture of *tatmadaw* and paramilitary forces, vacillating their counterinsurgency operations between outright coercion and military force, and concession and accommodation (ibid., p. 145).

The importance of the early years, and formation of Aung San’s decentralized PVO units, was that it cemented a certain degree of local autonomy for armed brigades in the periphery. Even as a new outside threat emerged in 1949—the Chinese KMT—to threaten Burma’s fledging sovereignty, which precipitated an overhaul of the *tatmadaw*’s organizational staff, as well as its discipline, command and control and ability to dictate who was an enemy of the state and who was not, local commanders still retained a great deal of military autonomy to cut deals and forge alliances with local warlords.

Tension would arise in two areas: Between field commanders and the general staff based in the capital, and between civilians in power (many of them ex-military) and the *tatmadaw*. War staff saw the commanders on the ground as arrogant and unwilling to develop a more efficient and modern fighting force, especially one capable of repelling a perceived Chinese invasion. Field commanders found the War Cabinet to be out-of-touch with local realities and unwilling to address their military needs. When the civilian prime minister, U Nu, promoted a Karen officer whose loyalties were suspect, to the rank of brigadier general, ostensibly without informing Ne Win’s army staff, this arguably set off an irreparable rift in civil-military relations that would eventually set the stage for U Nu’s ouster and Ne Win’s 1962 takeover of power (ibid., p. 150). There were charges of civilian incompetence and meddling. Under the ‘reforms’ of Ne Sin and Maung Maung, civilian administrators were given less authority over internal army operations.15

Yet, the War Office also sought to rein in the autonomy of its field commanders, though with mixed success. The army saw themselves as fighting for this idyllic vision of a Burma united and impervious to foreign invasion, whereas they saw their civilian counterparts either enriching themselves or instituting policies replete of the colonial powers. More important, Ne Win’s 1951 memorandum had lasting impact over how Burmese authorities viewed threats emanating from
across their borders. The memo stressed the ‘need for … readiness in case of external aggression is quite apparent’ (Callahan, 2004, p. 160). The *tatmadaw* sought to modernize its forces, fanning out across the globe to emulate organizational structures from armies in Britain, India and the USA. Maung Maung and Ne Win sought to transform the War Office into a Burmese version of the US Defense Department, whereby civilians controlled broader strategic objectives and army officials commanded control over operational and internal military affairs (ibid., p. 162). ‘In other words’, as Callahan put it, ‘the Burma army was still an army of guerrillas. What it needed to become was an army capable of standing up to the KMT and potentially the CIA and the PRC’ (ibid., p. 161).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, during the formational years of Burma’s state-building process and despite its brutality and consolidation of power, the *tatmadaw* saw itself as a modernized army, one with a military academy modelled after West Point, one trained in the style of counter-guerrilla fighting by the Yugoslavs and Israelis, and one inspired by the Spartan ‘fighting spirit’ of the Pakistani army (ibid., pp. 170–177). Yet, Bertil Lintner questions whether the army during its early formation was in fact emerging as a more professionalized, modern and disciplined fighting force. Many of its early founders had gone into business or politics. Those left remaining from the early resistance fighters sought to give the military greater independence and leeway in its use of force. It was becoming more financially independent and ideologically motivated. This kind of military professionalization, as Samuel Huntington has noted, gave it greater purpose—improving its ‘adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence’—even as it kept the military increasingly isolated and separate from the society it is supposed to protect. Still, the army by the time it seized power was what Huntington called ‘an engine of growth’, playing as it did a defensive role as well as an important sociopolitical one (Lintner, 1994, pp. 140–145).

Yet for a half a century it has been a praetorian state. Among scholars of civil-military relations, the outlook, doctrine and tendency of military regimes for aggressiveness remain debated. Michael Desch finds that states whose internal threats are greater than their external threats should see firmer military control, whereas states with higher external threats should see greater ‘objective control’ by civilians (Desch, 1999, pp. 14–16). Barry Posen argues that militaries should prefer offensive doctrines as a way of ensuring their organizational status and survival and so military-run states should reflect this outward orientation. Meanwhile, others posit that militaries should prefer to focus on near-peer conventional adversaries and dismiss the eradication of peripheral non-state threats as policing operations (Betts, 1991).

A similar dynamic applies to counterinsurgency operations. In recent decades, the Burmese military has relied on a two-pronged counterinsurgency strategy: First, it adopted a policy aimed at separating the armed groups from their civilian bases of support; second, it created local counterinsurgent militias in the periphery regions (Maung Aung Myoe, 2009, p. 26; Wai, 2011). But the military doctrine has shifted mostly in response to Myanmar’s threat environment. During the first decade of postcolonial rule, the military’s focus was on preventing outside state powers from carrying out conventional military attacks against Myanmar.
Under U Nu, Burmese foreign policy was one of neutrality, non-alignment and isolationism, a short-lived posture owing to the looming threat of its larger neighbours, India and China (Egreteau & Jagan, 2013, pp. 85–91). Insurgents were in full rebellion but the style of warfare was predominantly conventional. Rebels would shift their strategy towards more guerrilla irregular warfare in the 1950s, owing to the precepts learned from Mao and insurgencies elsewhere. In response, the tatmadaw shifted its military doctrine in the late 1950s, moving towards a more mechanized and centralized force and adopting the doctrine of ‘people’s war’ to put down internal rebellions and to prevent the wars raging in Southeast Asia from spilling across borders (Myoe, 2009, p. 26).

In later decades, Myanmar’s so-called ‘four cuts’ approach became the cornerstone of its counterinsurgency strategy. The system, put forth in the 1970s, sought to cut off ethnic militias’ access to food, cut off funds, cut contacts and intelligence, and ‘cut off the insurgents’ head’ (i.e., recruitment). The tatmadaw also relied on a village defence system as a way to gather intelligence and disperse insurgents, as well as launch a campaign of psychological warfare. The training of military rank and file, national defence planning and strategy became more centralized under the General Staff office, and the army began teaching the principles of anti-guerrilla warfare at its training schools (ibid., p. 20). In the final stage, as the threat perception became more external in the mid to late 1980s and following Ne Win’s handover of power in 1988, the tatmadaw sought to reorient itself towards the threat of external state and non-state actors, fuelled as it was by a siege mentality among tatmadaw commanders and Western sanctions slapped on the military after the 1988 crackdown in Yangon (ibid., p. 33).

The military carried out more combined arms and joint services exercises, mobilizing some 30,000 forces in five light infantry divisions. The military also trained various auxiliary brigades on guerrilla warfare and hostage rescue. During this phase of the fighting, the tatmadaw acquired newer sophisticated weapons, training, radar and intelligence to carry out cross-border missions against ethnic armed actors and to improve its national air defence. As Maung Aung Myoe notes, the tatmadaw sought to gain the initiative and ‘adjusted its warfighting method in accordance with those of the insurgents’ (ibid., p. 36).

Myanmar’s post-1988 expansion and modernization of its military forces were driven by both internal and external threats. On the one hand, its defence-in-depth, or active defence, strategy was aimed at repelling foreign armies by the threat of a Maoist-style guerrilla war if the tatmadaw were to be defeated on the conventional battlefield. On the other hand, its principal fear shifted towards lower-level non-state threats based along its borders and in neighbouring states. Because of concern that its monopoly on power might slip away, the tatmadaw underwent force modernization, greater arms procurement—including some from several ‘secret partners’, namely Germany, Singapore, Israel and Pakistan—and expanded its command structure (Myoe, 2009, p. 11). As Myoe writes: ‘The tatmadaw is in the process of transforming itself from essentially a counter-insurgency force into a conventional one’ (ibid., p. 11). Since the transition to greater civilian rule in 2015, the military has not let up its crackdown of ethnic armed groups, especially in Rakhine state, which has seen hundreds of thousands of Rohingya flee from...
Bangladesh and find themselves stateless, what some human rights groups call a deliberate campaign of ‘ethnic cleansing’ (Lederer, 2017).

Although Aung San Suu Kyi, as head of the reform-minded National League for Democracy party, came to power in 2016, the constitution written in 2008 still grants the military considerable discretion over its use of force. The military controls a quarter of all parliamentary seats, the defence budget and most importantly the three ministries that execute its counterinsurgency operations—Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs.\textsuperscript{21} The use of force in Myanmar’s periphery, which continues to resemble a brutal counterinsurgency similar to the ‘four cuts’ strategy deployed in the 1960s and 1970s, has not been significantly affected or restrained by greater civilian control of government.

In recent years, however, as a way to conserve resources the \textit{tatmadaw} has looked to sub-contract out border security to local actors. Moreover, there have been a number of failed ceasefires and offers of dialogue brokered by outside parties (i.e., China) to resolve Myanmar’s ethnic conflicts. Most breakdowns in talks led to greater military pressure against these groups. The objective of the Burmese military has been to incorporate the armed factions into the national army and to relinquish their goals of greater autonomy.\textsuperscript{22} For example, ahead of national elections in 2010, the military regime under General Than Shwe offered a scheme to create a so-called Border Guard Force (BGF), in which armed groups would be absorbed into national army or transformed into pro-government militias in exchange for clemency and a ceasefire.\textsuperscript{23} The plan called for these groups to surrender their arms and be reissued government weapons and their forces would pledge loyalty to Myanmar military commanders. The government also reformed its constitution in 2008 as a way to address some of the ethnic groups’ push for greater decentralization and federalism. But the constitution did little to appease

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<th>Timespan</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
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<tr>
<td>1948–1958</td>
<td>Focused on external conventional threat (China)</td>
<td>Large divisions, armoured brigades, mechanized warfare strategic denial</td>
<td>Defensive: External defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958–1988</td>
<td>Focused on internal ethnic/communist insurgencies (KNDO, BCP)</td>
<td>Irregular warfare, ‘four cuts’, aerial stifling, psy-ops, artillery fire, ‘people’s militias’</td>
<td>Internal: Counterinsurgency and ‘People’s War’</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988–present</td>
<td>Fear of foreign invasion or invasion by proxy force (KNDO)</td>
<td>Strategic denial, counteroffensive capabilities, combined arms, ISR, cross-border strikes</td>
<td>Offensive: Modernization, guerrilla warfare, ‘People’s War under modern condition’</td>
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ethnic groups’ call for greater revenue sharing, nor did it reduce the heavy-handed role played by the military in government. Part of the BGF deal was to render previous ceasefires null and void. Moreover, the ethnic militias would honour the new constitution, and they would be placed under the *tatmadaw’s* command. Many of the armed groups rejected the offer, including the United Wa State Army (UWSA), Kachin Independence Organization (KIA), and the New Mon State Party (NMSP).  

Only two groups signed on: the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the National Democratic Army-Kachin. The rejection of the agreement saw a flare-up along the Burmese-Chinese border among ethnic Kokang rebels, which resulted in a massive military offensive and 30,000 refugees fleeing to China (Vandergrift, 2010).

Interestingly there was no official mention of the BGF in the *tatmadaw’s* government documents. It is obliquely mentioned in the 2008 Constitution, but the command and control of these people’s militias was left vague and open to interpretation. Human rights groups report violations against civilians committed by the border militias. A notorious BGF in Rakhine state was disbanded by the *tatmadaw* in July 2015 after reports of flagrant human rights violations, including rape, forced labour and extortion (Tang, 2013). Karen BGFs have refused to cooperate with their Myanmar Army commanders. Other units have illegally confiscated land and been heavily active in the cross-border drug trade and generally only patrol areas to protect their opium crops (Keenan, 2013, pp. 3–4).

The *tatmadaw’s* recent push for peaceful borders has been driven by economics as much as by politics. To be sure, commanders on both sides of the insurgency sought to enrich themselves from profits from the illegal trade of drugs and natural resources (South, 2008, pp. 34–36). As mentioned, the border regions are home to highly lucrative operations in logging and rare earths. The *tatmadaw* has offered these groups economic incentives to disarm (i.e., greater equity in the distribution of natural resource revenues), though with mixed results. The *tatmadaw* targeted Kachin rebels up north after they refused to move their headquarters away from the Taping dam, a major government investment project. Even as the ruling junta has taken a conciliatory approach towards its ethnic minorities, it has stepped up its counterinsurgency efforts. Such an approach has only deepened mistrust and worsened centre-periphery relations.

To trace the mechanisms of my theory, this article next examines the Burmese military’s cross-border use of force in China and Thailand.

**Myanmar’s Cross-border Use of Force**

Border crises in Southeast Asia are not new. China’s border dispute with Vietnam, for example, dates back to the first Chinese invasion in 111 BC. In Myanmar, which has a long history of dealing with criminals, rebels and other non-state actors wanted by its governments who flee across borders, there has always been a body of vaguely defined yet peaceful rules of intercourse and cooperation between Burma’s various kingdoms (Burma has only been a united single kingdom three times in its history). These same norms and rules broadly
defined its behaviour regarding its borders with the countries of Siam, China, Ceylon and India. Aliens were considered to be under the protection of their native state (Aung, 1965). In 1765, for example, a Chinese merchant was killed in a dispute over a debt unpaid on Burmese soil (ibid.). The Chinese government demanded that the Burmese king hand over the murderer to face trial and punishment, but he refused, citing that such a request went against the norms of the day (Burma offered compensation to keep murderer and execute him themselves, rather than hand him over). The cross-border dispute led to a series of invasions by Chinese forces. But this episode signified a historical outlier in relations between states in the region.

Typically, criminals who escaped from their territory were returned to their own state.

In more recent decades, the Burmese army has carried out hot pursuit in the context of its state-building enterprise. During the 1990s, for example, Myanmar’s junta, following contested elections in 1988 and a squashed popular uprising, launched a series of army offensives as well as forced labour and relocation programmes as a way to pacify its semi-autonomous border regions. The result of this campaign of state coercion was waves of Karen, Mon, Mon and Shan ethnic minorities fleeing into neighbouring Thailand, where they resided in hastily constructed camps (Loescher & Milner, 2005, p. 58). Initially, these groups were tacitly accepted by Myanmar’s neighbours for varying reasons, whether to provide a kind of buffer zone against Myanmar, a proxy force against a third actor—namely communist insurgents—or for reasons related to enhancing the profits of local business elites. Yet, they eventually began to test the patience of locals as well as pose security challenges to the state. Karen rebels, many of them student activists, carried out a series of violent acts against both Myanmar and Thailand. In January 2000, Karen rebels seized a Thai provincial hospital. Throughout the 2000s, as a result of a ceasefires and the creation of the BGF, the use of force was typically outsourced to local groups.

The bulk of Myanmar’s military interventions have occurred across the Thai border against Karen and Shan rebels given sanctuary. Since 1962, the Burmese military, perhaps borrowing from its former British colonialists, pursued a policy of divide-and-rule, ethnic cleansing and forced relocation for non-Burman groups, in effect pushing many Shan and Karen refugees and rebels across the Thai border (Win, 2001). The army has relied on local proxies, such as the UWSA, whose 30,000 fighters makes it Myanmar’s largest militia and the largest narcotics trafficker in the region, in border areas it does not control (Schearf, 2013). However, as the Myanmar focuses its armed forces on the fight against Kachin rebels up north, the Wa turned to China for weapons and has become a proxy of Beijing’s. For decades, Thai–Burmese relations were mostly dictated by their shared fear of infiltration, if not outright invasion, from China-backed communists until the mid-1980s, when the threat dissipated. Tensions between the two neighbours rose because of Thailand’s toleration of various insurgent groups along their shared border, including the Shan State Army (SSA), which provided a kind of strategic buffer between itself and Myanmar, especially when the threat of communist insurgencies became more pronounced during the 1970s. These groups acted as a
de facto border guard for the Thai military, providing them with valuable intelligence. The Thai military also enjoys close ties with the Karen National Union—which on occasion even engaged in direct combat with Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) forces on Thai soil—as well as the National Democratic Front (NDF), which served as an umbrella organization for Myanmar’s major ethnic insurgent groups. Liaison with these groups was coordinated via Thailand’s Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC), with clandestine support from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well (Lang, 2002, p. 141).

What did Thailand’s support for these groups consist of? The KNU, NMSP, Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Kachin Independent Organization (KIO) all enjoyed close ties with senior Thai intelligence and army officers (ibid., p. 142). The Thai military sent special agents to serve with Karen and Mon units as both observers and advisers. It should be noted that the Thai military possesses very sophisticated and disciplined special operations forces, something the Burmese military lacks (and compensates for with its deployment of local proxy and paramilitary BGFs).27

Thai support and sanctuary of these groups harmed cross-border ties with the tatmadaw.28 At the Non-Aligned Movement summit in 1976, Burma’s prime minister U Sein Win admonished his Thai neighbours for their lax border security, noting that countries in the region should ‘faithfully undertake not to provide one’s territory as a springboard of attack on its neighbors both covert and overt’. A larger stream of refugees was pouring across the border into Thailand as well, a consequence of the tatmadaw’s stepped-up counterinsurgency operations along the Burmese side of the border, exacerbating social tensions among local Thais.

By the mid-1980s, however, Thai–Burmese relations grew closer for several reasons.29 First, the security threat posed by the CPT insurgency was reduced, effectively ending (or at least mitigating) Thailand’s ‘buffer zone’ strategy.30 Second, Thailand’s cross-border liaisons with ethnic groups on both sides of the border shifted from the national level to the local level. Even though covert support to these groups continued, and the tatmadaw, in the mid-1980s, began to embrace a policy of hot pursuit against ethnic insurgents across the Thai border, relations would become less securitized. Finally, cross-border ties became more dominated by mutually beneficial trade, or what Hazel Lang calls ‘resource diplomacy’—especially in Karen-controlled areas rich in timber, teak and fishing (Lang, 2002, p. 145). The Thai government was the first to develop official ties with the new Burmese regime in power in the wake of the brutal crackdown in 1988 and a string of logging concessions were handed out to Thai timber companies (ibid., p. 143).

The Thai–Burmese border, which stretches for 2500 kilometres, comprises mostly remote and densely wooded forests, and is a significant and strategic feature of the geopolitical landscape fuelling the longstanding Karen insurgency. ‘The borderlands … [were a] zone of ambiguity, flexibility, and nonchalance’, noted Walker (1999, p. 7). It is a haven for drug smugglers, migrant workers, and refugees. Its localized system of governance can be described as a kind of ‘negative space’, as James Scott describes, where upland local actors rule in opposition to state enclosure but also benefit from the border demarcation and largess of host
state authorities (Scott, 2014). Whereas sections of Thailand’s border with Malaysia constitute little more than a narrow strip of asphalt, the border with Myanmar is demarcated naturally by the Moei and Salween Rivers. The forbidding jungle provides Karen rebels a natural canopy to avoid being targeted. Karen operated bases, refugee camps and a number of profitable teak and timber enterprises along the Thai side of the border. Their presence is tolerated rather than permitted by Thai authorities, according to Ananda Rajah (Rajah, 1990, pp. 116–117). In exchange, the Karen do not actively recruit or seek support from locals. Yet support among Karen along the Thai side of the border for the KNU’s nationalist struggle is weaker than on the Burmese side (Keyes, 1979, p. 58).

Starting in the late 1970s on the Thai side of the border, the Royal Thai Army relied on paramilitary border forces called the Thai Rangers to patrol the area, since the bulk of its forces were garrisoned along the Cambodia border to prevent fleeing Khmer rebels. The chief aim of these border guards—whose ranks were filled ‘essentially by mercenaries, not conscripts’, as one military expert put it—was to guard against communist insurgents crossing from Myanmar into Thailand. The Thai military also relied on the SSA-S (or Shan State Army-South) as an informal border proxy to act as a buffer zone against communist intrusions, supplying the insurgents with weapons and providing various trade concessions.

After the collapse of the CPB in 1989, this freed military resources to focus its attention on ethnic insurgents in the north and east. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Myanmar’s military outsourced border security to local proxies, such as the DKBN, to carry out cross-border attacks into Thailand. Previously the presence of such forces was viewed as a kind of buffer zone. Forces loyal to the tatmadaw, according to one expert, ‘attacked, torched, and littered Karen villages with landmines to prevent residents from returning’ (Wright, 2016). Groups such as the DKBN served as convenient proxies to do counterinsurgency against China-backed communist forces also in the region. The US–trained Thai military also faced an internal insurgency along its southern flank with Malaysia. These Myanmar-orchestrated cross-border operations chiefly served two purposes: To destroy potential supply sources and bases for insurgents but also as a means of acquiring forced labour for Myanmar’s military operations (Loescher & Milner, 2005). The presence of these non-state actors led to strained bilateral relations and weakening of economic development in these frontier areas, thus leading to a rise in social tensions. Thai labour unions complained about the use of cheaper illegal workers from Myanmar.

The insurgent groups based along the Burmese–Thai border were pushed into these areas as a result of heavy fighting in the 1970s. These outposts provided a valuable cash stream from the taxation of cross-border trade. Myanmar’s government, in fact, facilitated this trade by providing logging concessions to the Karen, in addition to Karenni, Shan and Mon (Lang, 2002, p. 145). This accommodation was part of a larger counterinsurgency strategy with three aims: First, it was meant to undermine these groups’ economic relations with the Thai authorities, thus provoking a backlash. Second, it was meant as a revenue generator, especially from the lucrative extraction of teak. Finally, the erosion of the hinterland forest
made military advances by the *tatmadaw* that much easier, as it prevented concealment by insurgents. ‘In order to attain high volume teak extraction, Thai concession holders contributed to the clearing of logging routes between the concession areas and the Thai–Burmese border, and this facilitated the advance of the Burmese army,’ wrote Hazel Lang. ‘The “collaboration” not only opened the way for loggers, it subsequently contributed to changing the dynamic of the war’ (ibid., p. 145).

By 1988, Thailand shifted away from a military strategy of relying on local proxies to form a proto-buffer zone of sorts. Until then, the KNU derived much of its income from taxing illegal trade, much of it timber, across the border. But as the *tatmadaw* was increasingly able to control more villages and take more territory near the border, this income dried up. Instead, Karen groups began to rely more on covert assistance from the Thai military. Also, Thai–Burmese military-to-military ties became much stronger. This is partly due to the regional balance of power but also was a function of the booming logging and fishing trade along the border, which came about due to the tentative ceasefires with Kachin insurgents up north. What occurred was a shift in profits away from Karen rebels and into the hands of local Thai business elites, as well as Burmese and Thai state officials. This fed the development of dams, highways and ‘economic development zones’ along the Thai and Chinese borders, as mining of jade and cross-border trade in lumber boomed (South, 2008, p. 76).

The *tatmadaw* would later carry out a number of cross-border incursions against Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) bases on the Thai side of the border. But the Thai military did not accommodate such actions until 1988, after the ‘thaw’ in Burmese-Thai relations and the logging and fishing concessions granted to Thai interests along the border. In May 1989, the Burmese military carried out an armed attack against the Kawmura camp only a few miles from the border. Buoyed by improved ties with its Thai military counterparts, the *tatmadaw* decided to launch a major anti-Karen offensive in 1991 in order to recapture the regional camp of Manerplaw (Lintner, 1994, p. 239). The area is encased in mountains and ‘virtually impregnable’, making it ‘ideal guerrilla country’ (ibid., 239).

The Karen rebels had been pushed out of the delta and forced upland. In the dry season of 1992, the military staged a three-pronged attack of roughly 7000 soldiers as well as mobilizing thousands of civilians who were forced to work as porters. It was the furthest the army had advanced into the border regions.

**Military Incursions along Burmese–Chinese Border**

Myanmar’s relationship with China in recent years has been a complex one of porous borders, entangling alliances and local militias doubling as state proxy forces. As Lt. Col. Maung Maung put it in 1951, upon being asked what Myanmar’s biggest foreign threat was: ‘No question about it: It was the Chinese. Indians are not really a problem. The Thais are not strong enough. Realistically, no one is going to invade us from the sea’ (Callahan, 2004, p. 161). In the 1950s, a number of illegal Chinese immigrants, most of them from Yunnan province across the
border, flocked to Burma’s northern highlands to work as traders and merchants (Egreteau & Jagan, 2013, p. 100). Since 2008, ethnic tensions across Myanmar’s border with China’s Yunnan province have intensified. Myanmar’s newly written constitution effectively dismantled a series of previous ceasefire agreement in 1989 that granted limited autonomy to ethnic armed groups. In exchange, they were to join a ‘BGF’ under the tatmadaw’s authority (ibid., p. 284). The period from 1993 until 2008 had been relatively peaceful along the Chinese border. As the Burmese military ‘modernized’, it sought greater influence and control over the semi-autonomous border area with China, thus reigniting an insurgency with the Kokang. The Kokang belong to China’s ethnic Han majority and can trace their lineage to the remnants of the Ming Dynasty that fled to Myanmar in the mid-seventeenth century (Dinmore, 2015). The assault resulted in thousands of Kokang refugees pouring into Yunnan province. A number of Kokang rebels joined the BGF (see Egreteau & Jagan, 2013).

At the root of the frontier conflict is another of Myanmar’s largest ethnic minorities: the Kachin. Of Tibetan-Burmese origin and predominantly Christian, the Kachin reside in the remote hills of Myanmar’s northern regions, an area known for its timber, jade, and other natural resources. In December 2012, rebels of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) fled across the border into China, prompting Myanmar’s Air Force to violate Chinese sovereignty and drop bombs on their suspected headquarters in Laiza. A follow-up bomb hit China in January 2013. The operation disturbed the authorities in Beijing, but instead of retaliating militarily it instead convened and hosted peace talks between Myanmar and the KIA. But the talks did not deter the tatmadaw from using force across its border. On 13 March 2015, a Burmese warplane entered sovereign Chinese territory and bombed Yunnan Province, an area directly across the porous border (Sun, 2015). The attack left four Chinese civilians dead. The target of the raid was a band of separatist ethnic Kokang rebels that utilized safe zones in Yunnan. China responded forcefully to the violation of its sovereignty. Besides lodging a formal diplomatic protest, Beijing sent fighter jets to the border, called for an investigation, and demanded compensation for the attacks on its citizens. A few months later, China launched a series of live-fire air-ground training exercises in Yunnan, ostensibly to send a signal to Myanmar about its use of force against Kokang rebels that flee across its border (Hua, 2015).

The Kokang’s armed resistance can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century and the messy aftermath of China’s civil war, when the USA launched its ‘secret war’ against Chinese communists (Lintner, 1999, p. 105). Between 1959 and 1961, there was a Tibetan uprising whereby the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was given permission to pursue CIA-backed rebels into Mustang, a region of northern Nepal. The Chinese also sought to clean out a faction of KMT fighters, who fled westward to wage a violent guerrilla war against the Communist mainland. Around 12,000 of the group’s soldiers, the KMT’s 93rd Division, were Hui Muslims who found refuge across the border in Burma (Qin, 2015). The group became synonymous with narcotics trafficking, banditry and cross-border raids into Yunnan province. They also reportedly enjoyed financial and logistical backing from the CIA, which sought to prevent Communist intrusion into the
borderlands of Tibet and Thailand as well as espionage against the Communist mainland.\textsuperscript{38} Burma at the time gave the PLA permission to clean out KMT forces in eastern Shan state along the Mekong.\textsuperscript{39}

The porous border between China’s Yunnan province and Myanmar’s Shan state has always been poorly delineated. Just as borders become institutionalized over time, a border’s lack of formalization can also paradoxically become institutionalized. When 2000 Chinese army deserters poured across the border in 1949, razing Shan villages in the process with the help of US provisions delivered via air drops, this recast the conflict along Burma’s peripheries (Clymer, 2015). The government was less concerned about the fate of Shan than they were of the prospect that the presence of KMT forces might invite a full-scale invasion by China’s PLA. This accelerated calls for military reform. In 1951, Lt. Col. Maung Maung was brought in to reform the planning staff and supervise the change from a decentralized army to a more centralized and disciplined counterinsurgency force. Despite minor progress along its periphery, the KMT retained key chunks of Shan state and became a kind of occupying force (Taylor, 1973, pp. 15–16).

The civilian government of Myanmar resented the presence of Chiang Kai-shek’s foreign army on their soil and his army’s ostensible takeover of its Kengtung state. They filed a protest with the American ambassador, William J. Sebald, who denied US support for the KMT (Clymer, 2015). Burma’s prime minister at the time, U Nu, suspended cooperation with the Americans and nearly severed relations entirely.\textsuperscript{40} Thus began several decades of distrust between the governments in Rangoon and Washington. In 1961, remnants of the KMT were driven out of Myanmar into Laos and Thailand after a major army offensive. To this day, the region along the Chinese and Laotian border, dubbed the Golden Triangle, remains a kind of ‘no man’s land’ of black market activity and banditry (Lintner, 1994). Moreover, large numbers of ‘stateless’ ex-KMT combatants remain stuck in legal limbo in northern Myanmar and Thailand several decades later (Boyle, 2007; Loa, 2007). Some of them, dubbed China’s ‘Lost Army’, continue to wage a low-intensity war against the \textit{tatmadaw} and ethnic militias, ostensibly with the support of Taiwan and USA, and carry out forays into Chinese territory until the mid-1980s (Qin, 2015).\textsuperscript{41}

Although present-day Myanmar enjoys close military-to-military relations with China—the PLA sells arms, provides aid, equipment and training to the \textit{tatmadaw}—Beijing historically has supported the Burmese Communist Party, whose latest iteration is a militia formed in 1989 called the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). As Yun Sun of the Stimson Center notes:

> Through years of guerrilla warfare, ethnic groups along the Sino-Burmese border have developed a strategy of skillfully playing ‘hide and seek’ with the Myanmar Army in the jungles. They fight when the situation is to their advantage and retreat into China when they stand to lose. Knowing that the Burmese Army cannot cross into China and chase them down, ethnic armies treat China as their safe haven. The porousness of the border, thriving legal and illegal border trade and frequent border-crossings by locals makes the strategy feasible. (Sun, 2015)
There have also been cross-border uses of force by the tatmadaw against Kokang targets in China. Reasons vary, but a few analysts point to the recent thaw and prospect of normalization in relations between Myanmar and the USA, and Chinese hardliners view the attacks as evidence of Washington meddling. Beijing denies backing the Kokang rebels, which are based on a corner of northern Shan state. China’s interests in Myanmar are driven more by economic than political interests, notably new trade routes and oil and gas pipelines between China and the Indian Ocean, even as Beijing seeks to reassert its influence in Myanmar.

In March 2015, Burmese forces killed five Chinese farm workers in cross-border artillery fire against MNDAA forces (Mang & Dinmore, 2015). The bombing, which drew an apology from the tatmadaw the following month, was part of a larger pacification campaign against MNDAA fighters in the hilly self-administered Kokang border region of Shan state. The violence has displaced some 78,000 people, most of them ethnic Chinese, who have moved across the border into China. A state of emergency and martial law was instituted and a probe into the deaths was promised (Dinmore & Mon, 2015). Around the same time, a draft of a countrywide ceasefire agreement was signed by the tatmadaw and by a team of representatives of 16 armed factions (ibid.). The attacks drew a rebuke from the Chinese government, whose foreign ministry expressed its ‘strong dissatisfaction’ with the incident and urged Myanmar to restore stability to the region ‘as soon as possible’. The outbreak of cross-border violence has raised questions as to how China might respond—Beijing issued a strong warning that it would take ‘resolute and decisive measures’ to protect the safety of its nationals if such an incident occurred again—as well as aroused suspicions that Beijing is actively supporting MNDAA forces inside Myanmar.

The cases of counterinsurgency along Myanmar’s Chinese and Thai borders highlight the dynamics of foreign state sponsorship of non-state actors, dealing with local actors and paramilitary groups, and waging a brutal counterinsurgency, one that occasionally strays across borders, while managing interstate tensions and avoiding conflict escalation.

**Conclusion**

This article takes an institutionalist lens to examining how Myanmar, a state with a complex history of centre-periphery relations and the world’s longest-running civil war, wages counterinsurgency along and across its borders. I trace its postcolonialist history of military consolidation up to the present, where brutal military crackdowns continue along its violent borders, most famously in Rakhine state. My theory posits that Myanmar’s military doctrine is a product of its turbulent state-building process and its shifting threat environment, both external and internal. Myanmar has moved from militarily defending itself against a conventional enemy (China), to fighting internal non-state enemies (Rohingya, Karen, etc.), to the present day of defending itself against both states and non-state actors that it claims enjoy state support or cross-border sanctuary. Despite greater civilian control and democratic
openness in Myanmar, the *tatmadaw* still controls counterinsurgency strategy. Balancing fears of its waning legitimacy with the profits to be made from these border areas, the military will continue to wage a counterinsurgency that vacillates between coercion and accommodation.

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**Notes**

1. The ruling junta officially changed the name of Burma to Myanmar in 1989. This article will use Burma when referring to the country pre-1989 and Myanmar when referring to the present.
5. For regional dynamics, see Myint-U (2012).
6. For example, in the Karen National Union (KNU) there are Burmese-speaking Karen who do not speak a word of Karen, just as in the Burmese Army there are hill-dwelling Karen whose second language is Burmese (Smith, 1991, p. 35).
7. On child soldiering in Myanmar, see Chen (2014).
8. Posen (1986), for example, argues that nationalism is a consequence of conflict as much as it is a cause. Using the example of Napoleonic France, technological improvements required more battlefield dispersion, which thus meant it was harder to keep troops motivated.
9. Employing ‘new institutionalist’ theory, Spruyt (1994) argues that the sovereign nation-state was able to ‘win out’ over its competitors because of its internal centralization and mutual compatibility, which allowed like units to facilitate trade by lowering transaction costs and so forth.
10. For more on the Golden Triangle, see Lintner (1994).
11. This typology of the oppositional model is borrowed from Nugent (1994).
13. Nugent points to the Chachapoyas of Peru to illustrate his theory.
15. The army expanded from eight infantry battalions in 1948 to 26 in 1951. By 1962, there would be 57 battalions, five regional commands and over 100,000 soldiers. The military boosted its budget by 40 per cent (Callahan, 150).
17. By ‘professionalization’, this refers to professionalized and uniformed military officers who control means of violence, rather than relying on amateur groups (e.g., mercenaries). See Huntington (1968, pp. 12–13). On military professionalization, see Huntington (1957).
18. On praetorianism, see Egret and Jagan (2013, p. 113), who wrote: ‘[P]raetorianism does not imply systematic militarized violence or the use of war (especially interstate wars). Praetorians … are more concerned with political power and leadership than the systematic use of force, conflict and/or domestic repression—although they are ready to use them to achieve their goals.’

19. Posen’s view has come under criticism for misrepresenting civilian oversight and inflating the external threat environment on doctrinal innovation. See Kier (1995) and Zisk (1993).

20. This is a force posture that seeks to delay rather than prevent the advance of an attacker by surrendering territory and relying on an attrition strategy on the hope that the attacker will lose momentum.


22. For more on BGF, see website of Myanmar Peace Monitor (mmpeacemonitor.org).

23. Ibid.

24. See Keenan, (2013). By end of 2015, the BGF incorporated militia forces from the NDA-K, KNPLF, MNDA, Lahu Militia Group, DKBA, KDA, and SSA-N and SSA-S. According to the Myanmar Peace Monitor, each battalion of the Border Guard Forces (BGF) has 326 soldiers, including 18 officers and 3 commanders (one from the tatmadaw). BGFs are only deployed within its territory and paid the same salary as normal soldiers.

25. See Defense Services, Chapter 7, of Myanmar’s Constitution. For more on BGF, see Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2013.

26. Since Myanmar’s ceasefire with the Wa in the 1990s, northeast Shan state has become one of Asia’s largest production areas of methamphetamine (from author’s interview with Burmese military expert in Bangkok, November 2015).

27. From interview with Burmese defence expert in Yangon (26 November 2015).

28. Around this time a former prime minister, U Nu, also was granted asylum in Bangkok and established a base for his opposition Parliamentary Democracy Party (PDP) (Lang, 2002, p. 140).

29. The official Thai policy towards Myanmar at this time, along with its ASEAN partners, is that of ‘constructive engagement’, and encourages peaceful coexistence rather than isolation or criticism of the Myanmar regime.

30. Author’s interview with Burmese military expert and ex-officer in Yangon (25 November 2015).

31. The Moei is a tributary of the Salween River.

32. Interview with Thai military expert in Bangkok (25 November 2015).

33. Interview with Thai military expert in Bangkok (25 November 2015).

34. At the same time, the People’s Army disintegrated into four different militias representing the Kokang, Wa, Kachin and Shan-Lahu peoples (see South, 2008, p. 118).

35. Attacks reached a climax in June 2011, when the Burmese army launched a major border offensive, driven partly by the breakdown of the ceasefire but also over which side controls a multibillion-dollar hydropower dam project on the Taping River (‘Why Kachin Conflict Threatens Myanmar Peace’, CNN.com, 21 January 2013).

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. From an interview with a Myanmar military expert in Bangkok (25 November 2015).

39. Ibid.

41. In the mid-1980s, once the Communist threat had been reduced, KMT soldiers agreed to disarm in exchange for Thai citizenship. Many of them took up farming.

42. A KIA commander reportedly gave an interview with China’s Global Times portraying the border incident as ‘no coincidence’ given that senior US Defense officials were in the northern city of Myitkyina holding secret meetings with the tatmadaw.

43. Interview with Myanmar military expert in Yangon (27 November 2015).

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